Getting a “Good” Letter of Recommendation

You may find yourself needing letters of recommendation in applying for professional positions or entrance into graduate school. When strategically approached, obtaining a good letter of recommendation could be the deciding factor for recruiters to move from a “maybe” to a resounding “YES” in bringing you on board.

Here are tips to consider when seeking a good letter of recommendation.

Who to ask:
Read the application carefully. Applications may provide specific instruction regarding the categories of people that letters of recommendation should come from (i.e. supervisors, professors, friends, etc.). If no specific instruction is provided, it is always best practice to provide more professional recommendations than personal. Professional recommendations can include professors, supervisors from any paid or volunteer position you’ve held, colleagues, and former clients.

When to ask:
Once you have determined who to ask, be respectful of your recommender’s schedule and ask at least 2 weeks to a month prior to the deadline. Make sure your recommenders are aware of all deadlines pertaining to the letter.

What to ask:
You want to be sure that the person you ask can actually provide a positive letter of recommendation regarding your work and character. When asking, use the words, “positive” or “good” to be clear what you are looking for. Also, provide context to your recommender by including your résumé and job description or program description. This will help your recommender customize what he or she says about you in the letter.

How to ask:
Asking in person or over the phone is preferred, but email may be an option if the first two are not feasible. No matter the method, be professional and ask without expectations that the person will be able to provide you a positive recommendation. Some companies have policies regarding recommendations and your recommender must follow protocol which might be a generic recommendation that may not benefit you.

How to follow-up:
Thank your recommender for taking to time to write the letter and be sure to keep him or her updated regarding the status of your potential opportunity. They definitely want to know!