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Pre-Employment Background Checks: More and More a Routine Part of The Employment Process

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Several years back, when an employer mentioned to us that they would require a background check performed by an outside agency or resource, it was almost always coming from a company engaged in investments, financial services, banking or insurance. As a matter of course, since their employees might have access to private confidential financial information related to their customers, these firms needed to complete these background investigations in order to assure their customers – and their underwriters – that confidential information would stay that way.

Times have changed.

That was then – this is now. Our business world has overwhelmingly become a landscape of internet-enabled enterprises; companies whose business data – and even their employee data – is acquired, shared and managed via the web across a truly global community.

As a result, more and more companies are seeing value in background investigations as a routine part of their pre-employment process. These inquiries are expensive, and are usually only initiated when a candidate is being extended an offer of employment.

Unfortunately for the candidate, at that point in the process – when an offer is being constructed – it is usually much too late to correct any errors or poorly remembered data that may have already been shared as part of their application and interview process.

A key part of the process.

As a collaborative partner in the employment process of thousands of companies, Winter, Wyman has a unique vantage point from which to view this expanded use of external information and verification. We have seen first-hand the rescinding of employment offers and, on occasion, the termination of a newly hired employee whose final background check came back with irreconcilable errors.

For some employers, the investigation actually replaces traditional employment references. Those employers, assuming that a candidate is only going to share a reference that is commendable, will rely on their personal assessment of the candidate during interviews and then verify their impressions with the results of a background investigation by a reputable service provider as they make their final hiring decision. Other employers will use the results of the background check to augment their own – or an agency's – detailed reference activities. In either case, when adverse or distinctly different information surfaces during the background

investigation, it almost always results in disqualification and an end to the offer process.

An ounce of prevention.

What can you do to protect yourself? It sounds simple, but, as in most things in life, an ounce of prevention can protect you from a pound of pain. As you begin to confidentially explore the job market, take a few moments to circle back on your own career history to capture accurate information on a number of key elements:

- ***Periods of employment*** – make sure that you have accurate dates (you'll need to provide the month and year) for beginning and ending periods of employment for each employer. If there are short periods of employment that you had thought about excluding, think again. Your complete employment history will be visible to an authorized background investigator, and an omitted period of employment is equally as damaging as one that is incorrectly entered.
- ***Reasons for leaving*** – a layoff is a layoff; a resignation is a resignation and termination is a termination. If you were fired, obscuring that fact won't help if it surfaces when you are in line for a job offer. Some of the best-known names in modern business can recount the times they were fired. Deal with your employment history honestly and move forward; never let it keep you from a job offer you've earned.
- ***Educational foundation*** – make sure that you have complete, correct names of schools and colleges attended (especially for schools located outside of the US), correct degrees and dates of graduation and, of course, for any honors awarded. If you are near completion of a program of study, indicate that – do not indicate that you hold a degree that is incomplete, even if you only have that one remaining course. The smallest inaccuracy can lead to a quick disqualification.
- ***Salary information*** – do not use earnings estimates or vaguely recalled salary values from past jobs. Any earnings information that cannot be verified by payroll or personal tax records – and that will not be verifiable to the external investigation source – will most likely ensure a quick and speedy trip to the "OUT" basket for you and your candidacy. If you are in doubt or cannot remember actual compensation values, make every effort to get that information. If it just isn't available, make a notation on the application or cover letter that the figures you are providing are an estimate – and make every effort to be sure that your estimate is not in any significant way higher than your actual pay might have been. No matter your intent, that type of error will most likely be seen in an adverse light. If you are working with a search agency or placement service, be sure to give them the same accurate information that you will ultimately share with the employer as you move toward an offer. Errors at the front end of the process are even more glaring when they need to be corrected as the final details are being applied to an offer package.
- ***Drug testing*** – screening tests for illegal substances are also becoming more prevalent as pre-employment tests. Although drug testing is not always performed in conjunction with a complete background investigation, it is nevertheless equally as powerful. In some ways, even more so. While there may be an explanation, or additional recovered data that can be used to offset a problem surfaced during a background investigation; it is just about impossible to rebut a failed drug screening. Find out at an early stage if a drug test will be a required part of the employer's process. If you have reason to believe that you would not be able to pass a routine screening for controlled or

illegal substances, manage your search process with that in mind. And definitely share that information with any search agencies or placement services you are using. Again, having that obstacle surface at the final part of the process can be a hard reality to deal with – for all parties. Complete and honest disclosure up front will allow you to avoid any such downfall.

It's all up to you.

Given their increasing usage, it is a distinct possibility that background investigations, drug tests and other pre-employment inquiries will have an impact on your career search. It's up to you whether that comes as a surprise – or as an event that you have anticipated and are ready and able to manage constructively and with positive results. Do your research, have accurate information available, deal honestly with agencies or services you expect to assist you and you'll be prepared for success.