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Sample Reference Letter (Reduction in Force)

Reference letters of the “To Whom It May Concern” variety are a mixed bag, in my opinion. Many employees seem to think they’re important, often including them as a requirement in a settlement. But I don’t believe that employers pay much attention to these. They rarely say anything useful, and more-experienced employers know that they’re often negotiated over.

Additionally, many employers are squeamish about writing reference letters. There’s a fairly common myth that employers are constantly being sued for giving out references for lousy employees. But I can report that in 17 years of representing employers, I never once encountered or even heard or read about an actual claim for “negligent reference” against an employer. It’s the Loch Ness Monster of HR.

If a manager really liked a departing employee, she would offer to make phone calls on the employee’s behalf, or allow prospective employers to call her directly. A form letter is for employees you don’t really like.

But there is an exception. When you have to do a reduction in force, it may be impossible to make phone calls for everyone laid off. In this case, a form letter like this one may well be appropriate—and appreciated.

Naturally, you should customize it as much as possible.

[River Bank Letterhead]

To Whom It May Concern:

[Employee] has been employed by River Bank since [DATE]. During this period, [he/she] demonstrated all the qualities that employers look for when seeking promotable employees.

[He/She] has an excellent capacity for quickly grasping new theories and applications and is proactive about looking for and taking on additional responsibilities.

[Employee]’s dedication to her job is displayed by [Personalized example]. [His/Her] competence is such that [Personalized example of leadership skills, work under pressure, creativity, etc.]

It’s unfortunate for River Bank that because of economic constraints, we had to reorganize and lose valued employees like [Employee]. I highly recommend [him/her] for any position or career that [he/she] chooses to pursue.

If you have any additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

[Letter writer's name]

[Title]

River Bank