

Rocky Mountain News

To print this page, select **File** then **Print** from your browser

URL: http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/other_business/article/0,2777,DRMN_23916_4856490,00.html

New hires scrutinized

About two-thirds of employers in survey check Social Security

By Roger Fillion, Rocky Mountain News

July 20, 2006

A new survey of Colorado employers suggests that about two-thirds go to extra lengths to ensure new hires are legally entitled to work in this country.

A joint survey by the Mountain States Employers Council and the *Rocky Mountain News* found that 65 percent of respondents said they verify the authenticity of a person's Social Security number as part of the hiring process. The move isn't required by law.

MSEC members participated anonymously in the unscientific survey, which was conducted on the group's Web site. Two hundred seventy-one members responded.

The nonprofit MSEC counts about 2,500 employers as members. The group provides members with help in human resources, employment law and other areas.

The survey results come amid a heated national and local debate over illegal immigration and whether Washington should toughen U.S. immigration laws.

During a special session this month, Colorado lawmakers passed a bill requiring employers to declare they've inspected a job applicant's work documents and aren't knowingly employing an illegal immigrant. The bill is awaiting the governor's signature.

In the MSEC survey, the roughly two-thirds figure for those who say they verify a new hire's Social Security number sparked debate about just how diligent companies should be in checking a person's work eligibility.

"I can't imagine not taking all the steps I can take to verify Social Security numbers. That's the responsible thing to do," said Thomas Fries, CEO of Commerce City-based CP Co., a supplier of refrigerated transportation equipment. Fries also is chairman of the employers council.

"It's a good sign that there are a lot of employers who think it is a normal thing to check the Social Security number," said Paul Buono, the employers council's manager of immigration services. "Verifying the Social Security number is a good idea."

Social Security numbers and other data are gathered as part of documenting a person's hiring status on a federal I-9 form that a company keeps in its files. Immigration officials can demand the form as part of an audit.

While not required by law, a company can verify the authenticity of the Social Security data either directly with the Social Security Administration or by using a third-party business such as a payroll service.

A much smaller percentage of respondents, 8 percent, participate voluntarily in a work-authorization program operated by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The pilot project allows companies to check a person's work eligibility via the Internet.

Thirty-three percent of respondents said they don't verify Social Security numbers or participate in the DHS work-authorization program.

Judi Hulvey, office manager for Alfred Industries, a maker of transportation products in Henderson, said the 65 percent of survey participants who said they verify Social Security numbers seemed low.

"I thought it would be higher than that," she said.

Candice Jenkins, human resources manager for software maker Bolo Systems Inc. in Lakewood, called it a "poor business practice" not to verify crucial information such as a Social Security number.

But Jay Anderson, director of manufacturing for Medegen Medical Products in Northglenn, noted federal law "does not require the Social Security verification."

He said the law does require employers to fill out the I-9 form. The form, provided by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, asks employers to note the documentation provided by a prospective hire to confirm their work eligibility.

The information could include a Social Security number, a U.S. passport, a driver's license or other documents.

Buono, of the employers council, said the relatively low 8 percent of respondents who participate in the Department of Homeland Security's work-authorization program reflects a lack of familiarity with the pilot project.

The electronic system is voluntary and is designed to enable an employer to confirm the employment eligibility of all newly hired employees.

"A lot of employers still don't know about it," Buono said. He also said the system "doesn't always work the way it's supposed to."

Buono advises employers to hold back on participating until DHS fixes the kinks in the system.

Checking workers' status

Results of the MSEC's most recent poll question on immigration:

• **Question:** During the hiring process, while gathering data for the federal I-9 employment-eligibility form, which do you verify or use? Check all that apply.

• **Answer Percentage**

Social Security numbers 65%

Department of Homeland Security's pilot work-authorization program 8%

Neither Social Security numbers nor DHS program 33%

Note: Numbers don't add up to 100 percent because of potential overlap among options chosen

fillionr@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-892-2467

Copyright 2006, Rocky Mountain News. All Rights Reserved.