Background investigators screen potential candidates for hire

By Terri Mrosko

Deb Scott started as an entry-level investigator in 1999 with BackTrack, Inc., a company that specializes in background screenings for employers. She worked her way up to assistant manager and then manager of investigations nearly seven years ago. This past January, Scott completed her bachelor of arts degree in business management at Ursuline College.

The management team at her company regularly attends industry-related seminars and webinars to keep up with the latest employment regulations and to expand their knowledge of industry trends.

"I lucked into this work," Scott said. "I worked in the secretarial field for many years and then stayed home to raise my kids. When I was ready to come back to work, I was looking for an administrative-type position. I found the ad for this job, and it sounded interesting."

While a business background helps, it isn’t necessary to do the work, Scott explained. The company provides a fully-paid training program for new investigators. They learn more about the industry, how to process reports, and what federal regulations to follow during the screening process. The training program lasts about six to eight weeks.

Early on as an investigator, Scott helped with billing, training and quality control. Now she oversees the investigations and is the first point of contact for clients.

The duties of an investigator include verifying a prospective candidate’s former employment, education and credentials. Investigators contact references, check criminal records, pull driving reports, and order drug tests.

"We do anything the client needs to make a good hiring decision. We are on the phone most of the day calling various sources. We get our information from primary sources, not from some secret database that holds all of the information in one place," Scott said. "We actually directly contact the schools and former employers and organizations to obtain the information."
What it takes to succeed

To be a background investigator, a strong sense of curiosity helps, Scott said. The work is extremely detail oriented, and multi-tasking is a must in the fast-paced environment. The background screenings need to be completed as quickly as possible so an employer doesn't lose a viable candidate to another company.

"We don't want to hold up the process and have the employer lose them as a good hire because some other company hired them first," Scott advised. The company generally hires investigators with good office skills. Much of the work is conducted online, so strong computer skills are essential. You need to switch gears quite a bit, Scott explained.

When conducting an interview with a source, you need solid listening skills. It's important to listen to what's being said, as well as to what is not being said. Professionalism and good judgment are important, too.

What Scott likes best about her job is the variety of work. She works with clients across the country and in different industries.

"I get to talk to a lot of different types of people throughout the day. I might call the president of a Fortune 500 company one day and then a small mom-and-pop shop another. We might screen for production positions, executives or chief financial officers," Scott said.

For those who are interested in the field, Scott recommends a lot of networking. It's a niche field and not very big. To succeed, it's often more about who you know or through referrals.

Background investigators learn through industry training programs

There are no formal prerequisites for becoming a background screener or investigator, but some primary soft skills and general abilities are recommended. In addition to strong communication skills, active listening skills are essential. Investigators must be able to provide full attention to what other people are saying, taking time to understand the points being made, asking questions as appropriate, and not interrupting at inappropriate times.

A keen sense of observation and the ability to process a lot of information is important. Background screeners or investigators need to be creative and think outside of the box, while adhering to federal regulations that govern their procedures.

Most reputable background investigative and screening services provide in-house or relevant training. Many employers seek individuals with some type of prior formal education, but a degree is not generally required.

"When hiring new investigators, we don't have specific requirements as far as education. We do look for good written and verbal communication skills, as well as strong computer skills. Investigators need to be flexible and have common sense and a lot of enthusiasm," said Deb Scott, manager of investigations at BackTrack, Inc.

There are no professional licenses required, but the National Association of Professional Background Screeners provides accreditation to organizations that offer this service. More information can be found at www.napbs.com.