

Clients call for tougher CV checks

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Checking the background of candidates is not what most recruiters had in mind when they started their careers. But while the process may not be glamorous, or exciting, in an increasingly security and safety-conscious world it has never been more important.

The consequences of inadequate checks can be catastrophic. Peter Knight, a director of London-based recruitment consultancy Roberts Knight Selection says he knows of two recruitment companies which lost contracts after audits revealed that their checking of candidates had not been up to scratch. "It's becoming the recruiter's worst nightmare," he says.

Olivia Yost, business development director at finance and support staff recruiter Poolia, says: "We have all heard horror stories of candidates being walked off the premises because they did not have the right visa, or because their references were not satisfactory. We don't want to put our clients in a position of risk."

The tendency of job seekers to "enhance" their CVs is encouraging greater scrutiny. A recent survey by The Risk Advisory Group (TRAG) an employee screening firm, found the number of CVs containing discrepancies is increasing — it now stands at more than 50% — and the inconsistencies are becoming more serious.

Commenting on the findings, Sal Remtulla, TRAG's head of employee screening, says: "The serious nature of the discrepancies emphasises the need for heightened attention during the recruitment process."

In one case, checks revealed an applicant for a position at the Financial Services Agency was investigated by her previous employer, which discovered she had divulged sensitive information to a competitor.

Such findings do not surprise Knight. "From time to time you get people who provide false information to us. I could probably write a book about it," he says.

Legislation introduced in recent years has increased recruiters' responsibility to verify the identity of candidates (see box). But many clients now expect recruiters to do even more, according to Knight. Most require background checks to go back three to five years. Knight cites one contract where 86 staff had problems with gaps in their CVs. This was costly for the company because it had to take on additional staff, and it was also time-consuming, requiring up to 15 contacts before some references were finally obtained. "The process is a huge burden for temporary and contract people, but we have no other way to validate that what they are saying is correct," Knight says.

Tom Forrest, associate director at Joslin Rowe in the City, says practices have changed. Five to six years ago, the attitude was often "so and so can start in 20 minutes". That does not happen any more, he says.

Forrest says one major investment bank will not employ temps unless employers for the previous five years have confirmed candidates' employment. Credit checks are also common. And some clients require a personal reference for gaps of more than three weeks.

Forrest says the checking process can significantly delay the date a candidate starts work. He adds that most clients are prepared to wait rather than accept improperly screened people. "Checking is now critical," he says, though he concedes that smaller financial institutions will often allow employees to start without seeing their full references up-front.

Screening requirements have grown so much that in 2005 Joslin Rowe created a four-person unit dedicated to checking references for temporary staff.

Recruiters also report that more and more clients require police checks through the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). These checks are now common across sectors including education, finance and medical. However, many recruiters complain that the CRB checks take too long. "I have a teacher that I put in for in August, and I am still waiting for the CRB check to come back," says Stephen Ashfield, manager director of Durham-based recruiter SAS Teachers.

Checking has also become more difficult due to the influx of migrant workers, including 600,000 from eastern

Europe alone in recent years, says Knight. "People are more difficult to contact abroad, there are language barriers, and there can be question marks over the quality of information," he adds.

Rather than doing the more stringent checks themselves, some recruiters are turning to specialist companies to do the work. Graham Johnson, a director of Greenfields Risk Management, which has four recruiters among its clients, says, "Agencies are so tied up with clients and candidates that they don't have the time to carry out the checks themselves."

Simon Houlton, managing director of the Referencing Agency, which has two recruiter clients, says a typical assignment would be to check "an eastern European worker who has had 10 jobs in the last 10 years".

Although the growth of background checking appears universal, checking by recruiters is still mainly confined to temporary staff, as clients usually take responsibility for checks for permanent appointments. Helen Hopperton, business performance manager at Select Appointments, says: "We don't reference permanent staff unless the client requests it."

Hopperton adds that some sectors pose more difficulties than others. "Checking industrial workers is harder than checking commercial staff because they are more likely to be from overseas, and there's also likely to be a higher turnover," she says.

One sector where screening has taken on greater importance is aviation, due to the threat of terrorism, and recruiters are expected to play their part. "Anyone that passes into the security zone at airports has to have a five-year history check and verification of where they have been over that period," says Steve Doherty, recruitment manager at Wynnwith Engineering, a supplier of contract staff to major airports including Heathrow and Gatwick.

Some professional contractors will have had 20 to 30 employers in that period, so the checks can take up to six weeks, and cost "several hundred pounds" per person, Doherty says. Doherty adds that around 20% of contractors now fail the vetting procedure compared with "a couple of per cent" previously. "We have to over-recruit, and then see how many we can get through clearance," he says.

The situation has been made more difficult because it is no longer acceptable for contractors to provide a generic set of references. Instead all references have to be re-run for each new employer. "That's extremely common," says Doherty. He accepts that security must be strict, but says the downside is that tighter vetting has "stifled a certain amount of business". Gatwick airport was left "significantly short" of personnel in the summer because staff couldn't be cleared in time, he says.

Another sector facing difficulties is IT.

Martin McCrum, a director of Aspirare Recruitment in Hamilton, Scotland, says that the eight-to-12-week vetting procedure to work on government, military-based IT contracts has resulted in lost placings.

"Nine times out of 10, a contractor will go and take work immediately [rather than wait for vetting to be completed]," says McCrum. The company gets round this by putting candidates forward through another recruiter, which has already been security vetted.

Andy Church, managing director of Lorien, a specialist IT recruiter, says that after terrorist attacks in recent years, clients became concerned that they did not have enough information about their workforce.

"A significant number of our clients no longer accept the previously standard process of acquiring two references, and require stringent checks including credit, fraud, proof of residence, eligibility to work, proof of address, and criminal record checks," says Church. "In all cases, the process of obtaining the information for the screening is the responsibility of the agency."

Church says that if everything runs smoothly these checks take a minimum of 48 to 72 hours, but there can be delays, and the biggest drain on resources is the need to check references going back up to six years.

According to Church, the process has become so rigorous that to corroborate periods of inactivity or unemployment, for example, the agency may have to provide passport stamps to verify a candidate was travelling, and bank statements to prove there was no irregular activity. "In one extreme case," Church says, "a client insisted on viewing a death certificate when a candidate had been absent because his wife died."

Church says the performance of an agency's team carrying out screening can be just as critical as that of the main delivery team. "Clients audit us often, and the consequences of a failed audit can lead to the suspension or termination of our supply status."

The good news is that recent developments may make checking easier. For example, a database management system launched by a firm called Refero allows employers to access a central store of references, so they do not have to seek new references for every application.

MINIMUM LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

Under the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Business Regulations 2003, recruiters have a responsibility to confirm the identity of the work-seeker, and to check the candidate's experience, training and