



PHOTO BY TANYA LUNDINE

American Data Search owner Heidi White weeds out job applicants with shady backgrounds.

## Background checks

How to make sure you're not hiring an embezzler.

BY CINDY BARTH | MANAGING EDITOR

Michelle Gunn, human resources administrator at Universal Land Title Inc., has nearly 14,000 associates to worry about in branch offices from Florida to Colorado, Texas and Ohio.

In the land title business, she says, background checks are essential before hiring staff.

"Some of our people go to closings and have to sign checks, so we want to make sure we know who we're dealing with," Gunn says.

That's why Universal Land Title turned to American DataSearch, an Orlando-based private investigative agency that specializes in pre-employment, tenant and volunteer background screening. American DataSearch does

about 20 background checks a month for Universal Land Title, Gunn says, adding that the firm now is its exclusive background-check agency.

"Their turnaround time is fantastic," Gunn says. "They usually ask for 48 hours, but most times we get the information back within a day."

Building her business on the reputation of quick, but thorough, background checks, owner Heidi White today oversees a small staff of three who do everything from education verification and drug screening to criminal history checks, at prices ranging from \$30 to \$150.

"Employers used to worry about whether or not a person could type or spell," White says. "Now, they worry about whether or not a potential employee is engaged in criminal activity or is a terrorist."

Or, perhaps a concern more in the minds of local employers, they worry about whether or not a potential staffer is violent. Citing data from the Workplace Violence Research Institute that shows that with the average out-of-court settlement of \$500,000 and an average \$3 million jury award, White says "it's to your advantage to check people's background carefully before you put yourself — or your business — at risk."

And it's not just the risk of hiring people with long criminal histories or drug abusers, White says.

It can be something as simple as not wanting to hire someone who has a poor driving record or a history of drug abuse. Or, it can be verifying a good candidate

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quickly so that someone else doesn't hire him or her first, White says.

"You don't want to miss an opportunity to hire a really good worker just because you can't check their references quickly enough," White says. "That's where we come in."

Quick assessments were something Ed Lastinger, director of human resources



PHOTO BY TANYA LUNDINE

Heidi White

for Velda Farms, was most interested in.

Lastinger says his company, like others that need a team of drivers to deliver products, is facing a crisis in finding properly licensed drivers. "They're just not out there right now," Lastinger says. "We're all having a hard time finding qualified drivers."

Enter American DataSearch, which Lastinger says has "greatly speeded up our checking process." Lastinger estimates he uses American DataSearch 20 to 25 times a month.

"I've been in human resources for

## American DataSearch

**Top official:** Heidi White, owner

**Line of business:** Private investigative agency specializing in pre-employment, tenant and volunteer background screening

**Year established:** 1997

**Employees:** 1 full-time, 2 part-time

**Most interesting case:** White says one applicant they were doing a background screening on checked "no" in reference to criminal history, but after running a check came back with a 22-page summary of skirmishes with the law. "That's not a history," White says. "That was a career."

**Web site:** [www.americandatasearch.com](http://www.americandatasearch.com)

years," Lastinger says. "They're the best I've ever seen at getting information quickly."

Even with the praise of some of her company's clients, White says, ironically enough, that getting information in a timely manner has been her biggest business challenge. That's why she's introducing a new product this June that allows clients to enter a job applicant's driver's license and connect via her company's proprietary software program to additional information helpful

**'6.5 million were on probation, in jail or on parole at year-end 2000.'**

**— Bureau of Justice Statistic, 2002**

in making hiring decisions.

After all, points out White, "There's so many potential liabilities out there for employers, but the fact that the Florida statutes give protection for companies that do background checks makes me wonder why anyone would be hesitant to do it."