Pre-employment background check: A review and research agenda

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ABSTRACT

Research background: This review paper is about the pre-employment background check by the human resources of the desired job candidates for the offered job. Pre-employment background check is a crucial part for the final selection of the right candidate.

Purpose of the article: The aim of the article is to evaluate one of the important functions of human resource management, pre-employment background checks (PBC) based on the existing available literature. This will be achieved by conducting a critical literature review in the context of its definition, needs, processes, and limitations, presented in a simple and narrative manner.

Methods: Methods such as synthesis, comparison, deduction, and systematic-analytical examination of scientific articles were used in the preparation of the article. Primary literary sources on the given topic were searched in the Web of Science and Scopus databases. The data collection period focused on the years 2000 to 2024.

Findings & Value added: Although the process of background check for the job candidates can be conducted at any stage of their employment history, PBC is an important step as the final part of selection process. According to the literature, PBC is an imperative step for the employers in the selection process to get a clean employee reducing the chances of future accusation of negligent hiring. Although being an important step of the selection process, this area of HRM is comparatively under-researched. Therefore, this paper with enriched information about PBC can benefit multiple stakeholders such as employers, employees, researchers and independent hiring agencies.

INTRODUCTION

With a higher rate of unemployment in numerous countries, there is more competition for each position resulting in a higher number of job applications, especially if it is a mid-level or lower-level position. Therefore, organizations are now facing the problems of choosing the right people among many applications which have resulted in adopting various techniques applied (Karim et al., 2023; Qing et al., 2023). A number of tests are being applied for by the organizations that are defined as selection tests ranging from the traditional ones such as interview, written exam, presentation, to the recent ones like simulation, problem solving and practical debate. In addition, one of

the most widely used and applied assessment screening tools is pre-employment background check (PBC) as a standard practice at many organizations (Hosain, 2021).

Although as the final part of the selection process, PBC is not new for the organizations as it had been in use before as a tool for searching an employee's previous records. The fact regarding PBC is that this technique can be applied before a selection test to reduce the number of applicants, or it can be used after the final selection of an employee but before joining. Using background checks as an assessment tool are now a common practice in many countries although many organizations are usually reluctant to admit of utilizing such practices due to several practical limitations (Brody, 2010).

Due to a sharp increase in legal strictness, competition in the business environment and corporate failures as a result of personal fraud, dishonesty and inefficiency. In this pertinent, Amin et al. (2024) indicated that organizations are focusing more on the business environment. Additionally, organizations are now paying more and more attention to assessing employees' background in order to protect their (organizations') corporate reputation. The process is not only deemed appropriate to save the organizations but to save the hiring professionals who were involved in hiring process to avoid "negligent hiring". Therefore, PBC has been an inevitable tool for HR professionals or organizations to crosscheck an employee's past records: personal and professional. Such a statement is particularly true if the employees are to be selected for key organizational positions such as CEO, CFO, COO and Area or Regional Manager.

The majority of the organizations rely on background checks as a means of screening job applications prior to making decisions regarding hiring. These screenings include assessing a candidate's personal history, criminal record, financial transaction history and maybe even scrutiny of social media-related information (Hosain & Mustafi, 2023; Brody et al., 2015).

Thus, as an important part of the selection process, a proper PBC has utmost priority in order to prevent any unexpected future events such as, employee turnover or negligent hiring (Bartik & Nelson, 2024; Hosain & Mustafi, 2023). As PBC is important in selection practice, it should also get similar importance from the academics. However, we do not still have adequate theoretical and empirical papers that have focused on this important issue (Bartik & Nelson, 2024; Brooks, 2024; Tatman, 2024; Hosain, 2021; Hosain et al., 2021; Hosain et al., 2020; Hosain & Liu, 2019) creating a clear research gap. Therefore, it is imperative for the academics to conduct more studies on PBC-related issues in order to keep pace with practice. In this regard, this paper is unique and has multiple implications.

This paper can help academics as a basic guide on their future endeavors. This is a basic theoretical paper explaining what PBC is, its types, process, importance and some future recommendations for both the academics and practitioners. For writing this paper, we basically relied on published journal articles, books and conference papers published from 2000 to 2024 that have particularly focused on PBC. The basic aim of this paper is to narrate PBC in a clear, easy language to all the academics, practitioners and job candidates alike. We believe that it can make theoretical and practical impacts.

PBC: THE BASICS & TYPES

As part of the hiring process, organizations' logical motive is to pick the best possible future employees having not only the best interview or selection tool performance, but also clean previous records. Organizations have sought after to protect themselves by conducting background checks for tentative employees before offering them the jobs. It is the duty of the recruiting managers, human resource (HR) departments and other pertinent professional groups engaged in the selection process to safeguard their organizations against possible future incidents of deviant or unethical conduct perpetrated by workers in the future (Amin & Oláh, 2024; Amin & Rubel, 2020; Martin & Austin, 2010). A PBC may include resume verification, credentials check, credit check, reference check, criminal background check and even social media background check depending on the specific job requirements.

Each of them has been discussed in the following sections: (i) resume/CV verification; (ii) credentials check; (iii) credit check; (iv) reference check; (v) criminal background check; (vi) social media background check.

Resume/CV verification: Organizations routinely verify a candidate's resume or CV to make sure that the information provided is correct (Brody et al., 2015). Particularly, past employment records and credentials are verified. This can be done by making a quick call or sending an e-mail to the previous employers of the job candidate. The credentials to be verified take a little bit longer if they are not available online. In that case, an organization needs to send copies of those credentials to the respective organizations to investigate their authenticity.

Credentials check: Credentials are the indicators of the educational background of a candidate. Generally, the credentials provided by a new employee are verified after joining. But an organization can even verify those before by contacting those organizations from where the candidates graduated. It depends on the organizational policies and requirements when to verify the credentials and how.

Credit check: Checking the credit history of a candidate is one of the most important parts of a PBC. Any organization wants to hire employees with sound financial records and who are financially responsible. This is especially important for organizations that deal with cash, financial instruments or asset management. However, it is equally important for any organization as this is a matter of not only financial responsibility but also ethical and social integrity. An individual with declared bankruptcy or

tax fraud is much less likely to be hired because of his/her bad credit history.

Another psychological aspect is that if an individual has a lifestyle beyond his/her means, it is more likely that individual will find any dishonest means to keep that lifestyle (Mahmud et al., 2023). In this time of financial crisis and price hike, financial burden is a major issue for many job seekers, and they might become a threat in future for any organization by engaging in fraudulent activities. However, there are expectations of course as some applicants might have poor credit scores that were beyond their control (Kuhn, 2013).

Reference check: Organizations conduct reference checks as part of background checking process by collecting information regarding the applicant from previous employers, colleagues or subordinates. Reference checks mainly include previous on-the-job reputation, competencies, honesty and commitment. Reference check can be conducted by contacting the contact information on the resume/CV or the investigating organization can initiate their own reference checking procedure with the help of third party or agencies.

Criminal background check: Criminal background or criminal history check is another very important element of background check. It can be obtainable through a police report. In addition, it can be obtained from local community or neighborhood watch. But it is difficult to obtain if the candidate stayed in multiple places before.

Social media background check: Social media record or sometimes termed as social media background check is the newest form pre-employment background check that has got the attention recently (Hosain et al., 2024; Hosain & Mustafi, 2023; Hosain, 2021; Hosain et al., 2021). In such investigation, an evaluation is made based on candidate's social networking information such as posts, shares, photos, videos or comments. Such evaluation helps an organization to judge an applicant based on his/her likes/dislikes, tastes, preferences that are shared through social media (Hosain, 2021). Organizations are attracted to such investigation as that information are easy to get and cost effective. On the other hand, those who oppose it argue that it is not fair and ethical to screen a candidate based on his/her personal tastes (Mühlhoff & Willem, 2023; Hosain, 2021). Although there are controversial opinions for and against such practices, the tendency to use social networking sites for background check is getting increased by many organizations around the globe (Hosain & Mustafi, 2023; Hosain, 2021; Hosain et al., 2021; Hosain et al., 2020; Hosain & Liu, 2019).

Generally, the responsibility of conducting pre-employment background checks (PBCs) is within the purview of recruiting experts, who play essential roles within HR departments. Following the formation of a candidate pool that is consistent most closely with the job prerequisites, recruiting professionals proceed to get written consent in order to conduct a background check, often referred to as pre-employment scrutiny. If the outcome is in favor of the applicant, they are provided with an offer of employment. Conversely, unfavorable outcomes render the applicant ineligible for further evaluation. The steps and procedures of the background check have been delineated in the following section (Figure-1) as prescribed by Hosain and Liu (2019).

Figure 1: The typical PBC process
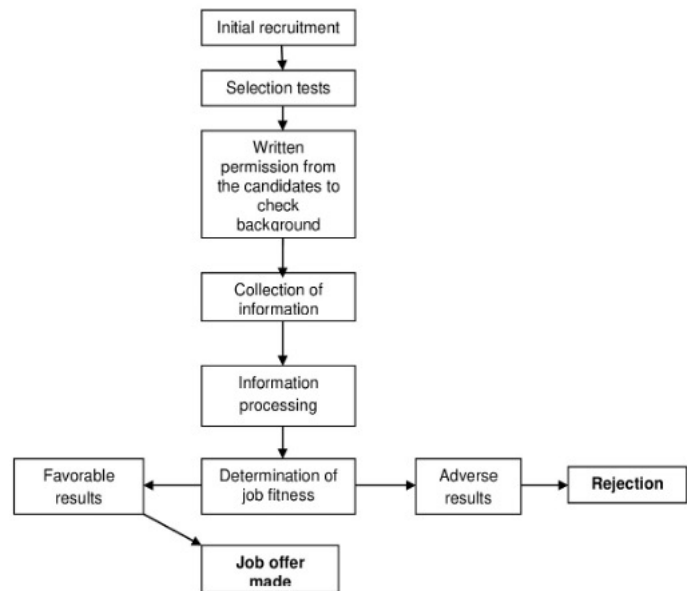
Source: Hosain & Liu (2019)

PBC: THE IMPORTANCE

If the reference is at the end of sentence: 1 author (Stein, 2018), two authors (Stein & Kinski, 2018), three or more authors (Stein et al., 2018).

There are several strong reasons for conducting background checks. The most important ones are discussed in the following sub-sections.

To pick up the clean employees: Organizations always try to hire employees who have a clean background as this is the obligation to the stakeholders. Although it is impossible to guarantee that a candidate's background cannot be checked through only investigation, the hiring professionals want to do their best to avoid any future complicacies.

To avoid negligent hiring: If it is proved that the hiring professionals did not do their best intentionally or unintentionally at the time of hiring candidates, they might be charged with the accusation of negligent hiring. Negligent hiring indicates that the hiring professionals did not properly investigate the candidate, and it is considered as an allegation against them. Therefore, all the hiring professionals want to avoid negligent hiring allegations by conducting thorough PBCs at least to prove that they did their best.

To reduce selection cost and time: A selection process is very expensive which means a wrong candidate selected will waste the time, money and effort for the organization if he/she needs to be replaced later. A proper PBC

reduces the chance of wrong selection before making an actual job offer.

Legal requirement: In many countries, the laws require that an employee selected should be best judged and background checked before offering the job to him/her. In many cases, the organizations are held liable for any misconduct/mischief done by the employees. Further, it is important to know if the selected employees have the legal right to work in that organization or in that country.

PBC: THE LIMITATION

However, the background check has a number of limitations although it is an important step for uncovering a candidate. The limitations are elaborated on the following sub-sections: (i) unavailable or inadequate information; past is not always an indicator of future; (iii) ethical concerns; (iv) fairness concerns.

Unavailable or inadequate information: Missing or inadequate information often poses challenges for the validity and relativity of PBC as a process. For example, when conducting a criminal background check, only the information of prosecution is found regarding the person under investigation. But if that person is not prosecuted or under prosecution, the information may not be available at all or few information may be available. Moreover, if the crime was conducted by another person but under the guidance of the person under investigation, the original identity will not be revealed at all. Again, in case of a reference check, the previous employers or colleagues may not provide accurate information regarding the applicant due to the relationship with him/her. In summary, the unavailability or inadequacy of information regarding an applicant often makes a background investigation difficult, invalid or unreliable guiding into a wrong conclusion.

Past is not always an indicator of future: There is a saying "History does not always repeat itself". An applicant who was very honest, reliable & consistent performer and committed employee might not behave on the same manner in future. There are a diverse number of causes that can turn a person that was once unbelievable. Therefore, a person who passed the previous background check does not mean that the same individual will remain same in future.

Ethical concerns: Ethics always plays a crucial role in deciding the measures and techniques adopted for PBC. For example, the exclusion of an employee based on his race, religion or locality might trigger the debate of discrimination. Employers should be very cautious regarding ethical and fairness concerns that can lead the hiring professional(s) or the organizations into lawsuit by the applicants.

Fairness concerns: Background checking processes should be fair and impartial. A little bit of discriminatory practice can not only take the organization to court but also can damage the organizational reputation to a severe extent.

PBC: A FEW CAUTIONARY NOTES AND ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIRING AND/OR HR PROFESSIONALS

Effective coordination across many departments, including HR departments, is essential in the current candidate screening context. This coordination involves the collaboration of diverse departments to evaluate job applications using various sources. HR departments, specifically, should prioritize addressing this issue in order to mitigate any potential inquiries and legal disputes, given their crucial role in the recruiting and selection processes inside any organization. The ongoing debate around discrimination and privacy is anticipated to intensify in the foreseeable future due to the absence of widely adopted laws governing the use of information in hiring procedures.

HR departments have the competence to establish a comprehensive strategy for evaluating potential candidates, focusing on specific details that may be effectively communicated to the individuals being considered for recruitment. Implementing a well-defined strategy and comprehensive training program for the recruitment of professionals has the potential to mitigate the occurrence of discriminatory practices and minimize associated legal liabilities. Additionally, it is essential that the collected information remains secret and is only used for the purpose of screening. Ultimately, it is imperative that the same protocol be implemented for every individual seeking candidature, regardless of age, gender, color, religion, nationality and geographical location.

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of existing research and proposes a set of policy suggestions afterward: (i) detection of susceptible information (Gruzd et al., 2017; Stoughton et al., 2015); (ii) Staying away from social, non-job-related information (Hosain & Mustafi, 2023; Hosain et al., 2021; Gruzd et al., 2017; Davison et al., 2016; Ollington et al., 2013); (iii) Training of hiring professionals; (iv) verifying the validity and reliability of information obtained (Davison et al., 2016; Van Iddekinge et al., 2013); (v) conducting PBC only after initial recruitment and before final selection (Hosain et al., 2021; Hosain & Liu, 2019; Davison et al., 2016); (vi) attaining written permission from the job candidates (Yarbrough, 2018; Davison et al., 2016); (vii) comparison of assessment results with other predictors (Davison et al., 2016); (viii) formulation of a structured, unified and standardized procedure (Hosain et al., 2021; Hosain et al., 2020; Hosain & Liu, 2019; Davison et al., 2016).

Recruitment specialists and employers should understand, acknowledge and detect that information that applicants perceive as insecure and susceptible because utilizing such information can diminish an organization's persuasiveness throughout various stages of the screening procedure (Amin et al., 2019). This is especially critical when the pool of prospective employees is conscious of such practices.

Hiring professionals must collect a comprehensive range of job-related information, including prior work experience, proof of previous employment(s), skills, presentation abilities and negotiating aptitude, to conduct a thorough background check. However, it is advisable to refrain from revealing private, social, professional and non-job-relevant details about candidates, such as their peer group(s), traditions and interpersonal relationships, since these aspects sometimes constitute very intrusive information. The present paper suggests that using employment-based social media networks such as LinkedIn may lead to developing work-related behaviors and a more favorable perception by regulatory decision-makers (Hosain & Liu, 2020a; Hosain & Liu, 2020b).

Mere formulating policies are not adequate if those policies cannot be executed in a proper manner. The hiring professionals must be trained on how to access, collect and utilize information from different sources for job screening (Willey et al., 2012).

It is essential to ensure the validation and trustworthiness of information collected from various sources to the most significant feasible degree (Gazi et al., 2024; Amin & Salehin, 2021). Specific third-party consultants, such as Social Intelligence, should be engaged in the practice of evaluating social networking websites (SNWs) for different attributes and generating reports that exclude demographic information.

The applicant screening process should be carried out after the candidate's initial recruitment and before the ultimate job offer. This screening would reduce the probability of discriminatory practices and legal liability for recruiters.

It is of the utmost importance for organizations to ensure that they notify, declare with, and acquire written consent from potential workers before conducting investigations into their background using different sources. These efforts contribute to the mitigation of privacy concerns and the potential for legal consequences on both sides of applicants.

Employers and recruiting specialists are obligated to participate in a comparative analysis of the evaluation of obtained information alongside other predictors, such as conventional personality tests and background checks, among others. This comparative analysis should include evaluations of both the validity and unfavorable effect aspects. The present paper advises organizations to consider that predictors exhibiting better validity are often favored, mainly when they result in less harmful effects. The evaluations of incremental validity assessments should also be considered.

The background screening process should be carefully designed, clearly defined, seamlessly integrated and standardized. It is essential to administer the same standardized procedure to all the applicants consistently and equitably. The use of standardization has the potential to immensely help HR professionals by facilitating the creation of organized interviews. Furthermore, it may also serve to mitigate challenges faced by the assessors (Campion et al., 1997).

DISCUSSION WITH THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The key objective of this paper is to elucidate the function of HR professionals in the background verification process, drawing upon current available literature on this topic. Moreover, this paper is anticipated to make significant additions and provide valuable insights into the existing body of literature on the practices of conducting background checks for job candidates. Given the seeming dearth of research evidence in this particular domain of Human Resource Management (HRM) (Bartik & Nelson, 2024; Brooks, 2024; Tatman, 2024; Hosain & Mustafi, 2023; Hosain, 2021), there is an increasingly pressing need for comprehensive research and literature findings to inform the decision-making processes of selecting the job candidates.

The importance of this issue is heightened due to its close connection to employee viewpoints, including privacy, fairness, ethics and legal concerns (Hosain & Mustafi, 2023). Although this paper is a very basic one describing PBC in a very simple manner, we hope that it will act the founding guideline for upcoming studies focusing on PBC.

The recommendations made in this paper may be helpful for the organizations and HR professionals in formulating and implementing an effective PBC policy that may avoid any future problem such as, the acquisitions of negligent hiring. However, organizations might consider recruiting specialists responsible in the event that concerns about irresponsible hiring are raised. As a result, recruiting experts are susceptible to risks emanating from both candidates and organizations.

According to Levashina & Campion (2009) the pre-employment background checks (PBC) are a critical component of human resource management (HRM) with several implications for both employers and job candidates. PBCs help verify the accuracy of job applicants' credentials, reducing the risk of negligent hiring and employment discrimination (McElhatta, 2022). They are essential for ensuring information security, particularly in IT sectors, where background checks and monitoring are crucial for safeguarding organizational data (Kumah et al., 2018).

Compliance with regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is necessary, focusing on lawful data processing, candidate rights, and data retention (Butler et al., 2018). In this context Hammer & Kimbell (2023) said, that the "Ban the Box" movement challenges the use of criminal background checks to prevent disparate impact on protected classes, promoting fairer hiring practices.

Schaafsma et al. (2016) thinks that the effectiveness of PBCs varies, with some studies indicating limited impact on reducing occupational risks and sick leave.

The recommendations provided in the paper offer significant theoretical insights for human resource management (HRM) and organizational behavior.

- Enhances Knowledge of Risk Management in HRM: It contributes to the body of literature on how pre-employment background checks (PBC) can function as a critical tool in mitigating risks, such as negligent hiring. This deepens the understanding of HRM strategies for avoiding legal liabilities and safeguarding organizational integrity.

- Expands the Framework of Employment Screening: The research helps build a conceptual framework around PBC as a systematic practice within HRM, linking it with theories of organizational trust, security, and ethical hiring. It emphasizes the role of structured, well-implemented background checks in enhancing recruitment processes.

- Aligns with Compliance and Legal Theories: The paper underscores the importance of PBC in complying with employment laws, especially regarding negligent hiring, thereby adding to the theoretical discussions about organizational legal compliance and employer accountability.

The recommendations in the paper also have direct practical applications for organizations and HR professionals:

- Development of Effective PBC Policies: HR professionals can use the insights from the paper to formulate or improve existing PBC policies that are comprehensive and tailored to the organization's needs, reducing the risk of negligent hiring lawsuits.

- Legal Risk Mitigation: By implementing the recommended PBC policies, organizations can protect themselves from potential legal issues such as negligent hiring, which can lead to costly lawsuits, reputational damage, and safety concerns.

- Improved Hiring Processes: The guidance can help HR departments streamline their hiring processes by integrating PBCs as a standard practice. This ensures that candidates are properly vetted, leading to higher-quality hires and fewer future employment problems.

- Policy Implementation Training: HR teams can use the recommendations to develop training programs for staff on how to conduct and interpret background checks effectively, ensuring legal and ethical standards are met in the hiring process.

LIMITATIONS AND NECESSITY FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This paper aims to provide valuable insights into the current reservoir of literature on background screening practices. However, it does possess a limited amount of constraints. This article focuses only on accessible literature without a quantitative or qualitative foundation. A larger sample size in an empirical study would have provided a more comprehensive understanding of various organizations and persons at different levels involved in pre-selection background screening.

Moreover, it is conceivable that further research studies could be conducted to examine the growing trend of organizations incorporating additional guidelines on the proper procedures involved in pre-employment screening. This study may encompass determining the types of information that can be included or excluded, defining criteria for high-quality pre-employment screening and identifying practices that should be avoided to safeguard the hiring organizations against potential legal actions. Another potential avenue for future research might be exploring the perspective of workers and their viewpoints.

To further enhance understanding of pre-employment background checks (PBC) and their implications within human resource management (HRM), several future research directions can be explored: (i) impact of PBC on organizational performance (e.g. Levashina & Campion, 2009; Mai et al., 2024); (ii) cross-cultural and cross-industry comparisons (e.g. Fine, 2013; Gambhir et al., 2024) or (iii) technological advancements in PBC (e.g. Nura & Osman, 2013).

Future research could investigate the direct correlation between the implementation of comprehensive PBC policies and organizational performance. Researchers could explore whether organizations with stringent background checks experience lower turnover rates, higher employee satisfaction, or better long-term financial outcomes.

There is a need for studies comparing the effectiveness and legal frameworks surrounding PBC in different cultural contexts and industries. Research could focus on how cultural perceptions of privacy, legal restrictions, and industry-specific risks influence the design and implementation of PBC across different countries and sectors.

With the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, future research could explore how new technologies are transforming background checks. Studies could focus on the accuracy, ethical implications, and potential biases introduced by AI-powered PBC tools, comparing them to traditional methods.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the article is to evaluate one of the important functions of human resource management, pre-employment background checks (PBC) based on the existing available literature.

It is evident that background checks are subject to various constraints on their practices and methods. However, given the potential for significant damage that an untrustworthy employee may inflict upon an organization, this article argues that conducting a proper, fair and valid PBC is essential and should be considered an integral component of the recruiting and selection procedures.

Although there are people and organizations expressing reservations about implementing background checks on applicants, it is essential to note that when conducted appropriately, there is no justifiable basis for excluding such investigations, even if they sometimes infringe upon private rights. Indeed, it is predicted that including pre-employment screening in the selection process would provide advantages since these investigations are expected to uncover prospective candidates who are prone to engaging in unproductive behavior detrimental to the organization and vice versa. Considering the temporal, financial and consequential aspects inherent in the recruiting procedure, organizations should contemplate the judicious use of PBCs to facilitate the selection of suitable candidates while avoiding the selection of unsuitable ones.

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