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MARKETWATCH: SCREENING

Companies ramp up pre-employment screening

Working with human resources departments, security directors focus on integrity issues to prevent theft, violence

By Joanne Friedrick

Concerns about factors ranging from the general quality of the hiree to workplace safety to exposure to litigation have spurred the ramp up in pre-employment background screening.

A Workplace Violence Survey, released in January by the Society for Human Resource Management, reported 57 percent of human resources professionals were somewhat or very concerned about workplace violence. The report went on to show that 82 percent of organizations participating in the survey investigate the background of potential employees, up from 66 percent in 1996.



Patti McGowan

Criminal background checks increased by 29 percent, with 80 percent saying they conducted such checks; 35 percent conducted credit checks as a screening device, also up since 1996 by 16 percent.

Additionally, Patti McGowan, vice president-operations for Whitney, Texas-based Personnel Data Research, said figures supplied by SHRM show the move among companies with 500 or more employees has been toward outsourcing the screening process. In 2003, she noted, 82 percent outsourced, up from 70 percent just two years earlier. Similarly, the in-house screening figures dropped to just 11 percent in 2003 from 20 percent in 2001.

Screening is about a 50/50 split between the human resources department and the security director, said Janet Cortez, vice president of employment services in the workplace solutions division of ChoicePoint, Alpharetta, Ga.

What is happening, though, she said, "is a lot more cooperation between security and human resources."

"It's a lot of teamwork," agreed Don Corbett, senior investigator for NetJet in Columbus, Ohio, who said both departments need to work together to resolve problems. Once human resources decides someone is to be hired, he said, the security side gets to work conducting the background checks and drug and alcohol screening.

The security director's role, Cortez said, is often pointed toward integrity issues. "Things that will pop up later in their world such as theft or violence," she said.

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While all said they've witnessed cooperation between human resources and security personnel, Cortez said a strain is possible as the employment market heats up.

"A thorough background check takes time," said Cortez, adding in a tight job market human resources wants to fill positions as quickly as possible.

Jason Morris, president of Cleveland-based Background Information Services, agreed. "There's a rub," he said. "The goal of HR is to get someone hired quickly, while the goal of security is to get the safest person."

Corbett is among those who does most of the screening in house. "We do about 80 percent to 85 percent internally because it is more cost effective," he said.

NetJet, which must screen pilots, attendants and contractors under FAA regulations, checks not only criminal history, Corbett said, but also education, financial and driving records as they "align to what is relevant to the job."

Corbett said screening not only increases workplace safety by reducing violence, theft and embezzlement risk but also reduces exposure to litigation.

Those in the business of offering pre-employment screening services agreed that criminal records checks are usually at the top of the list of services requested, followed by Social Security number verification, as well as corroboration of employment and education.

"Criminal records are the key thing people screen for," said Cortez. And while past screening has focused on the locale in which people currently live, Cortez said screening is going to a national level, looking at information from all 50 states.

Cortez cautioned that there is no comprehensive national database, however; "even the FBI database covers about 63 percent of criminals." Still, she said, ChoicePoint's own national database "gives us about 60 percent coverage."

At minimum, said Morris, companies conduct SSN traces and verification, looking for aliases and previous addresses.

Although criminal records checks and Social Security verification lead the way, Les Rosen, president of Employment Screening Resources, Novato, Calif., said a look at a person's driving record, even for a non-driving position, "gives insight into their background and habits."

Increasingly, he said, companies want to check with past employers or schools as well, to verify that information.

Cortez said credit checks are used less and have even suffered a decline in recent years. She said ChoicePoint does credit checks in less than 10 percent of cases. "Companies feel there needs to be an intersection between the type of job (a person is being hired for) and the type of check we're doing," she explained.

While credit checks can give insight into intangibles, most often they are used for people who handle money, explained McGowan. But even then, she said, "most employers don't take credit at face value, but look at the whole picture."

As screening becomes more prevalent, the need for industrywide standards is also emerging as a hot topic.

McGowan, who co-chairs the ASIS Privacy and Personnel Information Management Council, said the upcoming ASIS International event in September will feature sessions on pre-employment screening and changes in the laws pertaining to it.

In addition, she said, ASIS is working with the National Association of Professional Background Screeners on guidelines "so all those employers who have to do background checks know how to do it."

The draft of guidelines is scheduled to be submitted by the end of the year to ASIS, she said, with dispersal of approved guidelines slated for next June.

"Certainly the security director more than anyone realizes the need for background screening and due diligence," Rosen said. Then the decision becomes, he said, whether they have the resources to do it in-house.

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