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Choosing and briefing your referees

How to identify the right people to vouch for you, ask them properly, and give them what they need to write or speak on your behalf — so your references strengthen rather than undermine your application.

TOPIC	Job Search & Applications
READING TIME	14 minutes
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Free to read and share. General information, not legal or financial advice.

WHAT YOU WILL BE ABLE TO DO

- Identify which people in your network qualify as strong referees for a formal Kenyan job application.
- Approach a potential referee by phone or in person and get a clear yes or no before submitting their name.
- Write a briefing message that gives your referee everything they need to support you without guessing.
- Recognise the signs that a referee is unlikely to help you and switch to a better option before it costs you a shortlisting.
- Manage your referee list across multiple applications so no one is caught off guard.

Who this is for: Graduates and school-leavers in Kenya applying for their first or second formal job, who have been asked to supply two or three referee contacts on an application form.

What employers in Kenya actually do with your referees

When and how references are checked here

Many Kenyan employers — especially banks, NGOs, government-linked agencies, and large firms such as Safaricom, KCB, or international organisations like UNICEF Kenya — do not check references at the application stage. They collect referee names on the form, then call or email those referees only after you have been interviewed and are being considered for an offer. A smaller number of employers, particularly in the public sector applying under the Public Service Commission process, may send written reference request letters and expect a stamped, signed response.

What this means practically is that your referees will usually be contacted when you are already close to being hired. A slow, vague, or negative reference at that point can reverse a decision that was almost made in your favour. You therefore cannot treat referees as an afterthought you sort out after you have applied. You need people who are ready, briefed, and reachable before you submit a single form.

The most common contact method is a phone call, usually from an HR officer who will ask three to five questions: how long they have known you, in what capacity, whether you were reliable and honest, and whether they would rehire or recommend you. Some employers follow up with a short email form. A few, especially NGOs receiving donor funding, use a structured reference questionnaire sent by email and expect a reply within five to seven working days.

What the referee is actually being asked to confirm

Employers are not asking your referee to describe your personality. They are checking three specific things: that you are who you say you are, that the role or experience you listed is accurate, and that there is no serious conduct issue they should know about. This matters because it tells you what kind of person makes a strong referee. Someone who can confirm your title, your responsibilities, and the period you worked or studied with them is far more useful than someone who thinks highly of you but cannot answer a direct question about what you actually did.

A lecturer at the University of Nairobi, a supervisor at your internship placement, a manager from a casual job, or the coordinator of a volunteer programme you ran — these people can all speak to specific, checkable facts. A family friend who describes you as hardworking cannot, and an employer will register that immediately.

Choosing the right people

The three categories to draw from

Work through your history in three groups and identify at least one strong name from each group you have access to. The first group is academic: lecturers, project supervisors, department heads, or TVET instructors who taught you in a class small enough that they would recognise your name and recall your work. If you are a recent graduate, at least one of your two or three referees should come from this group. Contact your head of department's office or check the university staff directory on the institution's website to confirm current contact details — phone numbers and email addresses change, and you are responsible for supplying accurate ones on the form.

The second group is work and placement: any supervisor, line manager, or team leader from paid work, internship, attachment, or a structured volunteer programme. This is the strongest category for most employers because it is the most directly relevant. Even a three-month attachment counts if the supervisor can confirm your role and speak to your conduct. If your attachment was arranged through a programme such as the Kenya Youth Employment and Skills programme or a university career office placement, the coordinator of that programme may also qualify.

The third group is community and professional: a pastor, chief, or community leader who knows you in a formal capacity, used where you genuinely lack academic or workplace options. This category is weaker for professional roles but is used and accepted, particularly in county government and NGO applications at entry level. Use it honestly, not as a shortcut when a work contact is available.

The four things a strong referee must have

Before you put a name on a form, confirm four things. First, they actually know you well enough to answer specific questions — not just recognise your face. Second, their contact details are current: a working phone number and, ideally, an email address. Third, they are reachable during working hours on weekdays, because that is when HR departments make calls. Fourth, there is no reason to expect a negative response. If you left an internship early without explanation, had a conflict with a lecturer, or know that a supervisor had concerns about your attendance, do not list that person. Choose someone else.

If you are unsure whether someone would speak positively about you, that uncertainty is your answer. A referee who says "well, she had some issues but overall..." has done you serious harm. The standard you are aiming for is someone who, when called, will answer clearly and warmly without hesitation.

Weak choice vs. strong choice — side by side

Situation	Weak choice	Why it fails	Stronger choice
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You did a three-month KPMG internship	The receptionist who was friendly to you	Cannot confirm your role or responsibilities	Your direct supervisor or the team lead who assigned your tasks
You studied at Kenyatta University	A classmate who graduated with you	Peers are not accepted as professional referees	The lecturer who supervised your research project
You ran a community youth group	A member of the group	No authority to speak to your conduct in a leadership role	The NGO or church official who oversaw the programme
You have no formal work history	A family friend who is a doctor	Cannot speak to any specific performance or role	A lecturer or TVET instructor who graded your practical work

Asking your referee properly

How to make the initial approach

You must ask before you submit. Never list someone as a referee and then tell them later. If an employer calls a referee who was not expecting contact, the referee may say "I don't recall agreeing to this" — and the application is effectively over. Ask first, always.

The best way to ask a former lecturer or supervisor is in person or by phone, not by WhatsApp message. A phone call takes two minutes and gives you a clear answer. If you call and they do not answer, send a short WhatsApp or SMS: "Good afternoon Dr Kamau, this is [your name], I was in your Research Methods class in 2023. I am applying for a position and would like to request your permission to list you as a referee. May I call you at your convenience to discuss?" Wait for a reply before calling again.

When you reach them, keep the conversation brief and specific. Say: "I am applying for a [job title] position at [employer]. The role involves [one sentence description]. I would like to list you as one of my referees because you supervised my [project/internship/coursework]. Would you be comfortable with that?" Then stop talking and let them answer. If they say yes, thank

them and tell them you will send a short message with the details they might need. If they hesitate or say they are very busy, ask whether there is a better time or whether they would prefer to decline — do not push.

What to do when someone says no or does not respond

If someone declines, thank them and move on. A reluctant referee is worse than no referee. If you cannot reach someone after two genuine attempts — a call and a message — treat that as a soft no and find someone else. Do not list a person you have not confirmed. If you are running out of options, go back to the three categories above and look again. Many first-time applicants overlook attachment supervisors, TVET instructors, or the coordinators of community programmes they participated in. A referee does not need to be a senior person; they need to be a person in a position of some authority who can speak specifically and positively about you.

Comparison: How to ask — weak vs. effective

	Weak approach	Effective approach
Medium	WhatsApp: "Hi Prof, can I use you as a referee?"	Phone call, followed by a WhatsApp only if no answer
What you say	"I'm applying for jobs and need references."	"I am applying for a Finance Officer role at Equity Bank. I would like to list you because you supervised my attachment in your department."
Their details	You assume you have their number right	You confirm: "Is this still the best number for you? And do you have an email address I can share with the employer?"
Follow-up	Nothing — you submit and hope	You send a briefing message within 24 hours (see artefact below)

Briefing your referee so they can actually help you

What to put in your briefing message

Once someone agrees to be your referee, your next task is to give them the information they need to answer an HR call confidently. You are not coaching them to say specific things — you are removing the situation where they are called without warning and have to guess what role you are applying for, what you did when you worked with them, or what dates you were there.

Send the briefing by WhatsApp if that is how you normally communicate, or by email if they are more formal. Keep it short — no more than three short paragraphs or a few bullet points. Include: the name of the employer and the job title you have applied for; a one-sentence description of the role so they understand the context; the dates and capacity in which you worked or studied with them (so they can confirm this without having to remember); two or three specific things you did with them that are relevant to the role, stated as facts, not as things you want them to say; and your current phone number in case they need to contact you before speaking to the employer.

Do not write a long essay. Do not tell them what to say word for word — that reads as scripted and makes an experienced HR caller suspicious. Give them facts they can honestly confirm. For example: "I was attached to your audit team from June to August 2023 and worked mainly on the retail client files. The role I have applied for involves bookkeeping and financial reporting, so if they ask about my practical experience, that attachment is the most relevant thing."

Keeping your referees updated across multiple applications

If you are applying to several employers at the same time — which is normal and sensible — your referees may receive multiple calls from different organisations, sometimes weeks apart. After each round of applications, send a brief update: "I have applied to two more positions this month — one at KRA and one at a local NGO called Amref Health Africa. You may receive calls from either of them in the next few weeks. Let me know if you have any questions." This keeps your referees informed and avoids the embarrassing situation where they are called by an employer they have never heard of and cannot connect to you.

Also update them when you get an offer or stop applying. A message saying "I have accepted a position and will no longer need references — thank you very much for your support" is courteous, takes thirty seconds to send, and means the person is willing to help you again in future. Reference relationships are long-term and worth maintaining.

Briefing message — weak vs. effective

	Weak version	Effective version
Opening	"Hi Prof, just to let you know I applied for a job."	"Dear Dr Ochieng, I wanted to brief you on an application I have submitted so you are not caught off guard if they call."
Role detail	"It's a finance job somewhere in Nairobi."	"The position is Accounts Assistant at Kenya Power, reporting to the Finance Manager. The role focuses on invoice processing and monthly reconciliations."
Your history with them	Nothing — assumes they remember	"I was in your Financial Accounting II class in Semester 2, 2022, and you supervised my group project on working capital management."
Relevant point to mention	Nothing — leaves them to guess	"The employer is interested in candidates with practical spreadsheet experience. My project involved a lot of Excel modelling, which you graded."
Contact	Nothing	"My current number is 07XX XXX XXX. Please call me if you have any questions before they reach you."

USABLE ARTEFACT — REFEREE BRIEFING MESSAGE TEMPLATE

Copy this into WhatsApp or email. Replace all items in [square brackets] with your actual details.

Dear [Title and Surname], Thank you again for agreeing to be my referee. I wanted to give you a quick briefing so you are not caught off guard if [Employer Name] contacts you. Role applied for: [Job Title] at [Employer Name] What the role involves: [One sentence – e.g., "processing supplier invoices and supporting monthly financial reporting"] My history with you: - Capacity: [e.g., student in your class / intern in your department / volunteer on your programme] - Period: [e.g., January to April 2023 / Semester 1, 2022] - Key work: [e.g., "I completed the procurement audit project you supervised" or "I handled client correspondence in your team"] Why this is relevant to the role: [One sentence connecting what you did with them to the job – e.g., "The role requires experience with supplier records, which I worked on during my attachment."] If they contact you, they are likely to ask: - How long you have known me and in what capacity - Whether I was reliable and professional - Whether you would recommend me My current phone number: [07XX XXX XXX] Please contact me any time if you have questions. Thank you very much. [Your full name]

USABLE ARTEFACT — SEVEN-DAY REFEREE CHECKLIST

Work through this before you submit any application that asks for referee details.

- **Day 1 — List your candidates.** Write down every person who supervised, taught, or managed you in the last five years. Aim for at least five names so you have options. Note next to each: do you have a working phone number? An email? Have you spoken to them in the last year?
- **Day 2 — Confirm contact details.** For each person on your list, verify their phone number by sending a brief "Good afternoon, this is [name], I hope you are well" message. If they reply, the number works. Check for email addresses on the institution's website or staff directory — for example, university staff pages at uonbi.ac.ke or ku.ac.ke list department contact emails.
- **Day 3 — Make your calls.** Phone your top two or three candidates. Use the script in the section above. Confirm yes or no from each. If you get a yes, tell them you will send a briefing shortly.
- **Day 4 — Send briefing messages.** Use the template above. Send one to each confirmed referee. Do not wait — send it within 24 hours of them agreeing, while the conversation is fresh in their minds.
- **Day 5 — Prepare what you will write on the form.** For each referee, confirm the exact spelling of their name, their current job title, institution, phone number, and email. These must match what the employer will find if they search. A referee listed as "Dr J. Mwangi" whose email bounces will delay your application.
- **Day 6 — Check your backup list.** Confirm you have at least one additional name available in case a primary referee becomes unreachable. Note that person's contact details separately.
- **Day 7 — Submit your application.** You now have confirmed referees, accurate contact details, and sent briefing messages. Your referees are not

going to be surprised. Submit the form. After submitting, send each referee a short message: "I submitted today. They may be in touch within the next [timeframe if you know it, or 'few weeks']."

PROVENANCE & ATTRIBUTION

Portions of this material were AI-drafted and reviewed by a SmartNet editor before publication.