

BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU

How much employee screening is too much? Pre-hire screening will sift out the fakers and criminals, says Terry Williams, but what about those who lack the skills or attitude for the job.

IT WAS SAID BACK AT THE height of the cold war that everyone in East Germany had their own spy. Kind of like a social worker with a bad attitude, even the spies had spies. Trust no one and no one trusted you.

Germany reunited in 1990, the spy agency Stasi ceased to be and I guess everyone just got along awkwardly for a while, not talking about stuff. Any child conceived during that time would now be old enough to drink, vote and soon get discounted motor vehicle insurance. It was a while ago. There was no FaceBook. I know, crazy.

Back in 1990, it was probably relatively simple to concoct a CV crammed with generous over-achievements. A Commonwealth Games swimming bronze medal here, a Masters degree there. It was a hassle because there were no word processors and you had to type up multiple copies of your fraudulent qualifications, but it was very do-able.

And even if prospective employers thought to bother to check, it was no simple matter to do so. No Google. I know, crazy.

It was generally bad luck getting caught out. People would

make their lie on their CV, they'd get the job and they'd truck on quite happily and maybe even quite successfully.

Then something would happen. Maybe there was an accident or event which caught the media's attention and, in their muckraking, they uncovered some facts which revealed the original falsehoods. Look it up in the dictionary under 'Icebergs: tips of.'

Or, you'd get invited to speak at a function and discover that a chap in the front row also served in the SAS Afghanistan at the same time and in the same village that you claim to have done, yet he has never heard of you.

New Zealand is a small town. Never burn a bridge, and keep your lies away from computers and microphones.

As it is with insurance claims, exaggeration was probably more commonplace than outright total fabrication. I know I myself often refer to my DBA as "half an MBA."

Employers who used executive search consultants were indignant that the mega fees didn't include a thorough screening to ensure that the new CEO did actually have a law degree from Harvard University's

Rio de Janiero campus.

That was then and this is now. There are internets everywhere. Over half of your prospective employers will search you out on FaceBook, LinkedIn, etc and see how that synchronises with what you've been claiming about your qualifications, achievements and personal morality and hygiene.

I'm surprised the figure is only half. It will certainly grow. There are many websites where you can check out a hotel, movie or restaurant before you go. IMDB.com gives *Dallas Buyers Club* an 8.0 and *RoboCop* a 6.7. You have the feedback and can make a more informed choice.

How long before we get the same feedback aggregating services for us as employees? They already exist for trades people—plumbers, sparkies, etc. The wisdom of crowds online. Or the logic of pitchfork-wielding mobs. Tomayto, tomahto.

Screening employees has become quite the industry. I remember Pinkerton as a private detective agency from the movies as much as anything else. They didn't track down Zorro in the 2005 movie, nor Butch and Sundance, so now they've turned their skills to perhaps easier prey—they have an entire division dedicated to employee screening. No disrespect to employees, but Zorro was self employed and they do tend to work a lot harder.


There was a local case recently where an unsuccessful job candidate was subsequently successful at convincing a judge to compel the employer to release the CVs of the other applicants. The employees are now screen-

ing the employers. I have mixed feelings about this particular case but the principle of two-way screening is only fair.

Methodical pre-hire screening can significantly reduce poor hires. Drug screening and background checks often filter out the worst hiring mistakes. But really, the worst aren't the drug addicts, fakers or those with criminal backgrounds.

The largest volume are those sneaking by even the sharpest hirers are applicants who lack the skills needed to do their job, or the attitude to fit the organisation. Screen by all means, but of greater importance is a robust and systemic approach to recruitment generally.

Employees get screened during recruitment for crimes, debts, health and on the veracity of their CVs. Once employed, they can get screened for drugs, stolen goods, whistle-blowing or confidential information. They can even be screened after their employment ends if any restraint of trade type arrangements were made.

The common element in all this is a lack of trust. My favourite quote regarding trust came from that cold war era I wrote about earlier. Reagan and Gorbachev were signing nuclear arms reduction treaties and Gorbachev talked about trust. Reagan quipped on what must have been one of his lucid days, "Trust ... but verify." 



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