

A guide to background and employment history checks

Whether you're a hiring manager looking for a new team member or a job-seeker applying for new roles, it's important to understand background and employment history checks. What exactly are these checks – and why are they so important?

A background and employment history check is when a potential employer contacts the references on your resumé to verify your past work roles and experience. It's usually done after you've passed through the initial stages of the job application process. These checks help the employer confirm that the information you've provided is accurate, and can include verifying employment history, educational qualifications and any criminal records.

Let's take a look at what exactly is involved in background and employment history checks, explore the different types, and cover what you can expect during this process.

What is a background check?

A background check is a review of your work history to see whether the information you provided throughout the interview process is accurate. Employers use it to gather information to help them make the best hiring choice. While it's a chance for hiring managers to look for any red flags, it also helps them confirm your credentials and work experience. There are a range of different checks employers can do.

Types of pre-employment background checks

Each type of check has a specific purpose, helping employers form a full picture of your background and qualifications, and your suitability for the role. Let's dive into the different types of checks conducted by employers.

- **Identity verification:** the first step in any background check is to confirm

your identity. This involves verifying government-issued IDs such as a driver's licence or passport. The aim is to ensure that you are who you claim to be.

- **Education verification:** for roles requiring specific qualifications, it's important to verify your education. This check confirms any degrees, diplomas and certificates, ensuring they're from accredited institutions.
- **Employment verification:** employers check the accuracy of your work history, including the positions held, how long you were employed and reasons for leaving previous jobs.
- **Criminal record check:** this is often a key component for positions that require a high level of trust and security. This check looks for any past convictions, ongoing legal proceedings and other legal issues that might be relevant.
- **Address verification:** this is needed for tax, insurance and superannuation
- **Online presence:** in the digital age, running an online background check online has become increasingly easy. These checks can include looking at your social media profiles and online behaviour, offering insights into your character and lifestyle.

Why have I been asked to use a third-party screening company?

When it comes to carrying out background checks, many employers use third-party screening companies. This is common practice and nothing to worry about. These companies make sure the background check is conducted in a professional and unbiased way. They understand the legal requirements and have processes in place to gather and verify information.

Can a background check affect employment?

Naturally, one of the biggest concerns you might have as an applicant is the impact a background check can have on your chances of getting the job. Understanding how the information collected is used and the potential reasons a background check might influence a job offer is important.

A background check is used to verify the accuracy of the information you provide during the interview stage. It's an opportunity to confirm your qualifications, work history and personal integrity, to make sure you're a good fit for the company culture and the specific role you're applying for. As long as you've been honest on your application, you shouldn't have any issues with a background check.

Can a background check cost you the job?

With the above in mind, there are several ways in which findings from a background check can affect you. This includes things like:

- **Discrepancies in information:** if the background check reveals significant discrepancies between the information you provided and what they find (such as falsified qualifications or employment gaps), it can lead the employer to question your integrity.
- **Criminal history:** depending on the nature of the job, a criminal record can be a cause for concern.
- **Poor credit history:** for roles that involve financial responsibilities, a poor credit history might lead employers to question your reliability.
- **Security issues:** any information that raises concerns about your ability to handle confidential information can deter employers.

Legal requirements for background checks

Many job seekers aren't aware of their legal rights when it comes to background checks. In Australia, it's a legal requirement for an employer to gain consent before a background check is conducted. There are specific regulations on how these checks can be done.

Privacy Act 1988 (Cth)

This act protects the handling of personal information. This includes the collection, use, storage and disclosure of personal information in the federal public sector and in the private sector. Employers should make sure that the information collected during background checks is relevant to the job and only used to assess the candidate's suitability for the role.

Anti-discrimination laws

Various state and federal laws prohibit discrimination in employment. This includes making sure that background checks don't lead to [discriminatory hiring practices](#). If you feel like you have been discriminated against in the process, it's your right to take it further.

What employers can ask about your background

Understanding what [employers can and cannot ask](#) during background checks is a great way to empower yourself. Background checks for employers can help them make the right hiring decision, but should never infringe on your rights during the hiring process.

Questions employers can legally ask

- **Work history:** previous employment, including the roles you held, your responsibilities and the duration of your employment
- **Education level:** verification of qualifications and certifications
- **Criminal record:** this question is subject to the limitations set by laws, which protect the rights of individuals with old or minor convictions
- **Right to work:** verifying your legal right to work in Australia

Discriminatory questions that should not be asked

- **Age:** questions about your exact age or date of birth are generally not allowed, unless age is a legal requirement of the job (e.g. serving alcohol)
- **Marital status or family plans:** your marital status, plans to have children and your family responsibilities aren't relevant to your ability to perform a job.
- **Race or ethnic background:** questions about your race, ethnicity or nationality – unless to confirm your right to work in Australia – are considered discriminatory.
- **Disability:** while employers can ask if you can perform the duties of the job with reasonable adjustments, they shouldn't ask about the nature or extent of a disability.
- **Sexual orientation:** this isn't relevant to your job performance.
- **Religious beliefs:** unless it's a genuine occupational requirement (e.g. working for a religious organisation), employers should not ask about your religious beliefs.

How to prepare for a background check

By preparing for your background check and making sure your information is accurate, you can help streamline the process. Here's how.

1. Review your socials

In today's digital age, your online presence can be as important as your resumé. Before you apply for the job, make sure to review your social media accounts. Remove or edit any posts, images or comments that may be viewed as unprofessional or inappropriate. You can also adjust your privacy settings to control what can be seen publicly. Another tip is to do a quick Google search of your name to see what comes up.

2. Gather all appropriate documentation

Next, make sure you have all your documents in order, including your employment history, education credentials and identification documents. Honesty is crucial when it comes to background checks. If there are any potential issues, such as a gap in employment or a minor criminal offence, it helps to mention this upfront and provide some context.

3. Finalise your references

Finally, your references play a key role. [Choose them wisely](#); select people who can vouch for your professional abilities and character. Let your references know that they might be contacted and provide them with details about the job you're applying for so they can tailor their responses.

How long does a background check take?

When you're anxiously waiting to hear back about whether or not you got the job, the number one question is: how long do background checks take? For basic background checks, such as identity verification and criminal record checks, it can take anywhere from a few days to a week. More in-depth checks, such as verifying educational credentials, employment history and reference checks, can take from one to three weeks.

It's important to note that the hiring process is going to differ from company to company, so your waiting time will vary. As a general rule, it's fine to check in after a week for an [update on the position](#).

If you're turned down after a background check

It never feels good to be [turned down for a job](#). When it happens as a result of the background check, it's important to understand exactly what went wrong and how you may be able to improve things for next time. Here's what you can do, depending on the situation.

Inaccurate information

If the information you've provided isn't accurate, there are a few things you can do.

- **Request a copy of the background check:** under Australian law, you have the right to request a copy of your background check if it's been used as a basis for a job rejection. This allows you to see exactly what information the employer based their decision on.
- **Identify and correct inaccuracies:** if you find any inaccuracies, contact the agency that conducted the check to dispute this and offer up any evidence you have.
- **Inform the employer:** once the inaccuracies are corrected, inform the employer and provide them with the updated information.

Discrimination

If you feel as though you've been subjected to discrimination, then there are a few steps you can take.

- **Review the reason for rejection:** employers are required to provide a valid reason for job rejections. Ensure that the reason given isn't related to [discriminatory factors such as age](#), race, gender, disability or marital status.
- **Seek legal advice:** if you suspect discrimination, consider seeking advice to get guidance on the strength of your case and the next steps to take.
- **File a complaint:** you can file a complaint with bodies such as the Australian Human Rights Commission or the Fair Work Ombudsman.

Navigating the world of background checks can be a daunting aspect of the job search process. However, understanding and preparing for it is key to success. Keep in mind that background checks are a standard part of the employment process, designed to help determine your suitability for the role. By understanding the process, your rights and how to present your best self, you can navigate this stage of your job search effectively and move one step closer to securing your desired role.

FAQs

How long does a background check take?

A background check typically takes anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. Basic checks on a criminal record can be on the faster end, while more comprehensive checks, such as employment and education verifications, can take up to three weeks or more.

Are background checks a requirement for all employees?

Background checks are not a legal requirement for all employees in every industry. However, they are commonly used as part of the hiring process, especially for positions that require a high level of trust or security.

Why do employers choose to use third-party screening companies for background checks?

Employers use third-party screening companies to streamline the checking process. These companies specialise in conducting thorough background checks and have access to various databases and resources.

What should employers consider when selecting a third-party screening company?

When selecting a third-party screening company, employers should consider factors like the company's reputation, legal compliance, the accuracy of their checks, turnaround time and cost.

What is the most common background check for employment?

The most common background check for employment is a criminal history check, followed by [employment history](#) and education. These checks are important to verify the integrity and qualifications of potential employees.

How do you communicate background check results to an employment candidate?

An employer will need to inform the candidate that their background check has influenced their decision to not hire them. In this case, the employer should provide a copy of the report and an explanation. This communication should be clear and respectful.