

Background Screening: A Paradigm Shift

Vijay Vaswani highlights the importance of background screening for organisations

Many of us are put off by the idea of having our cars stopped by the police, and being subjected to a breath-analyser test. Whether it is the delay and inconvenience involved, or potential hygiene issues, it can be an irritant. Regardless, most of us would still not want these tests done away with, because there is a sense of safety that comes out of vigilance. The fact that it creates a deterrent to drunk driving, at least among rational people, is very comforting.

Yet in our day-to-day lives, be it at the workplace or within one's personal space, we continue to deal with a fair number of 'drunk drivers'. The difference is that, instead of having alcohol in their blood, what these people have are naturally 'intoxicated' minds that breed lies, deceit, even crime. In the corporate world, this might translate into resume discrepancies of varying levels of seriousness. Indeed, a recent study by First Advantage found that, of every 100 candidates the company vetted, roughly 11 had discrepancies of some form or the other. All of this goes to say that background screening is something that needs to be taken very seriously, and not treated – as it is today – as one of HR's 'step-daughters'.

Background checks: a specialised skill

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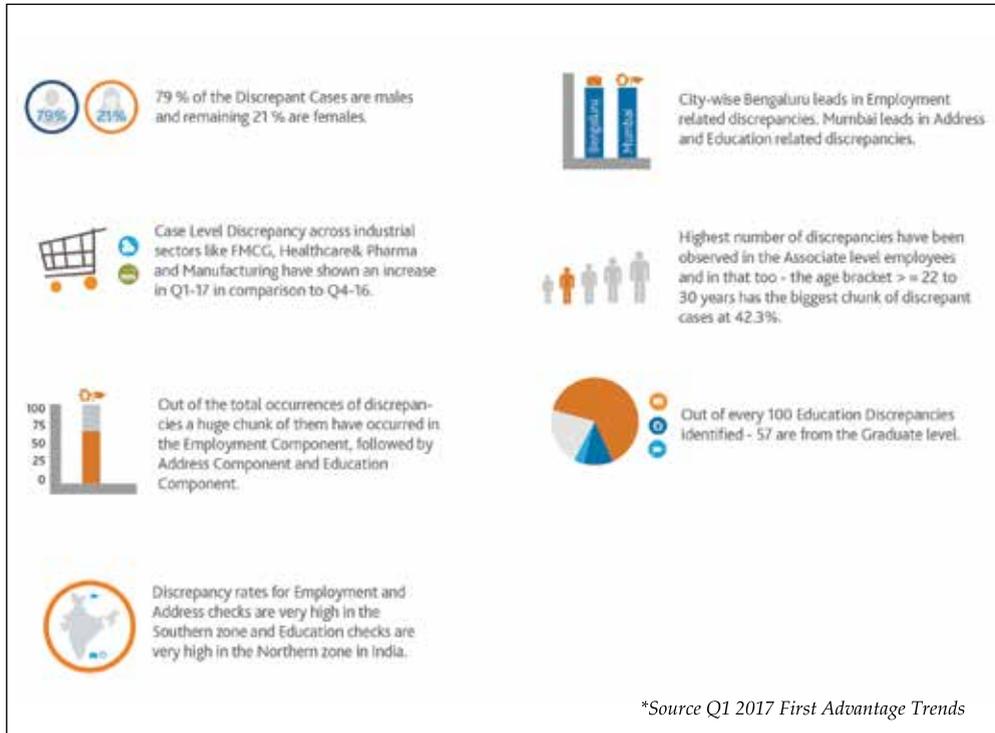
of 'minds' that they hire – but to be sure where they stand, they need a new type of 'breath analyser'. Background screening companies meet this need. The challenge is that, instead of measuring the blood-alcohol content – a straightforward task – what they do is to validate documents against public records. Much of this information might not be available in digital form, so it involves checking with past employers, educational institutions, police stations, or court records, and often requires a high degree of research.

Globalisation and technological advancements has made the world a smaller, 'flatter' place, and MNCs have leveraged this to expand their global footprint. Most look towards developing countries for their pools of young, available, educated candidates. Job seekers,

too, are moving across borders in search of more sophisticated roles and opportunities. All of this adds to the complexity of screening, because a person might be born in one country, educated in another, might have worked in a third country, and may now be seeking a job in an entirely new geography. Considering that the world has 195 countries, each with multiple states, and that each country has its own verification processes and privacy laws, the complexity involved in screening is huge. All said and done, it is a specialised activity that can no longer be internalised within HR departments.

Cultural Fit? Screening may have an answer or two

At a different level, background screening can extend beyond weeding out liars and crooks, to identifying people who may not be the right cultural fit for the organisation. Put more positively, it can help companies hire only those individuals who are aligned to their culture. This also helps the candidates: people spend more than a third of their lives at work, and most look for work places that allow them to not only earn money, but maximise their potential and achieve a certain work-life balance. Everyone will assign different priorities to each of these factors. After all, if work were just about making money, it wouldn't matter where one works. This is where cultural fit comes into play.



than he or she claims to be.

Given today's rapid technological change, appropriate skillsets – and having the right people in the right positions – matter more than ever. In response, the leading background screening companies have now evolved from an 'audit centric' approach focused on validating the various parts of a candidate's CV, to actually assisting organisations in hiring right by partnering with HR. The engagement is wide-ranging, from

CV-validation and skills assessment (in terms of both soft and functional skills), to measuring leadership skills, team-building and cultural fit. In short, screening companies today have become true 'Talent Acquisition Solutions' providers.

Widening the canvas...

It does not stop there: the benefits from employee screening are motivating organisations to have full-fledged programmes to screen their vendors and contractors. In a way, screening is like 'quasi corporate governance', enabling management to discharge the trust reposed upon it by shareholders, employees, and contractors. However, greater legislative support is needed to give this area a thrust. Screening is not a choice anymore. Rather, it is an obligation one needs to institutionalise to vindicate the trust that society and

shareholders repose in management. ■



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Organisational psychology guru Adrian Furnham offers a good definition in *The Psychology of Behaviour at Work*: 'A fit is where there is congruence between the norms and values of the organisation and those of the person.' Those in 'congruent' jobs that match their personality report feeling more competent. In other words, positive cultural fit can improve our self-esteem and make us feel more capable of carrying out our work to the best of our ability. Cross-country studies of cultural fit also find a relationship between cultural fit and mental and physical health – so if your job fits your personality, you're less likely to exhibit signs of depression, anxiety and the like, and you might even live longer!

The importance of 'Talent Acquisition Solutions'

In a country as vast as India, it is not difficult to obtain fake degrees or mark-sheets, but resume fraud can prove costly – destroying careers, or even tarnishing a company's reputation. In an increasingly competitive job market, many

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candidates have begun fabricating documents. The discrepancies come into the light only through background checks, or more damagingly, when strategies fail because the executor is less qualified