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### MARKETWATCH

## Security directors demanding more from employee screening firms

Many service providers are expanding service offerings to meet the changing needs of the end-user community

By Joanne Friedrick - 11.2006

Even as employee screening becomes the norm among companies, providers of these services are expanding their repertoire to meet demand.

As the Security Director NewsPoll for September illustrated, 90 percent of respondents said they have a pre-employment screening policy or program in place. Nearly 96 percent said they screen for criminal history, which jives with what Jason Morris, president of Background Information Services, witnesses among his clientele.

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"Criminal background checks are still the gold standard," noted Morris. However, he said, education and credit checks are being outsourced to screening firms as well.

Tim Dowd, president of the commercial services division at USIS, said the emphasis has shifted from drug screening in a pre-Sept. 11 environment to screens for criminal and violent behavior since the terrorist attack in 2001.

In addition, he said, "because the technology has evolved to such a level, where moving down to screening every employee, but adding layers (of screening) as they move up (the corporate ladder)."

#### TYPICAL SITUATIONS

Typical screenings these days, noted Bon Idziak, president of Applicant Insight, include identification verification, criminal background checks, scrutiny of driving records, employment and education verification, and drug testing.

Beyond those areas, providers noted three trends have emerged: Screening of international employees, ongoing checks for existing employees and requiring screening for contract employees or persons working on a company's premises.

Morris said international screening is growing as companies hire employees from countries besides the United States or open offices in Europe, Asia and elsewhere.

Verification covers the usual areas of employment verification, criminal background and education. Because different countries have their own privacy laws, Morris stressed that such checks need to be done properly.

"International is significant for us," said Morris. "We have contractors and people in house who speak 18 different languages." He said much of the focus is on India and Asia where a lot of companies outsource their business.

#### INCREASED AWARENESS

Dowd agreed there is a growing awareness among security directors and human resources personnel about the risk of using offshore contractors that haven't been screened. He said there are country-specific regulations to follow, but many foreign countries are now setting up their own requirements for screening employees.

For example, said Idziak, India has been forthcoming on adopting its own policies.

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Dave Wirta, executive vice president of First Advantage Corp., said employers have been looking to expand their due diligence and vetting of overseas employees. "The risks can be compounded when you deal with companies overseas," he said.

The other growing focus for employers these days is conducting checks on existing employees.

"We're finding employers are interested in going back and screening employees," said Wirta, including those who were screened when hired previously or those who were brought onboard prior to a screening program being put in place.

As long as companies have the proper releases, said Wirta, they can usually screen existing hires without a problem.

Wirta said this falls into the realm of more rigorous compliance and reconciliation, which includes validating against people on the payroll to make sure the screening was done.

Dowd said the interest in ongoing screening has led to the creation of a new service at USIS called Driver Violation Alert. This monitoring product allows his company to screen people on the payroll whose driving is critical to their job function to see if their records have changed, such as DUI or a moving violation.

He said insurance companies are able to search records for such information, but employment screeners are just now being allowed to do so. "We have lobbyists working to get states to understand that this is in the best interest of a company."

Post-employment screening is one of the biggest trends in the past 10 years, said Al's Idziak. He said while screening has taken off in the past five years, many are just now starting to focus on existing employees.

The Security Director NewsPoll noted that about 31 percent of respondents said they screen existing employees on an ongoing basis, while 65.5 percent did not.

While there are issues to be worked out, especially with union employees, Idziak said those could be handled through getting the proper authorization and consent.

#### INTERESTED PARTIES

A third area of interest are what Wirta referred to as "contingent workers," or those people who aren't on the company payroll, but still have access to data or work on site, such as contract or temporary employees.

In these cases, said Wirta, the employer doesn't do the screening, but does dictate to the contract organization what type of screening must be completed to bring that person into the organization. In these situations, he said, there may also be an audit component required so companies are sure that their requirements were met.

Vendor screening, said Wirta, is often contingent on how much they bring to the organization as well as how much access they have to employees and property.

#### WORK ZONE

Companies feel the same obligation to screen contracts to ensure a safe work environment, said Dowd. "They push out a requirement (to contractors) with a level (of screening) that they specify," he said.

While providers agreed that screening requirements are changing, most noted that the process is still very much a hands-on one and even electronic data needs to be approached with a high level of skepticism.

"I don't feel comfortable relying on electronic data," acknowledged Felix Nater, president of Nater Associates, a security consultancy.

Nater, a former postal inspector who was in charge of workplace security, said he conducted background checks as part of his job. Now, he said, he hires third-party investigators for clients, "but I advise them as to what the process entails."

He said companies need to do more than rely on standard criminal checks, because that information can be deceiving. A Department of Motor Vehicles check, he said, "will tell you more about their history."

It's also important, said Nater, to corroborate electronically generated information, which often means going to the courthouse to access the records. "It's a lot of boots on the ground," he said.

Although more and more records are online, said Dowd, there is still the factor of currency. He said they often send in a court runner "because of the lag time from when the data is posted."

"As any quality screening company will tell you," explained Idziak, "there are good and bad sources of information. As a consumer reporting agency, you have to give accurate and up-to-date information, so we go to the source of the data."

He said there are too many risks involved in some of the databases and clients can be held liable by the Fair Credit Reporting Agency if they don't use accurate information or corroborate the data.

"I don't know that I'll ever see that day coming (with electronic-only data)," said Idziak. "There will always be states with no access. Even the FBI data base has its discrepancies," he added.

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