Social Media Background Screening for Law Enforcement

Introduction

Law enforcement officers are public servants who protect and serve our communities. They provide services, keep people safe, and enforce laws that ensure communities run smoothly. Considering their roles, it's important that members of the law enforcement community also follow the laws themselves.

Unfortunately, not all officers are committed to properly following the laws they vow to enforce. This has led to increased and intense scrutiny over the past several years. When these instances occur, it becomes a highly visible and expensive crisis for departments.

Police departments can prevent these crises and better protect themselves and their communities by taking steps to hire people with integrity who will honor the badge in the way their fellow officers, their departments, and their communities at large deserve. Research on The State of Misconduct at Work shows one of the best ways to hire the right people is through enhanced candidate screening processes that consider criminal history as well as a history of misconduct that might not show up on a criminal check. One of the most effective means of finding this information: online and on social media screening during the hiring process.

There are many reasons to consider online and social media background screening as an important addition to your pre-hire process, but there are three central ways that screening for online behavior can help law enforcement make safer, smarter hiring and recruitment decisions:

#1. Improve Support for Employees

#2. Improve Quality of Hire

#3. Enhance Public Opinion

Law enforcement makes some of the most important hiring decisions in the country on a daily basis. The selection of highly qualified individuals to protect and serve the public is not a process to be taken lightly. Read more to learn how online screening can help.

It is imperative that law enforcement recruits be able to adhere to standards of conduct in their personal lives as well as their professional lives.

#1. Improve Support for Employees

A healthy organizational culture is important for any team, especially for organizations like law enforcement where trust and safety in the team are critical components of the job. The heart of a team culture is usually governed by a Code of Conduct, which generally outlines behavioral expectations and consequences for non-compliance. Especially for positions as public as law enforcement, working and living with similar standards of integrity is important.

When it comes to misconduct, it only takes a small amount to breach trust and confidence in the organization – internally from other officers as well as externally from the public. Research shows that 5% of employees engaging in misconduct is when performance starts to decline, turnover rises, and costly lawsuits start to arise. Alleged misconduct by over 7,600 officers around the country have led to lawsuits and settlement costs totalling more than $3.2 billion.

Even worse, misconduct is contagious. Research from Harvard Business Review shows that misconduct has a social multiplier effect in which people who witness coworkers engaging in misconduct are more likely to engage in misconduct themselves. Several incidents out of Mountainside, New Jersey led to a police department becoming embroiled in a sexual assault, harassment, and bullying lawsuit brought on by multiple officers and a part-time dispatcher. Allegations include keeping and throwing sex toys in the office and creating a hostile environment.

Once misconduct is embedded into the fabric of an organization, it becomes a lot more challenging to change course and improve. When misconduct isn't properly managed and spreads out of control, it can result in similar outcomes to this Huntsville, Texas department in which a former cop was fired for filing claims of sexual harassment against another officer. The harassment ranged from tripping her, to soliciting topless photos, to escalated violence.

The female officer was dishonorably discharged after filing her third complaint against the same male officer. When the wrong course of actions are taken following instances of misconduct, it sends the signal that misconduct is okay, but reporting it is not. This only furthers cultures of misconduct that continue to demean the sanctity of the profession.

Screening for online evidence of misconduct may go a long way in helping set a precedent for what will and will not be tolerated in the workplace. Consenting to a screening of personal online activity can help facilitate a more inclusive working environment. If officers demonstrate healthy behavior out of the office, they are more likely to adhere to the precinct's Code of Conduct at work.

#2. Improve Quality of Hire

A candidate may not have a criminal record, but their online presence may show misconduct or violent behavior.

In addition to improving support for employees and maintaining healthy workplace cultures, screening for misconduct also improves quality of hire. Great-quality candidates are ones who not only can do the job and do it well, but who can also add value to the organization. In the case of law enforcement, that means keeping communities safe, carrying out duties as a public servant, as well as taking any and all measures they can to help the department maintain a positive relationship with the community they serve. Whether it's helping an elderly lady retrieve her cat from a tree or arresting a criminal for repeat, violent behavior, it is imperative that officers respond with the utmost professional integrity.

In high-stress situations, it becomes harder and harder for individuals to maintain professionalism, especially if there are intolerant or violent tendencies hiding beneath the surface. If a candidate is sharing harmful, violent, and discriminatory behavior online, the chances of them carrying these discriminatory and violent behaviors into their stressful workplace is high.

When law enforcement organizations don't take steps to screen for misconduct in the hiring process, departments end up in situations like in Chicago, Illinois, where an officer was reprimanded multiple times for posting inflammatory, discriminatory, and degrading statements against protected classes on Facebook and Instagram under the guise of patriotism and freedom of speech. Over the course of 20 years of service, the officer has had 47 complaints and seven suspensions. Despite Chicago PD's strict rules about keeping political views off social media, he has challenged all discipline. With such a clear, documented pattern of verbal and online abuse, a media-based background check could have saved the Chicago PD potentially thousands of dollars in misconduct and disciplinary spending.

Similarly, the Nelsonville, Ohio department, had an officer fired by the City Council after a months-long investigation found him guilty of posting racist memes and comments about the local Interim Police Chief. The City Council has since promised to reevaluate their social media policy to avoid these incidents in the future.

Social media and online screening has emerged as a valuable tool for law enforcement to screen for misconduct behavior when hiring. By using web-based background checks, law enforcement can take a proactive, preventative approach to winnowing away candidates that will put their departments in compromising situations and cost municipalities millions of dollars in disciplinary action or misconduct lawsuits.

Making social media screening a routine part of the hiring process can aid law enforcement departments in making smarter, more informed hiring decisions. A candidate may not have a criminal record, but their online presence may show misconduct or violent behaviors that may not be mitigable in high-stress situations.

Considering it only takes one mistake by a bad hire to take down years or even decades of trust that dozens of other officers have worked tremendously to maintain, it's important for departments to use any and all tools at their disposal to look for candidates that will ensure the safety of themselves, their peers, the department, and the community.

Requiring candidates to undergo a routine social media background check can ensure that not only are officers aware they are about to be held to the highest standards of public service in the country, they are responsible for aligning their behaviors with their Code of Conduct and working with integrity in the field.

#3. Enhance Public Opinion

"It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it."

- **Warren Buffett**

A department's public reputation is a powerful factor in gaining trust of the community and public at-large. Incidents by law enforcement officers are a lot more visible today, as people now have the ability to document and share incidents of misconduct, excessive force, and escalating violence like never before. Naturally, each of these incidents leads to public relations nightmares, which are detrimental to a department's reputation and hinders their ability to protect and serve.

Many departments are re-evaluating their hiring practices, whether on their own or at the request of the Department of Justice, to retroactively correct damage that has already been done and assure the public that improvements are coming. Social media background checks give law enforcement leaders the data they need to make better hiring decisions using publicly available information.

If a candidate already has a history of publicly viewable violent or racist behavior, the public is going to assume that this behavior is acceptable to the department and cause extra concern and scrutiny should any incidents arise. Identifying candidates who pose a threat to your precinct's reputation can help improve the quality of hire, prevent these crises, and subsequently improve public perception.

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Conclusion

Departments have a hefty job of navigating these crises, ensuring the safety and security of their employees, and also easing public concerns over misconduct. One of the best ways law enforcement departments can do this? Online screening during the hiring process.

Online and social media screening results in all kinds of benefits to law enforcement, from improving workplace culture and safety, to improving quality of hire, to enhancing public perception of officers.

Setting a policy for web-based background checks lets prospective and current employees know that their behavior matters, no matter if it's in person or online, and contributes to the health of their internal and public-facing working environments. These enhanced background checks can go a long way in setting a precedent for a healthy, safe, and integrity-based department.

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What is a social media background screening?

Fama's online screening and social media background check solutions compliantly search over 10,000 publicly available online, social media, and news sources for misconduct issues so you can make more informed hiring decisions. Our screening solution looks for nearly a dozen types of misconduct including harassment, threats, violence, and fraud. Clients can align their misconduct screenings with their unique Code of Conduct, so you only see the content that is most relevant to your organization.

Even more, the AI and human oversight process means that content is viewed through the proper context. We know the difference between movie quotes and original content. We also remove protected class information from reports to ensure compliance in your hiring process.

Reports can be created in our easy-to-use solution, and take about a day to return results. That means a more comprehensive background check and better quality of hire, without slowing down the hiring process.

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Fama is the innovator in online screening that makes hiring great people easy. Combining Fama's groundbreaking AI technology and ability to integrate across the HR Tech stack, the solution compliantly searches 10,000 online public sources to help companies avoid workplace misconduct, prevent costly legal action and ultimately, make better decisions. By modernizing candidate screening and due diligence, Fama helps organizations, agencies, and investors improve the quality of hires, make the most of each investment and build successful businesses.

Headquartered in Los Angeles, CA, Fama is FCRA, EEOC, and SOC2 compliant and integrates with major HRIS, ATS, and background check solutions.

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