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What will come up in your background check?

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Various jobs throughout my career required background checks as a condition of employment. I never thought much about those checks. I'd sign a consent form and move on with the process. Unfortunately, it's not as simple for many job seekers.

My first experience with the complexities of background checks came during college when I was interviewed by the U.S. military. They asked a few questions about a friend before he moved up in the ranks. When I was training to be an investigative journalist, I also learned how some institutions dig into high-profile people's backgrounds. More recently, I hear from friends who need to dig up years of financial records (often from other countries) for new jobs.

You'll likely encounter a background check before accepting your next job. The [latest survey](#) from the [National Association of Professional Background Screeners \(NAPBS\)](#) and [HR.com](#) found that 96% of employers conducted some sort of background check. Most said they check applicants for both part-time and full-time positions.

To get a better understanding of the background checks you may face during your job search, I talked with [Danielle Korins](#), who is the chief people officer at [Sterling](#), which performs background checks and other services for employers. Due to her position, Korins knows about

background checks from the side of the employer and the company digging into a person's history.

Why you get checked

Companies perform background checks for several reasons, Korins told me. The company may want to make sure the person is the right cultural fit for the role, for example. They may also believe eliminating people with criminal records from consideration will keep their current employees safe. In some cases, background checks may also be required by law.

“There is an onus on us to know what we're buying — so to speak — when we hire someone,” she said.

Some important points for you to know about background checks is that you won't face one until you've received an offer letter and provided your consent. You also have the right to see the results of the background check.

What you might encounter earlier on in the hiring process is identity verification, said Korins. An increasing number of companies want to make sure the person they are talking to is the same as the person listed on the application.

What gets checked

The reason employers often hire a company like Sterling to perform background checks is that the process is much more complex than just Googling a person or getting their criminal records. Employers need to make sure their background checks are performed within legal boundaries. Hiring a company to do the check limits their liability.

“There are a lot of protections for candidates in this process,” Korins told me. “We can't do whatever we want. It's highly regulated.”

Typically, she said criminal records will be checked from the past seven years. They'll also look at a person's education, job history and — depending on the company — may ask for their fingerprints and a drug test. Some candidates may also have their social media and other histories checked. Ultimately, it depends on the individual company's request and what the law allows.

The [NAPBS and HR.com survey](#) that I mentioned above found that between 80% and 90% of employers check criminal records of all applicants, 13% check their credit, 24% verify education, 37% check driving records and 6% check social media.

What the company sees

Background checks come back clean most of the time, Korins told me. In the cases when something concerning does pop up, the employer is told to review the person's information. The employer is responsible for following up with the candidate and ultimately deciding whether to hire the person.

Of course, you'll want to familiarize yourself with the specific laws in your area regarding background questions and checks. Many states have been implementing new laws and regulations that dictate when employers can ask and check different parts of a person's history.

The [National Employment Law Project](#) says [35 states](#) have adopted "Ban the Box" laws, for example. Those laws generally restrict an employer from asking about an applicant's criminal record during the early stages of the hiring process. The goal is to make employers judge applicants based on their qualifications — not their past offenses. Those laws typically don't affect background checks later on in the process, however.