



Verifying Employee Credentials

Phony colleges and unreliable Internet data are making it harder for employers to screen prospective job candidates.

ACCORDING TO A LANDMARK STUDY conducted by Verifile, a United Kingdom employee screening company, the United States has become the phony degree capital of the world.

Highlighted in the January-February 2010 journal of the National Association of Professional Background Screeners, the report claims to have identified 1,762 bogus “institutions” and is still investigating another 1,545 that are currently perceived as “suspicious.” The United States’ share of the confirmed phony institutions: 810.

In times past, an employer could get a copy of an applicant’s degree and pretty much rely on its authenticity if all the text was spelled correctly and in the proper fonts, if it had decipherable signatures, and if it was produced on the right kind of paper.

Not so, today. With the advent and confluence of personal computers, scanners, laser printers, and Internet marketing, employers must verify the authenticity of degrees and the accreditation of the institutions that offer them by looking up and contacting not only the schools themselves, but also the appropriate accreditation agency in order to verify that both the degree and the school are legitimate.

Diploma mills provide authentic-looking degrees in virtually any field of study, without the need to actually attend any classes or lectures or even peruse any textbooks. Some of these mills market the diplomas as legitimate degrees based on the “life experiences” of the students.

Charges for these degrees range from under \$100 to as much as \$1,000.

Of course, transcript, bibliography, and verification services are available for additional fees. Needless to say, employers also cannot rely on simply using verification phone numbers or even online services provided by these

■ **More than 11 percent of bogus degrees go to people in the health care industry.**

purported institutions any more than they can rely on the authenticity of a diploma based on its appearance.

Health Care Vulnerable

It is hard to imagine a profession more susceptible to harm due to phony credentials than health care. Alarming, a recent Government Accountability Office study found that more than 11 percent of bogus degrees go to the health care field and include doctors, nurses, and other health care practitioners.

One phony doctor was responsible for hastening the death of a teenage cancer patient, while another was convicted of rape. In addition to the needless suffering of the victims, the blame and liability for these bad acts will fall on the shoulders of the employer. Notwithstanding the potential for economic damages, the reputation of the facility could suffer irreparable harm, and the loss of accreditation is a real risk.

Some may feel that just relying on a job applicant or employee’s statement of education credentials puts the onus for liability back on the individual. But a plethora of negligent-hire lawsuits have proven that not to be the case.

Consider the California county that hired an individual based in part on his false statement that he held a PhD in public administration. He was put into a position with access to Medicare funds, and when accounting irregularities began to surface, the ensuing FBI investigation determined that the individual would not have been hired if a check of his credentials had been conducted. The county was then held liable for negligent hiring and fined \$20 million by the federal government.

New Incentives For Screening

Another recent development, this time coming from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), provides incentive for health care providers to implement more rigorous screening processes.

FTC issued new rules last year that will hold financial institutions and creditors—including nursing facilities—accountable for implementing formal programs for preventing identity theft. In this case, nursing facilities will be responsible for ensuring that residents are protected.

The rules require that any consumer account, or other account for which there is a reasonably foreseeable risk of identity theft, develop and implement

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an identity theft prevention program (ITPP) for combating identity theft in connection with new and existing accounts.

Additionally, the creditor's board of directors or appropriate individual/owner must certify that all ITTP processes will be effective in prevent-

ing or reducing the chances of identity theft, periodically review the ITTP for updates, and ensure that all appropriate staff are properly trained.

These rules, which have been delayed several times, are set to go into effect on Dec. 31, 2010.

Attempting to find information on

individuals through social network sites such as Facebook, MySpace, or even Google can sometimes do a lot more harm than good. For instance, it is very hard, if not impossible, to determine if information on the site is accurate or even that it actually belongs to, or is properly attached to, a particular individual, as opposed to someone with the same or similar name.

Additionally, accessing these sites for employment purposes may expose information such as age, marital status, race, religion, and other information protected by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act or the Americans With Disabilities Act, which may not legally be considered in making employment decisions.

Courts have come down with decisions that say, for the most part, "you can't unring a bell." And if an employer has been exposed to certain information, it may be very difficult to prove it was not a factor in the employment decision-making process, thus making the employer susceptible to being sued for unlawful discrimination.

Outsourcing An Option

The U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation are probably the most legitimate accreditation bodies in the United States. However, many bogus institutions use names very similar to the real ones and even falsely add legitimate schools to their lists of accredited members, making it very difficult to be sure what's real and what's not.

There are currently no reliable shortcuts to determining the authenticity of education credentials. The personnel performing verifications need to be dedicated to the task and be as suspicious as a detective.

Outside assistance is one way to reduce the possibility of hiring or retaining an individual with bogus credentials. Organizations that employ fewer than 1,000 skilled personnel will usually achieve more efficiency by outsourcing. Every company that requires educa-

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tion and/or training credentials for employment purposes should always verify those credentials to the best of its abilities.

What's more, checking the references and credentials of screening firms is as important as checking the credentials of job applicants.

Screening In Other Countries

According to Verifile, international background screening is becoming more critical to businesses as borders open up and the battle to hire the best talent intensifies. A large number of direct care staff in nursing facilities are foreign-born U.S. citizens, and facilities must effectively verify credentials to ensure potential employees have been honest and truthful in their applications.

To start, screening them in each of the countries in which they have lived

is necessary. Verifile recommends criminal record searches to verify that the prospective staff member does not have a record. Each country has its own system for collecting and releasing criminal record data, and it is important to take local regulations into consideration.

Rules on the release of consumer credit information also differ from country to country.

In the United States, obtaining credit information through a credit bureau is normal, legal, and widely understood, but in countries such as Italy or Malaysia, credit information is not available for preemployment screening purposes even though credit bureaus do operate there.

In the United Kingdom, South Africa, and Australia, credit bureaus will only provide for preemployment screening purposes basic information






on court judgments and bankruptcies. Although employment verification in the United States often takes place through a verbally conducted check, this is very different from the rest of the world. Verifile notes that in Europe, written requests for employment references are preferred.

The reality is that many people are willing to pay for, and will jump at the chance to take, a shortcut to further their careers and bolster their images.

This, coupled with the billions of dollars to be made by those who are happy to sell them the bogus tools with no regard for the potential consequences, means that this is going to be an ongoing and ever-worsening problem. ■


For More Information


■ Contact Bob Fisher at (800) 716-7773 or bfisher@erelations.com.


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	has been convicted of Embezzlement?	
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