

The future of employee screening process in the UK: why identity verification must evolve while remote hiring grows

An Identity check is a crucial – but not always easy – step in the recruitment process in the United Kingdom. Let's explore what is at stake for employers and the perspectives in terms of digital identity verification for remote hiring.

IDENTITY

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There is evidence that UK businesses are looking to take on new employees now that the country is emerging from the pandemic. However, employers have a number of regulatory obligations – including a rigorous identity verification and employee screening processes – that they must meet before a new employee can join their work force.

- The temporary rules that permitted remote identity verification during the pandemic will be revoked in September.
- The Home Office has yet to release new guidance on how employers conduct their employee screening process post-COVID.
- Fragmented issuance of official identity documents in the UK makes identity verification particularly challenging, and poses various risks to employers

Identity verification: the foundation of pre-employment checks

Every crisis forces people into new ways of thinking. Over the past 18 months, remote working has been enforced by employers across all sectors and parts of the globe. In addition to shedding some light on the benefits of a remote work environment that has encouraged a more mobile workforce, these practices have also had a notable effect on recruitment practices.

As things begin to return to normal, many employers now find that a much wider pool of potential employees exists in locations from which a daily commute would be impractical. Digital technologies for employee identity verification and pre-employment screening can remove many of the risks that might have been a concern to employers before.

What is at stake with the employee screening process?

Hiring a new member of staff is a significant commitment for a business and is never undertaken lightly. Once an employer decides to hire a candidate, they must conduct a number of pre-employment checks before a new employee can start work. These checks – including identity document verification, criminal background checks, and employment history – are done to ensure that the candidate is who they claim to be, and that they have the legal right to work in the United Kingdom (UK).

Identity verification is foundational to the employee screening process. If the prospective employee's identity details are inaccurate then, at best, the time and cost of conducting the necessary background checks will increase. Far worse of course, the organisation might find itself to be a victim of identity or 'insider' fraud.

Employers also need to ensure they are not hiring someone who does not have the right to work in the UK. Illegal working is tackled through a 'whole government approach' with coordination across agencies in government, including Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), to ensure that illegal working is detected effectively. When illegal working is identified, a range of sanctions can be applied to the employer, from civil penalties through to prison sentences and closure of a business.

Know Your Candidate: the challenges of identity checks in the UK

Establishing the identity of someone you don't know isn't easy. People aren't always very good at facial recognition. A report by the US National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) highlights that even trained experts perform better when assisted by facial recognition technology.

Establishing identity in the UK is particularly challenging. For British citizens, there are no government-issued identity documents as such. Instead, the government has a set of standards that allow a person's identity to be established digitally to a defined 'level of confidence'. The government has published a draft version of a Digital Identity and Attributes Trust Framework, and legislation is expected in late 2022 or early 2023 to clarify how a digital identity that meets the government's standards aligns to regulatory obligations—such as pre-employment screening.

Post-Brexit, foreign nationals with the right to reside in the UK are issued with a Biometric Residence Permit (BRP). This is the only government-issued document in the UK classified in law as an 'identity document'. It follows similar technical specifications to a passport and contains a microchip so the photograph of the person can be extracted and compared to the person presenting it.

What's next for UK right-to-work checks?

The Home Office have announced that the temporary rules that permitted remote right to work and identity verification during the COVID pandemic will be revoked in September. However, an announcement is awaited on if employers will have to revert to the mandatory pre-COVID face-to-face ID document inspection, or use technologies that meet the new digital standards—aiming at simplifying the remote hiring process.

Our next article will look into how Reed Screening and IDEMIA's identity verification service works and explore the technologies that make it more effective than human visual document inspection.