

The Impact of Coronavirus on Background Screening

No matter which sector you work in, where your business is located, or how your business is run, normal hiring cycles will have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As work forces and populations remain largely in some form of lockdown, many companies are facing a number of new recruitment challenges including:

- The need for increased recruitment in certain sectors to meet demands of a population in lockdown (e.g. supermarkets, delivery companies or call centres)
- The need to recruit skilled critical hires in greater numbers than previously required (e.g. expanding IT teams to ensure that your workforce are still able to do their jobs from home)
- “Virtual” recruitment processes and access to information to support the process
- How to manage recruitment during a time when the pandemic has had significant economic impact in both the short-term and mid-to-long term
- Your existing workforce all working from home

This leaves companies that need to hire finding that they have two competing interests: the need to manage their employment risk and the need to hire quickly and cost-efficiently.

Your background screening provider's role is to help support you in overcoming these challenges and to provide a service that balances those competing interests.

The Practical Considerations

One of the challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the global lockdown and the impact that has had on being able to verify information provided by candidates.

- Initial lockdown measures caused data sources to either close or prioritise checks for key workers (e.g. India which relies on physical verifications and criminal checks for key workers). As lockdown measures are eased, sources will slowly reopen but with reduced staff and if we see a second wave of COVID-19, restrictions may be increased once more. This poses challenges when verifying information in the preferred way, directly at source.
- With so many people in countries under lockdown, there are many logistical considerations to be made. Candidates at home may not have the tools that they need in place to access critical supporting documents (e.g. scanning in documents to send digitally or receiving things by post).
- Due to the economic impact of the pandemic, many companies may have furloughed employees performing ‘non-critical’ roles, particularly those working in administration who may not be able to work effectively from home. With reduced numbers in these roles, the availability of information at some data sources, or the time to retrieve it may be impacted.

Your background screening provider can help you manage this by monitoring those sources and working proactively with them to understand when and how they can accept verification requests. They can also make sure that where verifications are impacted by COVID-19 that it is clearly marked, so that HR teams can easily run reports and make decisions when sources re-open as to whether or not those verifications should be attempted again. Finally your background screening provider can partner with you on your screening programme to tailor it to take into account these unique times.



Here are five things to think about:

1 Using a risk matrix to identify alternative checks

You still want to be able to address identified risks to your business when making hiring decisions, however the normal verifications used to mitigate those risks may not be available with source closures. Therefore, the use of a risk matrix can help to pinpoint those risks that require mitigation against a wider product suite (e.g. supplementing criminal checks with a global sanctions and enforcement check). This will enable businesses to form a proactive solution where certain checks are unavailable, averting potential problems for organisations needing to bring candidates into their business quickly, especially into critical roles.

2 Making changes to your standard processes

We are used to verifying information at source and it remains the best way to conduct a verification. However, you may wish to consider a temporary change in process to mitigate impacted turnaround times or availability where sources are either closed or their normal way of working is impacted. This can be particularly useful when verifying employment history: supporting documentation can be provided by the candidate up-front and the component check can be closed quickly. These checks can always be reworked if/when the source reopens or returns its own reference.

3 Supplementing criminal checks

In many countries there are significant delays on criminal checks due to sources being closed or running with a skeleton workforce. Many government departments are also prioritising criminal checks for key workers. These checks usually form the core of any screening programme where the checks are legally permissible, so the lack of available sources is impactful.

However, there are two ways that these checks can be supplemented:

The first is to include additional checks in your screening packages. Three options available are (a) global sanctions and enforcement; (b) conduct checks – local language media; and/or (c) adverse media checks – global media in English language. All these checks will remain up to date during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the media classed as key workers, an adverse media check may be a good place to start for up-to-date account of your candidate's presence in the press. Additionally, a global sanctions check can help identify if a candidate is on a number of high-profile watch lists, which could be a good alternative where a criminal check is not available.

Secondly, businesses may also want to use self-declarations, where the candidate is asked to answer a set of questions around their criminal history to self-certify, as an interim solution until it is possible to conduct a criminal record check.

Looking at these checks in combination, a business is able to build a package of checks to help mitigate risk and build a robust and up to date snapshot of the candidate's background.

4 Mitigation post hire - introducing longer probation periods for new hires

Probation periods are quite normal in employment contracts and are used as a period in which the employer assesses the performance of the employee and their suitability to carry out their new role. These probationary periods are typically between 3-6 months long, which can be extended where required.

With no face-to-face contact during lockdown, if probationary periods are not standard across all roles in an organisation, this may be something to consider amending. It may also be worth considering amending employment contracts to introduce a rescreening at the end of that probationary period OR on a return to the office once lockdown is over. This will allow an employer to 1) recheck information that has already been screened and 2) re-run checks which were previously unable to be verified at source.

Whilst usually a rescreening programme would not include employment or education checks (as this is static data), it is highly likely that for your COVID-19 rescreens that you would re-run your employment and education checks. You would also run (if you'd not tried already) your global criminal search, and where relevant directorship checks and credit checks, where sources may have been impacted. This will be particularly important for roles such as those within Financial Services or those deemed to be high risk, and would hopefully set up a rescreening programme moving forward, to help with the ongoing monitoring of risk within your organisation.

5 Rescreening your existing workforce

Many of your workforce may never have been screened or may have been screened some time ago when they initially joined your organisation. With entire workforces working from home, there has been an increased focus on how businesses mitigate risk, especially around data and systems, and a lot of focus has rightly been information security. However, how up to date is the information you hold on your employees? Where you have employees that have access to confidential or sensitive information, or are considered key risk positions, should you rescreen those employees?

Whilst expending money on screening you ordinarily would not complete may seem counter-intuitive at this time, the costs saved should issues be flagged via the screening (reputational and monetary) could be huge. Those rescreening packages could be tailored to keep costs down and to ensure that they are quick and efficient e.g. global sanctions and enforcement, adverse media check and local country criminal check (where available e.g. in England the DBS are still processing all Basic Disclosures).

In summary, many organisations now more than ever need to get new workers into their organisations quickly but also safely. The limitations around availability of sources is impacting typical screening turnaround times, but by partnering with your background screening provider, you can take steps to ensure that temporary measures such as alternative checks and changes in verification methods can enable you to hire swiftly and with confidence.

Getting Started

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