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### Background Screens Even More Crucial During Economic Slump

By Theresa Minton-Eversole, July 2008

Resume falsifications are on the rise and are expected to increase as the country continues to slog through economic doldrums, according to trends data recently released by several employment background screening firms.

Accu-Screen Inc. has kept records for 14 years on resume falsification data and has recorded "spikes" correlating with economic downturns and weak labor markets. According to the company's most recent data, approximately 43 percent of resumes and job applications could contain false information.

"We're seeing that the problem is bigger than has been previously reported," said Accu-Screen founder and chief executive officer Kevin Connell, in a statement releasing the data results.

According to a study conducted by J.J. Keller & Associates, Inc., the nation's leading provider of risk and regulatory management solutions, 55 percent of 161 human resource professionals recently surveyed said they have discovered outright lies on resumes or applications when conducting pre-employment background or reference checks.

"These results are consistent with similar studies," according to Edwin Zalewski, a human resources subject matter expert with J. J. Keller & Associates, "but they may be even worse than they appear. Among our survey group, 24 percent did not respond to the question, 'If you conduct background checks or reference checks, have you ever found an outright lie on a resume or application?' If we exclude those who didn't answer, the results indicate that 73 percent of those conducting background checks turned up a lie."

Connell suggested that the recent increase in unemployment figures combined with a weakening economy will prove to be leading indicators of even more resume falsifications.

"We want to get the word out to employers and job-seekers," he said. "Employers need to be especially vigilant during these periods. Job seekers must know that more employers than ever use rigorous background screening procedures to vet the information contained on their resume."

Cleveland-based employment screening company [employeescreenIQ](#) also noted in its recently released list of background screening trends to watch for in 2009 that the state of the current job market could lead some individuals to stretch the truth in order to secure employment. Over the past year, the company has found a 56 percent discrepancy rate between what is reported on a resume and what is found when conducting employment and education verifications.

Resume "fluffing" isn't the only area employers need to focus on, however, according to the report. Conviction rates among job applicants are also on the rise. Now more than

ever, hiring professionals need to be sure their employment screening firms are conducting thorough, detailed, background checks.

Among the other trends cited in the report:

- **Use of social networking sites to screen individuals.** The social network revolution has changed many communication channels. Sites such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn contain a wealth of personal information—good and bad—that allow hiring professionals to view home pages in order to gain additional information about job candidates.
- **Screening of Outside Contractors.** With more outside sources being used by staffing managers to fill positions, this is sure to be a hot topic in 2009.
- **Screening Existing Employees.** Recurring background checks on current employees are becoming more common. Continuous employee screening can help employers stay abreast of a person's personal activities that can play a role in the individual's employment standing.
- **Complementing Local, National, Criminal Records Database Searches.** A national criminal database search shouldn't be the sole method used to perform a criminal background check. Hiring professionals must confer with their screening company to make sure the provider is using the best method of conducting county records searches as its primary information source, coupled with researching a national criminal database as a secondary source.
- **State Focus on Developing Privacy Procedures for Public Records.** In the age of identification theft, states are taking measures to protect their citizens' personal information. These measures can affect how quickly and how much information employers can obtain.
- **International Screening Growth.** The complexity of the international privacy laws, in addition to the accuracy of international records, has created several issues for employers. As the world is beginning to embrace the concept of background screening beyond the United States, employers are faced with so many

issues regarding the legal procedures of the countries in which they are conducting background checks, especially concerning privacy laws.

- **State Mandates and the Electronic I-9 Process.** Filing I-9 forms electronically speeds up the process and improves the accuracy of verifying a potential employee's citizenship and right to work. More than 85 percent of paper I-9 forms are filled out incorrectly. With such a large margin of error, states are beginning to mandate the electronic I-9 process.
- **Adjudication Modules.** Some hiring managers use adjudication modules—grids or charts that dictate specific reactions to convictions for identified crimes—to assist them in the hiring process. The modules are perceived as a helpful tool to use during the employment review process. A pitfall for developing an accurate adjudication module is that different jurisdictions define crimes differently. These inconsistencies result in a flawed system and possible employer infractions of discrimination law.
- **Educating the Marketplace About Background Screening.** Even though hiring and selecting a background screener is a small portion of their overall duties, it is still important to keep current on the industry and the integral role it plays in mitigating an organization's liabilities.

"The only way to be reasonably certain you have a qualified candidate is to independently verify their qualifications," J. J. Keller & Associates' Zalewski said. "Another good reason to conduct background checks is to protect your business from negligent hiring. Courts may not only hold you responsible for what you do know, but also for what you should have known about your employees. Claiming you didn't know will not give you much, if any, protection."

*Theresa Minton-Eversole is an online editor/manager for SHRM.*

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