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Disturbing Trends In The Screening Industry



The employment screening industry has evolved greatly over the past decade. Ten years ago many companies were not conducting background checks on their job applicants. Now, for most companies background checks are standard procedure.

But as the market has matured several disturbing trends have developed. Here are five of the most disconcerting ones.

1. Relying On Proprietary Criminal Databases

Some screening companies now offer a low cost "national" or "nationwide" or sometimes a "regional" criminal database that consists of limited records from state departments of corrections, county courts, prison systems, sex offender registries, etc. They are touting their proprietary database as an effective primary search for records.

This is very misleading and risky.

As a supplement to onsite county courthouse searches or state government repositories a database is fine. But as a stand alone product a proprietary criminal database is dangerous.

Why? Databases can be inaccurate and incomplete.

Most jurisdictions don't provide records in bulk electronic format, which means many important criminal records are missing.

Many jurisdictions remove crucial identifiers such as date of birth, which means some records can be associated by the database with the wrong person.

Criminal records can change over time, which means the database reports outdated information such as expunged records or sealed cases. Deferred judgments that turn into convictions can be missed.

In essence, with database only searches you get the "worst" of both worlds -- missing some criminal records that should have been found on an applicant and other times finding some records that don't really belong to the applicant at all or cannot legally be used.

You could end up hiring someone with a criminal record who would otherwise have been disqualified or you disqualify someone who shouldn't have been and now you're facing a lawsuit.

Some screening companies don't bother to follow-up and check the records reported in these databases. They simply send the applicant a "contemporaneous notification" letter. This has already led to several lawsuits against screening companies from applicants who were denied employment because of faulty records.

At ESS we only use our "Auxiliary National Criminal Index Search" in conjunction with a county or official state government repository search. We will never sell it as a stand alone product. In other words, with ESS you get the "best" of both worlds.

2. Not Researching Criminal Search Locations

Some screening companies have so automated their criminal search process that they take all the human judgment out of it. A criminal search request comes in and the system automatically plugs in the search parameter based on the data entered.

This can lead to misdirected searches.

For example, if someone recently moved to his/her current residence from another jurisdiction it doesn't make sense to conduct the only criminal search in the new location. A person with a record often moves away from the location of the criminal record and it is unlikely s/he would be arrested, charged and convicted in the short period following a move to a new location.

The criminal search should really be performed in the last location where an applicant spent significant time. That could conceivably be two or three jurisdictions back.

At ESS a criminal research specialist looks at every criminal search order to determine the appropriate jurisdiction to search. The specialist looks at data obtained from a SSN trace or credit report or motor vehicle report or look at the employment application or resume to assess the proper location. There may even be other names to check.

The point is it's important to think through the search in order to do it most effectively. Automation is great but sometimes you need a live person to be involved as well.

3. Outsourcing Employment Or Education Verification To Overseas Call Centers

Another disturbing trend is "off-shoring" U.S. employment or education verifications. It is certainly cheap in price - both for the employment screening company and the client - but it may actually come at a much higher "cost."

Once an applicant's personal information (SSN, addresses, employment history, school history) is sent overseas most all the privacy and security protections vanish. The potential for identity theft is magnified exponentially.

At ESS we never outsource any domestic employment or education verifications. We refuse to compromise your applicants/employees' privacy or your company's liability safeguards.

Our own highly trained specialists in our Washington headquarters make all the calls. Their approach is courteous, professional, private and accurate. This insures you receive highly secure and confidential reports.

4. "My Way Or The Highway" Approach To Business

It seems that more and more screening companies, particularly the larger ones, are adopting a "my way or the highway" approach to customer service. They have a particular way of doing business and they aren't too interested in altering it for any reason. They may offer a cheaper product so they feel justified in offering less service.

This really gives our industry a bad name. And contrary to some screening vendors' beliefs one size does not fit all.

At ESS we have a reputation of going above and beyond to satisfy our clients' needs. We'll do just about whatever it takes to accommodate your reasonable requests.

Do you need a customized report package? You got it.

Do you need a specialized or personalized order form? No problem.

Would you like us to ask custom questions when conducting employment verifications or reference interviews? Be glad to -- no additional charge.

Do you need us to do some in depth follow-up research on an applicant we screened for you? Just tell us what you need.

Can we handle your adverse action or state applicant notifications for you? You bet.

Do you have a new staff member who needs to be trained on our process? We're happy to take the time to do so ... no charge.

Would you like us to design an online employment application for you? We'll do it ... no charge.

As you can see we're all about service. We call it "business TLC." It's our number one priority. If you need something special just ask us. We can probably do it.

5. Treating Background Checks Like A "Commodity"

Some screening companies have so homogenized their background checking processes that it's hard to distinguish them from most any other screening company. Their reports are essentially data compilations. There is very little creativity in gathering the information or in the presentation of the report.

In many cases this is probably out of necessity because of the frequent turnover of the people processing their reports (either direct employees or overseas call center workers.) They need to keep their procedures rather basic in order to accommodate inexperienced processors.

Or they look at simplified reports as a way to keep costs down.

At ESS we recognize that managing overhead is important but we don't want to skimp at the expense of value.

Over half of our employees have been with us for more than ten years so they are very experienced and expert at their craft. We don't have to minimize their tasks in order to bring them up to speed. We give them more not fewer responsibilities.

This means we provide you with extremely accurate, thorough and complete reports packed with meaningful information to help you make the most informed hiring decision. We're obsessed with value. Just take a look at our reports and you'll see what we mean.