



Paul Pompeo

THIS MONTH, WE RETURN to the Q&A format used in August, LD+A. Again, these are actual questions from both employers and candidates. If you have a question about the job market, hiring trends, the interviewing process or recruiters and search firms, drop a line to Question@pompeo.com. No names will be used to protect your confidentiality.

“How much is really done to check the backgrounds of candidates? It seems like in-depth background checks are not done as much as they were in the past.”—National Accounts Director, New Jersey

Pompeo: As business and life seem to move at a faster rate, some things fall by the wayside. Reference checks can be one of them, and, as you might expect, the electrical and lighting industry is no exception to this trend.

Another reason is that, in some states (such as California), new laws

now require us to share the results of reference checks with the candidates in question. Yes, you heard that right! Obviously, for a positive reference this poses few problems. However, in the case of a negative or even “so-so” reference, the potential ramifications—personal, legal, even safety—are pretty obvious.

In addition, some human resource departments, apparently for what they feel are legal reasons, will only permit a “name, rank and serial number”-type reference, which may indeed help their respective companies, but, unfortunately could harm the potential employers by denying them information that could affect the hiring decision. Those human resources managers setting these “no reference check” policies may be well served to remember that this issue cuts both ways; their own company may in fact be hindered from getting needed information (negative or positive) about a potential hire from other companies who adopt the same no-reference policy.

“Do you see the employment market opening up? It seemed kind of flat the past couple of years. Here we’ve hired and recently created two new positions. Is that industry-wide, or nationwide in other industries?”—Orlando, FL

Pompeo: Obviously, no one knows for sure. Anytime we’re in an election year (see the following question), as well as in the first year or two following it, there can be some volatility. Having said that, my feeling is the market has definitely opened up over the past 12 to 18 months. I’ll leave statistics to the statisticians and economists. However, just from the numbers of company searches, openings due to a job being created versus someone who has left the company and the mood of hiring managers, I’d say business has been on an upswing since early last year.

“I’m curious: In an election year, does hiring get put off until the next year?”—Chicago, IL

Pompeo: Excuse me while I grab my 10-foot pole. I will say that in some past elections, we have observed cautiousness from employers in the months just prior to a presidential election as well as sometimes through the first few months of any new administration, Republican or Democrat. We haven't noticed any cautiousness from employers up to this point in this election season. If we do see any caution on the behalf of employers, I believe at this point that war or terrorism is more likely to be the cause.

"What kind of weight does the LC hold? A lot of people with LCs portray themselves as lighting consultants, which they're not (it stands for 'Lighting Certified'). This seems to upset some real specifiers." — Regional Sales Vice President (lighting fixtures), Wisconsin

Pompeo: As far as "holding weight" goes, it depends who you're talking about. As far as people with LCs upsetting specifiers, that's a new one on me—I've never heard of that. I haven't heard any sort of negative reaction towards someone with an LC; if anything, I generally feel it's viewed as a positive in the field. On the other hand, in all my years of recruiting, I've never had an employer request an LC in the job specs for a position. However, can it be a plus in a sales (especially specification sales) or sales management role? In a close race, absolutely.

"I'm a lighting designer and am interviewing. I've been on more than one interview during which I've been asked for advice on lighting or asked to help solve a lighting problem. This is in an interview. I'm not even hired yet! And this is what I get paid for as a consultant. How do I handle this when it comes up during interviews?" — Lighting and Design Consultant, California

Pompeo: It's one thing to be asked a question during an interview to test your knowledge related to the functions of the position for which

you're interviewing. It's another to be asked to actually work for free, and it sounds like your experiences may touch that fine line. A little "brain drain" may occur in interviews occasionally, and usually it doesn't get excessive or touch on inappropriate (for example, competitive information) types of topics. As long as you know the company you're interviewing with has a specific position to fill, I would probably take its first "scenario" question at face value and answer it.

If you truly feel like the "hypothetical" lighting problem-solving questions are not job-related and the interviewer might just be looking for free advice, then you might politely reply as follows: "I am really interested in working with you as a client or as an employee. I'm getting the feeling you may need my assistance with a lighting problem, or is this just a standard question you ask during interviews?" This will nicely and subtly "call" them on it, without causing the interviewer to be upset or defensive. If the company says it is a lighting problem, just say you would be glad to assist, but would like to make a separate appointment with them, like you do with all your clients. If the company is just trying to get free advice and is not really interested in hiring you, then you might as well clear the air now and save everyone's time.

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