

How to Choose a Background Screening Firm

If you're contemplating initiating pre-employment background screening or changing screening firms, here are some guidelines to assist you in locating a reputable and competent screening agency.

Licensed Private Investigative Agency

Choose an agency with licensed private investigators on staff. Several states, including Arizona, require that criminal background searches be performed by licensed investigators. Whether it's a requirement of your state or not, the assurance of knowing an experienced investigator is overseeing your background screens will help you sleep better at night.

Stellar Reputation

As usual, word of mouth is a tried and true way to locate a screening firm you can trust. Ask around. Other business owners are eager to share their experience with you. Even if you don't know someone you can ask personally, contact a few well-established firms in your area. One of them will probably provide a recommendation. Short of that, search the web or the yellow pages and begin your own screening process.

Reliable Information

Information is only as reliable as its source, so choose an agency that uses official court records to search backgrounds. Don't forget, you and your screener may be liable for hiring decisions based on incorrect information, so accuracy is extremely important. If errors tracing to inaccurate data entry or indexing creep into court records, the court is responsible. But, if inaccuracies occur in the transfer of data from original court records into third-party databases, or in the transcription of records into screening reports, you and your screener may be held accountable. So make sure the screening firm you choose relies on official court documents, not third-party databases, and has a solid reputation based on high-level accuracy. The better-safe-than-sorry rule definitely applies.

Variety of Services

Screening firms come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and some offer more services than others. Make sure the firm you choose offers a complete menu of screening services. Your screening protocol might change or expand over time, so make sure your screening company has the capacity to meet your needs as they evolve.

Convenient Ordering and Reporting

Look for a background-screening agency that enables you to request screening services and receive and view results in a variety of convenient ways. Having the option to order by phone, fax or the Internet is a huge plus. Also, having the

ability to check the status of an existing request and retrieve results online 24/7 is another key convenience.

Easy-to-Read Reports

Ask to preview a sample report. Some are more difficult to read than an Egyptian hieroglyphic! Look for report formats that make it easy to quickly discern whether findings are favorable, unfavorable or inconclusive.

Cost Effective Services

Price is another important factor to consider. Weighing the value of performance relative to cost is a difficult balancing act. Don't let companies tell you that you can't have both. You can. Take time to compare rates and services.

Fast Results

Turnaround time is an important factor in today's competitive hiring climate. Most pre-employment screens can be accomplished in a few days. Most screening firms target results within 24 to 72 hours, but be advised that some difficult court searches can require more time, especially if possible records must be pulled in order to verify an identity match. A word of caution: If you receive results in hours instead of days, inquire whether unofficial databases are being searched.

Insured

Confirm that the agency you select is covered by Errors and Omissions Insurance. As with other types of liability insurance, this is a precautionary instrument used to provide security and protection to those who screen responsibly. Think of E&O as malpractice insurance for screeners. After all, you wouldn't think of using a surgeon who doesn't carry malpractice insurance, would you?

Compliance Assurance and Assistance

There are many laws governing pre-employment and employee screening. The Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) covers pre-employment screening and provides safeguards to job applicants and employees. Make sure you are dealing with an agency that knows and complies with government regulations and can help your company do the same.

Critical Mass

You'd be surprised how many purported screening agencies are nothing more than one or two-employee operations using post office boxes. Talk to someone in charge and get to know the people who will be supporting your business.

Customer Service

Find a screening agency that can meet your service expectations. Try to get a sense of whether you'll be able to reach someone in a pinch who can quickly answer your questions and resolve any issues.

NAPBS Seal of Approval

The National Association of Professional Background Screeners (NAPBS) offers its endorsement to screening agencies that comply with the association's ethical standards. Check to see if the firm you're considering is a member.

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