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How Investigators Foil False Identities – And What They Find When They Do.

By Alexander F. Williams



Artificial intelligence and other forms of automated data analysis allow background checks to digest increasingly large swaths of information. However, it still falls to experienced human investigators to follow leads, provide context and connect dots to create usable findings that allow decision makers to avoid risky transactions. Two case studies involving false identities help illustrate this point.

In the first, Mintz Group was asked by the owner of a major Manhattan office building to investigate the three principals — including a husband and wife — of a company that had applied for a lease. An initial search into the first principal uncovered no information; indeed, Mintz investigators could not identify anyone in the United States with such a name. However, the wife's marriage certificate revealed her husband had a different last name than what was on the lease application. Mintz Group investigators quickly realized that he had used his wife's last name to create a plausible alias for himself. From there, the investigators uncovered that the principal had been a defendant in more than a dozen civil and criminal cases in state and federal courts, including an ongoing suit alleging fraud and RICO violations, and a six-month prison sentence stemming from federal charges of money laundering and insurance fraud.

Notably, probing the wife's history uncovered no adverse findings, other than a dispute with a landlord over back rent owed in a restaurant venture she shared with her husband. Leveraging a spouse's clean record is a common strategy for those with checkered pasts, often by having the spouse front the business.

Continuing their research, Mintz Group investigators, connecting the dots from news reports, court records and other information, were able to determine that the third principal, in addition to being a defendant in a dozen debt-collection, tax lien and eviction proceedings, was possibly involved in a mafia plot to burn down a competitor's business.

Needless to say, the principals and their company were not given a lease. More important, the case underscores the critical role of investigative craftsmanship in assembling a comprehensive pre-transaction background check. It took experienced investigators to uncover the first principal's alias and to piece together addresses and job descriptions across several sources to connect the third principal to the arson.

A second case illustrates how investigators can use social media to help solve questions raised by preliminary research. Mintz Group was asked by a technology firm to vet a contractor they were considering hiring for an extended engagement. The consultant had given a hyphenated last name on his application. When database searches turned up no one with that name, Mintz Group investigators conducted searches using each of the two last names individually. They identified two people who shared a first name and hometown — who each had one of the last names in the false, hyphenated combination.

Digging further, investigators discovered that the personal information provided to the technology company was a mash-up of the profile of the two individuals. And by cross-referencing social media accounts, Mintz Group investigators determined that the two were friends who played in the same sports league.

The reason for the elaborate subterfuge became clear as the investigators continued their work. The actual applicant for the consulting position had been convicted of two counts of attempted credit card misuse and attempted theft and sentenced to two years' probation; further, his home had been foreclosed on three separate times. He colluded with a friend — who had the same first name and who had attended the same high school — to create a false identity.

The explosion of online data continues to radically reshape the process of background checking, and new technologies provide essential tools for managing this onslaught. In the end, however, technical tools can only go so far; uncovering deception often requires a combination of human experience and skill.

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