



## Background Checks - More Than a Formality

*Written exclusively for Chubbworks*

A former bookkeeper was sentenced to four years in prison for committing aggravated identity theft while on supervised release from a previous crime.

The former bookkeeper forged her employer's signature on business checks that she made payable to herself, petty cash, or to credit card companies from which she had obtained fraudulent credit cards under the name of the business and the employer. To obtain the credit cards, she used identification information including the employer's social security number and employer tax identification number. "Derby Woman Sentenced to Four Years in Federal Prison for Identity Theft, Violating Supervised Release," *Federal Bureau of Investigation Press Release* (Dec. 29, 2008).

She used a total of \$209,373 without authorization to obtain cash advances and to charge personal items and services on credit cards.

At the time the bookkeeper committed these offenses, she was on federal supervised release following a 2005 conviction for wire fraud. That conviction stemmed from her employment as a bookkeeper at a yacht club, where she used the social security number of a former employee of the club to obtain credit cards through which she made purchases of personal items causing a total loss of approximately \$11,669.

Following a three-month term of imprisonment for this crime, the bookkeeper was released and hired by another employer.

### *Commentary and Checklist*

This case highlights the importance of properly checking an applicant's background prior to hiring.

Employers should call all employers listed on the applicant's resume and make certain they are speaking with the appropriate supervisor of the applicant. With the abundance of cell phones, it is easy for an applicant to list himself or a friend willing to brag about the applicant's accomplishments – from a cell phone. As a precaution, consider having the supervisor call you back on a line where you can check the caller ID.

Another option for larger organizations is to call the main line and ask to speak with the HR manager rather than the individual listed on the resume – the HR manager can then verify the employer's manager and connect you with that person.

In addition to checking an applicant's prior work history, it is critical to check their criminal history.

Criminal background checks can unearth a criminal past that applicants would prefer to keep hidden. They also demonstrate employer due diligence serving as strong evidence when refuting negligent hiring claims. Finally, criminal background checks also send a strong signal that your organization values safety and character.

Here are some additional background check pointers:

- ✓ If a person has a criminal background, review the crime. A victimless crime (possession of marijuana) does not hold the same risk to the workplace as a crime against individuals (identity theft) or the community (selling drugs to minors).
- ✓ Reference checks are a must. If candidates cannot provide recent references or if their references refuse to cooperate, then you should give preference to those whose references check out positive.
- ✓ If an applicant's references refuse to cooperate, ask the applicant for other references. It is important that you find past employers that can state the applicant is a good worker and an asset.
- ✓ On personal references, question the reference closely to determine that the reference worked with the applicant in the manner that was described to you.
- ✓ Google the candidate. See if you can find blogs or other writings by the candidate or about the candidate that will shed more light on the candidate's personality.
- ✓ Check social websites like MySpace. Social websites ask users to post personal information. How a candidate describes himself outside of the hiring process can be very helpful.
- ✓ If an applicant is untruthful in his or her written application, then that is a sign to move on to the next candidate.
- ✓ Check a candidate's educational background. Make sure that they obtained the degrees and achieved the accomplishments listed.

This informational piece was published on February 10, 2009.

February 10, 2009

©2008 The McCalmon Group, Inc., all rights reserved. Designated trademarks and brands are the property of their respective owners. Use of this web site constitutes acceptance of The McCalmon Group's [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).