

References not worth the paper they're written on

makes an appearance is in the number of words you have in which to make an impression before your listeners make up their own minds.

"When we seek to persuade others, we only get two seconds, or seven words, to influence people before they make their own conclusions about the proposition you have put," says O'Keefe.

150 – It takes a village

The natural size of a grouping of humans is 150, based on the ratio of the size of the brain and body, according to Oxford's Robin Dunbar. "The way in which our social world is constructed is part and parcel of our biological inheritance," Dunbar told *The Guardian* newspaper last month.

"Together with apes and monkeys, we're members of the primate family – and within the primates there is a general relationship between the size of the brain and the size of the social group. We fit in a pattern. There are social circles beyond it and layers within – but there is a natural grouping of 150.

"This is the number of people you can have a relationship with involving trust and obligation – there's some personal history, not just names and faces."

As organisations grow beyond 150 workers, people begin to feel they are less friendly and silos start to form. People start to identify with their department or location, rather than with the organisation as a whole.

O'Keefe says: "Our brains are not big enough for individuals to associate with and gain identity in organisations of 2000, 20,000 or 200,000. A significant implication of our clanning instinct is that we have an inherent fear of strangers," says O'Keefe.

Holding fast to this principle is US-based firm Gore Associates (makers of Gore-Tex), which limits its facilities to 150 people. Once its 150-space car park fills up, it is time to build a new facility.

Flight Centre groups its operations in smaller "villages" of around 100 people. "Flight Centre in effect uses the clan-size concept to foster a healthy sense of rivalry rather than allow the rivalry to emerge in an unplanned and unmanageable way," says O'Keefe.

Fiona Smith

How much time do you spend reading those LinkedIn recommendations? When you're checking someone out, your eye might flick over them on the way to something more interesting. You are bound to look at where the person is working, where they have spent time before, details about what they have achieved and – definitely – you will assess their photo.

But the recommendations are about as relevant as those you find on a sales brochure. You know the thing: Jane M. and John W. gushing about the excellence of their experience selling their house through their local real estate "professional".

You would never use a recommendation that wasn't fulsome in its praise, would you? In fact, you may have done a deal, swapping cloying paragraphs with a work contact to plaster up on your pages.

This is the reason written references no longer exist: they weren't worth the paper they were written on.

Oh, and people started getting litigious about them if they were untrue or unpleasant.

So, it may surprise you to know that some people still take recommendations seriously.

One international tech-savvy company was progressing along the track of recruiting to fill a position when a top contender was knocked out of contention because he didn't have any LinkedIn recommendations.

The employer was Google.

Google is one of the most sophisticated recruiters on the planet, but its hiring process is drawn-out, complex and notoriously quixotic.

It is common for interviews to conclude with a *Star Trek* question after hours of writing brain-twisting algorithms.

Recruiters know it is incredibly hard to get even the brightest

candidates through the doors, but this response has the people at Slade Group flummoxed.

Slade's managing director, Anija Ziener, says: "We just thought the LinkedIn recommendations were about adding a bit of content and fluff."

However, this experience was not a one-off.

Recruiters at Slade have come across this attachment to recommendations before.

Curiously, it appears to be more common at information technology companies, she says.

Ziener says she thinks this re-emergence of the recommendation is a product of the relative newness of social media in recruiting.

People will try things out for a while, then they will lose favour if they are ineffective.

"I'd say it is a passing phase," Ziener says. "Honestly, I haven't seen a written reference for 15 to 20 years."

The only time they would be used outside of LinkedIn would be

for young people straight out of school who have no work experience.

LinkedIn now connects 2 million Australian professionals and more than 100 million around the world.

Recently, users have been warned to keep their social

Former employers are under no legal obligation to provide a reference.

Peter Ferraro

and work accounts separate.

There is a danger that if your LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook sites are linked, you will be revealing far more than you intended to potential employers, clients and workmates.

The persona you reveal to friends and family on Facebook may not be the one you want to

display in a professional context.

For those who do still write references for their employees, there are some legal minefields, says senior associate at Harmers Workplace Lawyers, Peter Ferraro.

Problems could relate to misrepresentation and defamation claims as well as invasion of privacy.

"Reference checking provides a potential employer with valuable information when it comes to assessing whether or not a candidate is suitable for a role, yet there is a fine line between providing too much or not enough information about a candidate's skills, previous experience and their ability to do the job," says Ferraro.

The safest thing to do is stick to the basic facts.

"Former employers are under no legal obligation to provide a reference," he says.

"Simply confirming the details of a person's employment is perfectly acceptable.

"If you do want to provide a character reference for a former employee, do this cautiously as you don't want to run the risk of being held liable for defamation because you provided an unfavourable reference for someone who didn't get the job.

"In addition, intentionally providing inaccurate information about someone or withholding critical information about an employee could land you in trouble with a claim for misrepresentation from the new employer with the potential to seek compensation for damages."

Ferraro advises people not to try the crafty tactic of "talking up" poor performers in order to get rid of them to a competitor.

He also advises that if you can't answer the questions honestly, or you don't want to be negative, don't answer the questions.

This just proves grandma was right: If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all.



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