

Hard Facts on Background Checks

“Sorry, but your offer has been rescinded.” It's one of the most difficult messages a recruiter has to deliver to a candidate, and it's difficult for a number of reasons. The obvious one is that the candidate who believed he was going to be starting a new career has just had the rug pulled out from under him. Equally important, if the offer was rescinded because of a purposeful misstatement of fact on the candidate's part, the trust the recruiter and hiring company placed in the candidate has been shattered along with the candidate's integrity. The need for ethics and honesty should be obvious to an information security professional. However, this year more than ever before, I've had to deliver this message to candidates who have provided false information to potential employers.

Almost every client for whom we perform search assignments now conducts background checks as a part of the hiring process. Most companies make a written job offer that is contingent upon the candidate passing a background check. This year we have seen more candidates fail their background checks than ever before. I don't know if databases are more extensive or better connected; if candidates don't recognize how thorough the process really is; or if some candidates are just so cavalier as to believe their misstatements will not be discovered. Regardless, offers are being withdrawn by companies who won't compromise their requirements.

Candidates fail background checks due to errors of omission, misstatements of fact, or financial or legal problems. I have found that some applicants who fail their background checks are not surprised. They are the candidates who have purposely distorted the facts of their employment history. Those who *are* surprised are usually those who've been given bad advice about filling in the gaps on their resumé by changing their dates of employment or exaggerating about their title or responsibilities in previous jobs.

What's essential to understand is that an employment application is a legal document. Once you've filled out an application, most companies are obligated to verify all the information you've provided in it. For this reason it is imperative that you are factually correct, and complete the application accurately. The information you include must reflect the information on your resumé as well as what you described during your interview.

To be clear, let's discuss what I have found to be the standard information routinely checked by companies performing background checks, and the types of issues that might disqualify someone from employment.

Credit Report. Companies look at credit reports as an indication of financial problems that may influence misdeeds. Some of the issues they consider are: a record of multiple collections, civil judgments, bad debts, charge-offs, a tax lien or a repossession.

Criminal Record. Has the candidate been convicted for a crime involving financial malfeasance, a crime involving violence, or a crime involving a controlled substance?

Previous Employment. Has the candidate falsely claimed that he worked for an employer? Has she omitted an employer she did, in fact, work for? Have her dates of employment been altered or stretched to cover gaps in employment? Finally, has he falsely claimed expertise gained from, or displayed at, a previous employer?

Education. Transcripts will be collected from any institutions listed on an application. Candidates will be eliminated if they falsely claim a degree they do not possess, or falsely claim the type of degree they hold.

Driving Record. A candidate's Department of Motor Vehicles record may be reviewed for occurrence of multiple DUIs; failure to appear in court when required to do so; or multiple charges for driving with a suspended license. Failure to carry insurance also may indicate a problem.

Social Security Number. Companies always want to make sure a candidate is legally cleared to work in the United States. They will determine if someone is falsely claiming a SSN, or is not allowed to work in the US.

Professional References. Most companies require that they be provided with, or are able to personally speak with, a minimum of two professional references. These references should validate and verify not only the candidate's technical ability to do the job, but also her management style, communication skills and personality.

The bottom line is this. If you are contemplating changing jobs, first review your resumé and make sure that all the information it contains is factually correct. When you fill out an application, check it twice for accuracy. Relay all relevant information to the recruiter or corporate human resources representative. You must realize that if you've had issues in the past relating to any of the above-mentioned items, you are best off disclosing them up front, always. If you have a reasonable explanation for any item that may appear suspect, and you disclose it up front, there is a good chance the issue will be resolved.

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