

How To Pick The Right Security Firm

When you need to hire security guards, your primary concern is always securing personnel who will do their jobs efficiently, professionally, and responsibly.

If you're hiring a security firm to provide guards, though, you need to take extra care to ensure you get the quality you're looking for.

Always remember that guards hired in these circumstances are not your employees; they work for the contracting firm.

One of the biggest concerns you need to address when hiring a guard company is how the firm handles matching up individual guards with their clients.

You want to end up with guards whose talents and temperament fit your needs as well as possible. In low-risk positions that require lots of public interaction (e.g. operating a guardhouse), guards who are open, friendly, and non-confrontational are ideal.

On the other hand, if you know your guard will be dealing with frequent incidents (such as providing security at a rough club), you want someone with a firm personality and the ability to intimidate troublemakers.

First, remember to cover the basics when you're screening a potential security firm.

Each of the following areas needs to be addressed before you make any commitments:

- * Full licensure according to state and local laws
- * Full insurance coverage
- * Reputation with previous clients
- * References
- * Guard training policies
- * Guard qualifications (certificates, etc.)
- * Equipment
- * Management Policies
- * Cost
- * Responsiveness (i.e. how they respond to your needs)

When it comes to hiring security guards through an independent contractor, insurance is important enough to deserve some further scrutiny.

All states keep extensive records on licensed security firms, so you can learn a great deal by checking in with your state's website. You may also find illuminating evidence regarding their licensure and any potential issues there.

Run down this insurance checklist with any potential security firm before you decide to proceed:

- * For long-term commercial contracts, have your insurance agent review the security firm's coverage.

- * You or your agent should carefully review the security company's policies and check their exclusions -- are there any glaring omissions?
- * The firm needs must have Broad Form General Liability Insurance. In general, you should look for at least \$3 million in total coverage and \$1 million per incident. Coverage will need to be higher for large-scale jobs.
- * For guards who will be driving, you'll need to confirm that the company has Automobile Liability Insurance.
- * All security firms need to at least meet the statutory minimums for Workers Compensation Insurance.
- * The firm should have liability coverage for any and all special equipment they'll be using (e.g. computers, surveillance equipment, golf carts, etc.).
- * Your contractor's Professional Liability Insurance needs to cover sexual harassment.
- * For long-term contracts, you may want to have your organization named as "Additional Insured" on the security firm's policies. Check with the company to see if this service will come at an additional cost.

As noted above, you need to review a security company's track record and reputation before deciding to do business with them.

Obviously, you're looking for firms with the highest possible standards for dependability and trustworthiness. One of the best ways to judge a company's past performance is to check on its history of legal action and formal complaints.

You can dig up the necessary records yourself at your courthouse, but the research will be faster and more comprehensive if you enlist an attorney's services.

You should be on the lookout for any suits filed against the company by either clients or employees. Also, look for complaints made to state and local regulatory agencies.

Management policies and experience matter when you're hiring a security company. This is because the pool of guards which will be tapped to meet your needs is largely homogenous; the talents and skills of their managers will end up making a great deal of difference to the level of service you receive.

You should feel free to enquire about the security industry experience of everyone in the chain of command at the firm, from the individual responsible for your account all the way up to the president.

There's a great deal to be said for working with a team of responsive, talented individuals who are lead by an involved owner.

Don't jump into an arrangement with a security firm without first clearly defining your needs and expectations.

Be wary of "boilerplate" contracts that may favor the security contractor over your organization. Have a thorough discussion about performance criteria prior to making any commitments, and have solid performance standards integrated into your final contract.

You need to take the time to get to know the key management personnel you'll be working with before you sign your contract.

You need to have confidence in their abilities to meet your needs and address issues. If they can't build that confidence prior to signing the contract, it's unlikely that they'll perform satisfactorily afterward.

Building a bond of trust and respect prior to working with your security company will make it easier to resolve problems in the future.

In order to get outstanding performance out of your security company, take the time to formalize and record your expectations for their guards' performance and behavior while they're on the job.

Prior to starting a security contract, make sure that the company has procedures in place to detect and rectify any behavior that fails to meet your expectations.

Don't rely on your security firm to provide all guard oversight, either; check up on your guards' performance to ensure it meets expectations.

Finally, here are a few minor issues that sometimes get neglected when you're choosing a security contractor:

- * How much advance notice is required to secure extra security coverage?
- * Are the guards provided to you going to be fluent in the languages you need?
- * What are the contractor's drug testing and personal screening policies?
- * Do you have any say in the uniforms the guards wear?
- * What are the contractor's policies regarding guards who miss shifts? Will they provide supplementary personnel to cover absent employees in a timely fashion?

Security guards play a vital role in a host of different modern organizations. Not every business owner who needs security guards is willing (or able) to put them on staff, though.

If you're in this situation yourself, you can hire the help you need from a dedicated security company. Here's a guide to finding the security contractor who will give you exactly what you're looking for.

Getting The Right Proposal

The first step to hiring a security company is to craft a request for a proposal, or RFP.

This needs to be as detailed as possible about your needs and requirements. Security companies will not include anything outside the RFP in their bids, so it's smart to be comprehensive.

Here are a few of the issues you'll want to address in your request:

- * Number of posts
- * Coverage hours
- * Supervisor inspection procedures
- * Special scheduling
- * Event / holiday coverage
- * Guard selection process

- * Guard training requirements
- * Disciplinary measures (transfer, termination, etc.)
- * Equipment needed
- * Insurance requirements
- * Uniforms
- * Client oversight
- * Length of contract (term or ongoing)
- * Start date
- * Terms of payment

Whether you submit your RFP to one security contractor or several, you'll want to scrutinize the proposals you receive.

For major jobs, it's an excellent idea to have proposals reviewed by an attorney and an insurance agent. Make sure that the proposals you consider address your specific security needs directly and cover all of the details requested in your RFP.

Depending on your organization's requirements, you may be looking for some very specialized details in your contractors' proposals. The following areas are generally applicable to all security guard contracts, though:

Training / Qualifications

A contractor's proposal should make it clear what educational background, training, and experience the company's guards will have.

Companies that can provide guards with more training, longer experience, or specialized skills will usually be explicit about these assets.

Guard Screening

Since you need security guards that are highly reliable and trustworthy, it's normal to request details on a contractor's staffing policies.

Most security companies vet their guards extensively to ensure that they've passed criminal background checks at the state and local level and been screened for drug use.

Many professional security guards have prior experience in law enforcement or the military; this is always good to see.

Staffing History

Ideally, you want to have your security needs met by a single team of dedicated guards, something akin to a personal staff assignment.

This is not always possible with security contractors, though. Changing staff levels and variable

hours worked may result in a rotation of many different guards through your organization's posts.

You should investigate a potential contractor's history of staff stability to see how high their rate of guard turnover is. High stability indicates a satisfied, competent workforce, and companies with long-tenured guards will generally provide superior service.

Supervisory Policies

Your contractor's proposal should provide plenty of detail about how the guards provided to you will be supervised.

A supervisor needs to make regular visits to your guards to ensure that the highest level of service is maintained.

You should also get details of exactly what takes place during a supervisor's inspection -- you want more than a cursory glance at your security arrangements!

You also want to get as much detail as possible about the qualifications, experience, and training of the supervisors who will be working with your security team.

Good supervisors are highly experienced, invested in their teams, and well-connected to a solid chain of command that runs all the way to the top of their company.

You should also look for a layered supervision schedule from larger contractors: Your guards should get regular visits from their direct supervisor and also less frequent visits from higher-level personnel.

Documentation Procedures

Take a close look at the documentation details provided in your contractors' proposals. Every professional security company delivers a wealth of recorded information to their clients, and you want to make sure a clear record of all security issues is preserved.

A brief overview of applicable records includes daily guard logs, time sheets, incident reports, and criminal reports.

Besides day-to-day information, your security contractor should also take responsibility for documenting the procedures they use to protect you. Patrol patterns, in particular, need to be planned and recorded.

Most large security contractors use specialized tools (e.g. Proxiguard, Deggy system) to do this. You need greater detail than, say, an hourly activity log that reports "all quiet" over and over.

Good security contractors have the tools to provide you with much more information, tracking their employees' movements and activities down to the minute.

Post Orders

Each of your contractors' proposals should include either a manual of standard operating procedures or a set of post orders customized to meet your needs.

This is a vitally important document; in the event of any legal action, the post orders provide an explicit definition of the responsibilities of each security guard working for you.

While a generic set of orders can help you judge a security contractor's overall level of competence and attention to detail, you must demand a specific set of post orders for your organization prior to the start of the security contract.

Be wary of companies that provide too much direction to their security guards in the form of verbal instruction.

A well-written set of post orders should be clear to everyone -- especially the guards -- about the full scope of their duties.

Post orders are also living documents; you can expect to collaborate with your security company continuously to keep your post orders up to date and accurate.

A contract with a security company can be an extremely important agreement. In order to provide your organization with the security it needs, you want to ensure that you get guards who will fulfill all of your requirements.

Looking out for the right details in the proposal stage will help you screen out inappropriate candidates and ensure you pick the best contractor available to you.