

Peter Botting

DECODING REFERENCES



37

**SECRET
PHRASES:**

WHAT YOUR

EMPLOYER

REALLY MEANS

*"I absolutely recommend
him to anyone looking for
a top level executive
coach."*

- Nadhim Zahawi,
Founder and CEO
YouGov PLC



DECODING WHAT EMPLOYER REFERENCES REALLY MEAN TRANSLATING THE HIDDEN LANGUAGE OF PROFESSIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

What sounds like praise in a reference might actually be a carefully worded warning. Learn to read between the lines of professional references.

These carefully written phrases will have been passed by Legal and are often used by HR.

What they say - and what they signal - might be entirely different things! You think they are endorsements, but they are really red flags.

This eBook shows you what's actually being said.

WHAT MAKES A REFERENCE PHRASE SOUND POSITIVE TO THE UNTRAINED EAR?

Reference phrases are carefully crafted to sound complimentary whilst subtly conveying concerns. Positive-sounding words can be disguised warnings. Employers want to avoid being sued.

These phrases exploit our natural tendency to interpret professional language optimistically, using words like "unique," "passionate," and "independent" that we think carry positive connotations in everyday contexts.

The key is understanding that what's not said is often more important than what is. Genuine praise is specific and backed by examples.

Vague “nice” positivity should and does raise questions. Always.



DETAIL- ORIENTED

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

A thorough professional who ensures nothing slips through the cracks. Someone who takes pride in precision and delivers flawless work.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

An obsessive micromanager who gets lost in minutiae, consistently misses deadlines, and struggles to see the bigger picture or prioritise effectively.



INDEPENDENT WORKER

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Self-sufficient and capable of managing their own workload without constant supervision. A proactive team member who takes initiative.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Refuses to collaborate effectively. Does things they like doing rather than things that contribute to the companies strategies and goals



PASSIONATE ABOUT THEIR WORK

What you think it means. What it sounds like

A dedicated professional who genuinely cares about their work and brings enthusiasm to every project. Someone who goes above and beyond.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Difficult to work with, takes criticism personally, and creates interpersonal drama. Cannot separate professional feedback from personal attacks.



BRINGS UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

An innovative thinker who challenges the status quo and offers fresh approaches to problem-solving. A creative asset to any team.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Refuses to follow established processes, ignores guidance from more experienced colleagues, and creates chaos by reinventing wheels unnecessarily.



EAGER TO LEARN

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

A motivated individual with growth potential and genuine curiosity. Someone who embraces challenges and develops quickly.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Fundamentally lacks the basic skills required for the role. Requires extensive training and hand-holding for tasks that should be straightforward.



WORKS WELL UNDER PRESSURE

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Resilient and composed when facing tight deadlines. Thrives in fast-paced environments and maintains quality under stress.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Only becomes productive when chaos erupts. Terrible at planning, creates artificial urgency, and relies on last-minute heroics instead of scheduling and managing their time effectively. Must have strict deadlines.



GREAT CULTURAL FIT

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

A harmonious team player who gets along well with everyone and shares company values. Will integrate smoothly into existing teams.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Pleasant personality but fundamentally lacks the necessary technical skills, ambition, or drive. Likeable but ultimately ineffective in the role



THEY'RE VERY DETAIL- ORIENTED

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Meticulous, conscientious, someone who catches every mistake and keeps things perfect.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Slow, obsessive, and incapable of prioritising. Spends hours on tiny details while the bigger picture falls apart.



THEY TAKE THEIR TIME

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Careful, thoughtful, someone who double-checks work and doesn't rush decisions.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Procrastinator, slow, and inefficient. Gets bogged down in details and misses deadlines.



THEY HAVE A UNIQUE APPROACH

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Innovative thinker, a true creative.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

A “creative thinker” who always bends the rules.. Good luck getting them to do anything the normal way.




THEY'RE AMBITIOUS

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Motivated, driven, and eager to grow. Someone who pushes themselves and the team toward success.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Major flight risk. Self-centered, opportunistic, unfocused, and ready to jump ship the second a shinier opportunity appears. Avoid.



THEY'RE VERY INDEPENDENT.

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Self-starter, able to work on their own, takes initiative without being told what to do.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Doesn't take feedback, ignores direction, and struggles to work in teams. Goes off on their own tangent and leaves others to pick up the pieces. Independent? Yes. Cooperative or manageable? Absolutely not.



THEY'RE HIGHLY CREATIVE

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Innovative, imaginative, and able to solve problems in original ways. Someone who thinks outside the box and brings new ideas to the table.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Full of ideas that don't work, impractical, and a waste of time. Can't execute, misses the point, and often frustrates everyone trying to make things happen.



THEY'RE LOYAL

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Committed, reliable, and dedicated. Someone who sticks with a company, team, or manager and can be counted on to see things through.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Resistant to change, inflexible, and unwilling to challenge the status quo.

Loyal but follows outdated processes, avoids innovation, and prioritises comfort over results. Dependable? Yes. Adaptable? Not so much.



THEY'RE VERY CONFIDENT

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Assertive, capable, and self-assured. Someone who can take charge, make decisions, and inspire trust in their abilities.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Arrogant, dismissive, and unwilling to listen to others. Thinks they're always right, brushes off feedback, and can create tension or resentment on the team. Confident? Sure. Easy to work with? Not at all.



THEY HAVE STRONG OPINIONS

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Thoughtful, decisive, and confident in their ideas. Someone who isn't afraid to speak up and can guide decisions with conviction.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Argumentative, inflexible, and difficult to work with. Clashes with colleagues or management, insists on having their way, and resists compromise. Can have ideas, but expect constant friction.



THEY'RE SELECTIVE

What you think it means.

Careful, discerning, and thoughtful about the work they take on. Someone who focuses on quality over quantity and chooses their tasks wisely.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Picky, indecisive, and slow to act. Avoids responsibility, cherry-picks the easy or appealing tasks, and can't be relied on to tackle what really matters. Smart? Maybe. Useful? Often not.



THEY'RE THOROUGH

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Detail-oriented. Detail-oriented, careful, and methodical. Someone who double-checks work, catches mistakes, and ensures everything is done properly.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Slow and unable to prioritize effectively. Slow, obsessed with minutiae, and terrible at prioritizing. Spends hours perfecting small details while missing the bigger picture. Reliable? Maybe. Efficient? Not even close.



THEY'RE PUNCTUAL

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Time orientated. Reliable, time-conscious, and always on schedule. Someone who shows up when expected and respects deadlines.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

They arrive at 09:00 and close their computer at 4.59. There is nothing else positive to say. Minimal effort, minimal contribution. Don't expect initiative, creativity, or real impact. Punctual? Sure. Valuable? Debatable.



THEY'RE VERY SMART

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Intelligent and capable. Intelligent, capable, quick-thinking, and able to solve problems others can't. Someone you want on your team for their brainpower.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Arrogant, socially tone-deaf, or lacking emotional intelligence. Brilliant in theory, but impossible to work with. Dismisses colleagues' ideas, clashes with management, fails to build effective relationships. Smart? Yes. Likeable or team-oriented? No.



THEY'RE COMMITTED TO EXCELLENCE

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

High standards. High standards, driven to deliver top-quality work, and unwilling to settle for mediocrity. Someone who pushes themselves and the team to do their best.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Difficult. Impossible to please, demanding, and a nightmare to work with. Sets unrealistic expectations for others, micromanages, and criticizes relentlessly. Can deliver high-quality work themselves, but at the cost of team morale



THEY'RE RESOURCEFUL

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Creative problem solver. Creative problem solver, someone who finds solutions when others get stuck, and can think outside the box to get things done.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Cuts corners, bends rules, and may manipulate situations to get what they want. Can get results, but not always ethically or reliably. Smart? Sometimes. Trustworthy? Questionable.



THEY'RE STRATEGIC

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Big-picture thinker. Big-picture thinker, someone who plans ahead, sees the long-term vision, and knows how to position themselves and their team for success.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Lacks follow-through or tactical execution. All talk, no action. Great at ideas, terrible at execution.

Can't handle the day-to-day details, misses deadlines, and often leaves others to clean up the mess. Ambitious on paper, unreliable in practice.



THEY'RE INDEPENDENT- MINDED

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Innovative and confident. Innovative, confident, and able to think for themselves. Someone who doesn't blindly follow orders and can bring fresh ideas to the table.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Innovative and confident. Stubborn, defiant, and hard to control. Doesn't follow directions, challenges authority unnecessarily, and often goes their own way even when it's counterproductive.

Can be creative, generally just difficult. A risk rather than an asset.



THEY'RE CONSCIENTIOUS

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Careful and diligent. Careful, diligent, and reliable. Someone who double-checks their work, meets deadlines, and takes pride in doing things right.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Hesitant, slow, or perfectionist to a fault. Obsessed with perfection. They overthink every task, can't act quickly, and often miss the bigger picture because they're stuck in the details. Reliable? Maybe. Fast? Rarely. Flexible? Almost never.



THEY'RE CULTURALLY AWARE

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Respectful and empathetic. Respectful, empathetic, and sensitive to different perspectives. Someone who understands diversity and knows how to navigate tricky social situations.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters

Overly cautious, politically correct to a fault, and afraid to take a stand. Hesitant to make decisions that might ruffle feathers. Nice to have around, but can't be counted on to take risks, challenge the status quo, or push projects forward.



THEY'RE HIGHLY ANALYTICAL

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Smart and thoughtful. Smart, thoughtful, and able to solve complex problems. Someone who carefully weighs options, looks at all the data, and makes decisions based on reason rather than emotion.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Paralyzes themselves over every decision, can't act without obsessing over data, and gets lost in endless "what-ifs." Overthinks to the point of inaction, misses deadlines, and has zero practical sense. Brilliant on paper, useless in real-world execution.



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THEY'RE A FREE SPIRIT

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Creative and flexible. Someone who brings fresh ideas, adapts easily to new situations, and thrives outside rigid structures. A spark of energy who keeps the workplace dynamic and interesting.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Unreliable, inconsistent, and chaotic. Flaky and hard to manage. Misses deadlines, ignores structure, and can't be counted on to finish what they start. Fun? Maybe. Productive? Not so much.



THEY'RE VERY ORGANISED

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Efficient and methodical. The dependable planner every chaotic workplace needs — structured, steady, and always prepared.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Rigid, inflexible, or bureaucratic. A stickler for systems who prioritises neatness over adaptability: great with spreadsheets, less so with surprises.



THEY HAVE A STRONG PRESENCE

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Commanding or charismatic. Leads with authority, and inspires others to listen. A natural leader whose confidence elevates those around them.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Domineering, intimidating, or controlling. Creates an ego, volume, or a knack for unsettling quieter team members.



THEY'RE AMBITIOUS FOR GROWTH

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Career-oriented: the kind of employee who sets goals, seeks feedback, and wants to rise through the ranks.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Flight risk: Likely to leave when a better opportunity arises. Restless and unfocused, impatient for promotion, likely to view this role as a stepping stone.



THEY'RE WELL- LIKED

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Popular and sociable. The kind of person who gets along with everyone – from interns to senior management – and makes the workplace feel more human.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Focused on relationships over results. No one disliked them, but no one's fighting to rehire them either.



THEY'RE PROACTIVE

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Takes initiative, spots problems before they happen, and doesn't wait to be told what to do. A self-starter who drives things forward and gets results.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Interferes, oversteps boundaries, or makes rash decisions. Starts projects that no one asked for and ruffles feathers by taking charge uninvited. Hard to rein in.



THEY HAVE A LOT OF POTENTIAL."

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Promising and capable. Someone on the rise: bright, ambitious, and ready to take the next step in their career. The kind of person who just needs the right opportunity to shine.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Currently underperforming or inexperienced. The person hasn't quite delivered. Inexperienced, inconsistent, still figuring things out.



THEY'RE VERY PERSONABLE

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Friendly and approachable. Someone who can build rapport with anyone, lighten the mood in meetings, and make clients feel instantly at ease. A team's social glue: warm, engaging, and confident.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Charming but lacks substance or professionalism. Relies more on charisma than competence. Well-liked but not particularly results-driven. Blurs the line between friendly and too familiar.



THEY'RE VERY PERSONABLE

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Ethical and trustworthy. Someone who always does the right thing, even when it's inconvenient.

A steady, reliable presence who upholds integrity in every situation.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Inflexible, moralizing, or unyielding. Resistant to compromise, struggles in grey areas, or challenges leadership decisions on ethical grounds.

Admirable certainly, but exhausting or obstructive in environments where pragmatism, politics, and outputs matter too.



THEY'RE STRONG-WILLED

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Determined and persistent. Someone who stands firm under pressure, speaks up when something's wrong, and won't be swayed by office politics or groupthink. A natural leader, not a pushover.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Hard to manage or combative. Not a team player. Has a history of conflict with management. Stubborn.



THEY'RE PASSIONATE

What you think it means. What YOU think it sounds like.

Enthusiastic and motivated. The sort of person who turns up early, stays late, and infects everyone around them with energy. A team player with drive and vision.

What they really mean. What potential bosses and recruiters read.

Emotional, overzealous, or easily frustrated. “Passionate” can sometimes be code for lacks boundaries or takes things personally.



ATTENTION HIRING MANAGERS: HOW TO READ BETWEEN THE LINES: RED FLAGS AND WHAT HIRING MANAGERS SHOULD REALLY ASK

Request Specific Examples

Ask for concrete situations where the candidate demonstrated skills, not vague descriptions. Genuine strengths come with stories.

Listen for What's Missing

Notice absent praise areas. If references don't mention teamwork, technical skills, or results, there's likely a reason.

Ask Direct Questions

Don't let diplomatic language obscure truth. Follow up with: "What areas need development?" or "Would you rehire this person?"

Compare Multiple References

Patterns reveal truth. If three references all mention "unique perspective," you've found a consistent behaviour trait—possibly problematic.



ATTENTION JOB SEEKERS: HELP THEM READ BETWEEN THE LINES - WHAT HIRING MANAGERS ARE REALLY LOOKING FOR

Share Specific Examples

Don't just describe your skills - show them. When asked about your strengths, give clear, concrete stories that demonstrate how you applied them. Real strengths come with real examples.

See What's Missing

Think about the areas your references might not mention. If you know teamwork or results aren't your strongest points, prepare to address them honestly in the interview. Hiring managers notice what's unsaid as much as what is said.

Invite Direct Questions

Encourage transparency. Say something like, "I'm happy to discuss areas where I've grown - would you like me to share an example?" This turns potential weaknesses into proof of self-awareness and personal development.

Create Consistency Across References

Make sure your story lines up. When all your references highlight similar traits - such as adaptability, creativity, or leadership - it shows reliability and authenticity. Data often lies. Patterns don't. Patterns tell the real story, so shape yours intentionally.



TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

If a reference feels too copy and paste, polished or suspiciously vague, dig deeper. Genuine recommendations are specific, balanced, and backed by real examples.

The best references acknowledge growth areas whilst clearly articulating strengths. Beware of the carefully worded compliment that appears to be a positive, but isn't.

EXECUTIVE INTERVIEW COACHING
FROM **6-TIME TEDMED**
AND SXSW
SPEAKER COACH

Peter Botting



Whether you are fighting to become Partner; seeking promotion or appointment to the Board; changing career or company; or struggling to jumpstart your career after redundancy... professional storytelling-based executive-level interview coaching could give you the edge and transform your life. And your income.



Stop being
Filtered OUT!
Buy The Workbook
now!