

Getting the Goods: Tips for Conducting Background Checks

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In the Jan./Feb. *Retailer*, I covered the importance of background checks for prospective hires. Several background checking services are available to handle this for you and their fees vary depending upon what checks you authorize. There are, of course, advantages to using a service. It can save time since they often have arrangements in place with law enforcement agencies and credit reporting services. In addition, they are up-to-date on the legalities of reference checking so they can usually provide you with the proper releases, etc.

On the other hand, the report you receive is of the Joe Friday variety, “The facts, ma’am, just the facts.” It’s my opinion that you get more than that by conducting at least some parts of the check internally.

With some preparation and thought, checking past employment and references might yield far more information than you would get from a service. First, you **MUST** use an employment application form that includes a proper release and is signed by the applicant. Some past employers may ask you to mail or fax a release before they provide any information. The release should apply to the verification of education, as well as past employment.

Of course, it remains extremely important to verify such factual information as dates of employment, title, last rate of pay and reason for leaving. Even current employers usually verify such information because these calls are common – you get them all the time for employees seeking a loan or a credit card. (This is about all the information a background checking service will get for you, by the way.)

I probably don’t need to say this, but be **VERY** careful when calling about someone who is still employed. Their employer may not realize they are looking for another job and you could cause a problem that you don’t want to deal with – especially if you **DON’T** hire the person.

Before you call former employers or references, think about what you want to learn. There are probably things on the application that raise a few questions – discharges, for one. Other things may have come up in the interview that make you think there is another side to the story. A few minutes reviewing your interview notes will help you prepare.

The potential for obtaining other kinds of information remains greater if you are verifying former employment. You should have a supervisor or manager’s name from your application form and that’s the person you want to reach. Of course, that’s not always possible. Company policy may dictate that all such calls go to a certain person but you can at least try. Ask for that person by name when you call. While they might refer you to someone else, they may be willing to talk with you.

Start with verifying the facts. By the time you have that out of the way, you should be able to tell whether you have established some rapport and might be able to discuss other topics. I had good luck explaining that our training program (computers, team work, company procedures, etc.) was customized and intensive during the first month of employment. Then, I would ask if there was a particular area that would be of benefit to the potential employee. That approach often produced interesting information because the former supervisor felt they were being helpful.

There is one question that I'm sure all of you would like to have answered by a former employer and that is, "How was his/her attendance?" Personally, that's a pointless question unless you know how a former employer defines "Good" and "Poor" attendance. That, my friends, is a standard that varies by company. For some companies, just having the person show up before noon is acceptable.

While it's important information, you must be specific when asking about it. For example, "We are pretty strict about being at work on time. Do you think _____ could adjust to that?" Or, "We have a no show/no call termination policy. Would you see any problem for _____ in that area?" Now, I will tell you this. If your applicant had exemplary attendance or was chronically absent, such questions will usually elicit a response. Then they will tell you that _____ was the first one to arrive in the morning and almost never called in sick. Or if attendance was poor, they will hedge their answer.

Personal references remain another source of information. MOST applicants list friends as personal references with the expectation that they will give a glowing report of his/her skills, behavior and work ethic – even if they have no real knowledge of such things. There is no harm in going on a little "fishing" expedition with these references, especially if you don't get much from former employers. However, recognize that you may get personal information about health, children, marital situations, religious affiliations, etc. that cannot enter into your hiring decision.

If you choose to personally conduct this part of the background check, I would be very interested to know how it works for you.