

Conduct background checks right

By Cindy Schroeter Graham

In this day and age it may be prudent to glean whatever information we can about a potential employee. Credit checks and background checks can provide a wealth of information, from how a person handles their finances to criminal records. How you obtain and use this information could determine whether you are complying with privacy policies and secure information handling.

The person conducting or reviewing a background check has access to information that could be devastating if it ended up in the wrong hands. If the information is lost, stolen or otherwise determined to be used for identity theft or fraud, it could result in fines up to \$2500, according to the FACT Act.

Here are some suggested guidelines to ensure the privacy of information obtained from or for employees and applicants:

- Designate who will have access to employee information. This applies to information gathered prior to and following background checks. Will a background check be conducted on all applicants? If not, make it a practice not to collect a social security number until you have determined whether the applicant qualifies for the position in all other aspects.
- Procedures for securing information. Once the information is obtained, implement safe handling procedures. Determine how long the information will be left unsecured and where the information will be kept secure. Information left unattended on a desk is unacceptable.
- Procedures for accessing the information. Determine who will have access to the information files.
- Procedures for destroying information. Information that is no longer needed should be properly destroyed, meaning shred it as soon as possible. Don't keep information in a box under someone's desk.

Background checks come in a variety of details as well as cost, from basic credit checks to full comprehensive searches. The duties of the employee and the type of information he/she will be handling may help determine what type of background check is sufficient.

Ask a few questions to start with. Why do you need a background check? What type of information are you looking for? Will the information determine whether or not the employee is hired? Will the information determine what job functions the employee will have? What details within a report will determine a positive or negative review?

Here is a non-comprehensive list of the information available through background checks that range from about \$10 to \$125.

- Criminal background check
- Credit Bureau reports
- Asset search
- Business records
- Marriage and divorce records
- Media searches
- Licenses
- State and federal court records
- Law suits
- Address and phone history
- Bankruptcy
- Liens
- Property values
- Aliases
- Roommates and relatives

As you can see, the information available can be very personal. It is vital that this information be kept as secure as possible. Unless you plan on running a check on every potential employee you should not collect personal information, such as a Social Security number, driver's license number or birth date, from every job applicant. Privacy policies should be implemented to safeguard any personal information on file, whether a new applicant or current employee.

Only after you have decided the employee meets all other qualifications should you ask for a Social Security number to run a background check.

If the employee will not be handling any sort of secure information or money, consider doing a basic background check to determine the reliability of the candidate. An address and phone history may be sufficient to determine whether the employee will stay

around or not. Don't base your decision solely on the contents of these reports. Unforeseen calamities can befall us all. Interview the candidate to further explain any questions or concerns you have. The candidate may have had problems in the past and has been working hard to correct them.

The trustworthiness of the employee should be considered if he/she will be handling private information. Reviewing background checks for criminal activity, moving from place to place or the inability to handle their own finances, could lead to temptations to misuse company funds or information.

Trustworthy employees and strict privacy policies and secure information handling procedures are necessary to help fight the battle against identity theft, fraud and misuse of information. ■

Cindy Schroeter Graham is an expert on identity theft prevention. For more information see www.whoelseisyou.com.

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