

Getting Facts Fast

Technology reduces the complexities and shortens the elapsed time in the screening of job candidates.

By Jennifer Taylor Arnold

Dawn Murphy spends a lot of time checking on people. As manager of staffing administration for Houston-based Continental Airlines, it's her job. In the current security-conscious environment, every candidate for every position at the airline goes through background screening. Depending on the job, the process may be multilayered and complex. And when you're hiring more than 600 people per month on average for multiple locations around the world, as members of Murphy's department do, the task can be daunting.

In recent years, though, Murphy's job has become a lot easier, thanks to technology. Now she can simply enter basic information about a candidate--name, Social Security number, date of birth--into her computer and get a response within seconds. For more-complex searches--because a criminal check has to be done in multiple jurisdictions, for example, or the inquiry involves international sources-- she gets a response within a few days. "It's very convenient," Murphy says. "I don't have to waste time on the phone." In Murphy's industry, screening isn't optional. But even in industries where hiring isn't heavily regulated, more employers choose to add this step to their hiring processes. And technology makes it easier and more accessible than ever.

Quick, Convenient-- And Secure

Not long ago, conducting a pre-hire screening on a job candidate was a cumbersome process. HR professionals had to call in or fax information to the screening vendor, who would then send a hardcopy report in the mail. The process could take several weeks. Verifying past employment and education could take even longer, particularly if the candidate had worked or gone to school overseas.

Today, technology provides several options for requesting and retrieving such information in a fast, convenient and secure way. From basic web-based access to custom systems fully integrated into existing human resource platforms, employers can choose

tools based on their hiring practices, corporate cultures and budgets.

At the bare-bones level, employers can log onto a vendor's web site, enter basic information about the candidate, choose from a menu of search options and click "Submit." This solution is ideal for small employers without a big budget.

For larger companies with more complex hiring matrices, web-based systems can offer custom options. Vendors can create an employer-specific "dashboard," and built-in databases can ensure that screening procedures are followed based on job codes. For example, background-screening requests for accounting positions could force the selection of a credit check, while requests for driver candidates could require screening of motor vehicle records. These built-in defaults help ensure that the appropriate hiring procedures are followed every time.

At Continental, the custom dashboard provided by Cleveland-based employeescreenIQ helps Murphy's investigators stay on top of a complex matrix of requirements. "Our checks change for every different position ... but we have only one [screening] vendor," says Murphy. Pilots, mechanics, cargo agents and ramp workers are subject to different regulations from a variety of outside agencies.

In periods of high-volume hiring, Murphy uploads screening request data to employeescreenIQ in batch mode; in slower times, her staff keys in requests via the web portal.

Applicant Tracking

Screening functions can be integrated into an applicant tracking system (ATS). This eliminates the need to key in candidate data more than once; the request for a background investigation can be initiated from a screen in the ATS, and, once received, the results are stored in the candidate's file.

Until recently, integrating a standalone screening solution into an existing ATS required time-consuming, expensive tailoring by the ATS vendor. Now, however, ATS vendors are offering screening functions as an option through affiliated partners.

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On-demand web-based systems generally do not require an upfront cost or a long-term commitment; users pay per screening request. For searches on higher-level employees, expect to pay about one day's salary; for lower-level employees, screens can cost as little as \$25. Costs for customization depend on the vendor and the expected screening volume. At Intelius, a background-search company based in Bellevue, Wash., for example, "It's a very flexible, pay-as-you-go pricing model," says Todd Owens, general manager of screening services. "You're billed at end of month for the applicants that you screen."

Managing your hiring process creatively can help you get the advantages of automated candidate screening while keeping costs low. Some vendors offer instant checks of noncriminal records. At Continental, Murphy takes advantage of employeescreenIQ's instant check function to weed out problem candidates before launching a full-scale background investigation. "If I can find out the answer to one question and they don't pass, then I don't waste the company's money" doing more-extensive screening, Murphy says. Other organizations wait until making an offer to order the screen.

Skills Testing For High-Impact Hires

Some employers take automatic pre-hire screening a step further by integrating skills testing and personality assessments into their hiring processes. (See "Nice Work" on page 78.) Although such assessments have been used for many years, new technology-based options give almost instant feedback and allow hiring managers to move quickly in a competitive job market.

Skills assessments are especially popular in the IT industry, where the pool of qualified candidates is limited and where up-to-date skills are essential. HR professionals and even hiring managers often don't have the technical expertise to ask the right questions during interviews. In such instances, skills testing can make all the difference in a hiring decision. "It really separates the pack," says Geri Devlin, PHR, director of human resources at Price Systems LLC, a software developer in Mount Laurel, N.J. "Good candidates present themselves well, their resume looks good, but sometimes they don't come through on the test. Candidates will tell you they know C++ [a specialized programming language], but nine times out of 10, the testing will show that they really don't know much." Devlin waits until the pool of candidates is down to two or three before administering the test.

Others administer the test before a face-to-face interview. "The main reason we do it is to save time for hiring managers," says Rebecca Reese, SPHR, senior technical recruiter at Adknowledge Inc., a behaviorally targeted advertising network in Kansas City, Mo. Roughly three-quarters of the positions Reese recruits for are technical, and she averages 50 screens each month.

Even though the company relies heavily on special programs developed in-house, Adknowledge uses special IT assessments to gauge candidates' experience and training. "No company can provide specific testing that's matched with your company [technology]," says Reese. "But this is a great way to get a base line of [candidates'] knowledge." Since Adknowledge uses timed assessments that allow the candidates to refer to resources, Reese also views it as a measure of problem-solving skills. Skills-assessment vendors can provide tests on programming languages and platforms, and can keep them current. "Technology changes daily," says David Ingram, president and chief executive officer of Richmond, Va.-based technical recruiting firm Capital Tech-Search Inc. "Six months from now, everyone's converting to a different technology [platform]. This way, we stay up-to-date."

Candidates access the tests remotely via an e-mailed link or online in a proctored environment, depending on the employer's needs. In either circumstance, authorized HR professionals receive almost instant feedback. This allows recruiters to move quickly to make an offer to a qualified candidate-- a big plus in the highly competitive IT job market. "Anything that is automated is a huge plus," Reese says. "There's a sense of urgency; we're not letting quality people sit out there."

In addition, some vendors supply context for the test results, enabling HR professionals and hiring managers to make informed decisions. "I can look at the results and compare them against the national average, and see where [the candidates] should stand," Devlin says. "That also helps us decide how much to offer the candidate."

Soft-Skills Assessments

Skills assessments aren't just for IT, however. Just about any industry can leverage the convenience and accessibility of technology to better measure a job candidate's aptitude for the job. At Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc., headquartered in White Plains, N.Y., the applicant portal of the company's ATS includes a brief assessment to determine the candidate's commitment to customer service.

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This assessment is used for positions that involve a high degree of interaction with hotel guests. “Our strategic objective is to improve service, so we need to know the ability of applicants to serve our guests,” says Matt Redmond, vice president of organization capability at Starwood. “To help in creating a service culture in Starwood, we have to have people with attitudes, abilities, motivations and interests compatible with service.”

Redmond’s department developed the guest service assessment internally after analyzing the requirements and key behavioral factors that influenced service performance. (See “Hard Facts About Soft Skills E-Learning” on page 76 of the January 2008 issue of HR Magazine.) He says the assessment helps broaden the snapshot view captured in what can be an impersonal process. “It helps you widen the net,” he says. “We didn’t want to limit the flow too much by overweighting work experience. The assessment helps us balance that with skills and attitudes that are important to the job.”

Starwood also has developed assessments for sales and call center positions. These assessments are more costly, so their distribution is more controlled. For call center positions, candidates come on-site to take the assessment online in a proctored setting.

For sales positions, the recruiter first reviews the candidate’s application to make sure he or she meets the basic requirements for the position. If so, the candidate is e-mailed a link to an assessment that the person can complete remotely and submit directly. This saves travel costs for the company by allowing it to narrow the field further before having candidates come in for interviews.

This type of special assessment may sound expensive, but, in fact, skillsassessment tools can be just as flexible and affordable as background-screening options. Experts say that a simple, on-demand skills assessment can be had for as little as \$16 per test; more-complex, custom systems cost more.

Such technology continues to level the playing field between HR departments in large and small companies. With the availability of ever-expanding and affordable high-speed access, and the proliferation of high-tech on-demand solutions, even one-person HR departments can take advantage of tools like these to ensure that they hire the best possible candidates. “It’s such an important part of our process,” Devlin says. “I don’t know what I did without this.”