

How long does a background check take?

Finding the right person to fill an open role can be tricky. You want to make sure that they have the required qualifications and that they are the right cultural fit for your team. However, a candidate's resume doesn't always give you the full picture — or the most accurate information. Running background check reports is helpful in vetting potential new hires to verify that they truly have the experience and credentials listed on their application.

Background checks are generally the last step in the hiring process before onboarding a new team member and act as a final safeguard to help you feel confident in making the hire. Background checks can help protect your business by providing more information on potential employees including criminal records, driving histories, and more. Many employers skip this step because they incorrectly believe that background checks take an excessively long time. Find out how long background checks really take and what kinds of information you can get from them.

What are background checks?

Background checks are pre-employment screenings of a prospective employee's credentials, criminal record, driving record, or other pertinent histories. They are typically conducted after an employer has decided which candidate to hire, but before employment actually begins. Many employers make job offers contingent on a successful background check.

How long does a background check take?

With background check services like [GoodHire](#) or [HireRight](#), you can expect a pre-employment background check to take 1-5 business days. Within that range, the timeline is often determined by the type of checks that you choose to run. A basic identity check and criminal background check will likely come back quickly, while more thorough background checks that require contact with more sources will take longer.

Delays can occur due to a variety of circumstances such as the use of nicknames or aliases, hard-to-reach previous employers, or if international records are requested. As such, it's best to start the process as quickly as possible after a candidate accepts a job offer. Another way to speed up this process is to make sure that all of the necessary paperwork is signed and that candidates understand the importance of thoroughly filling out all of their information. This includes things like previous or alternate names and all past residences. Any omissions or errors can cause issues with the background screening process.

Some small businesses prefer to take a DIY approach to background checks. This can lengthen the process quite a bit. Verifying past employers through reference checks is something that a small business owner or HR Manager can handle themselves. However, many employers do encounter a fair amount of bureaucracy and long turnaround times if they try to request court records, motor vehicle records, or an applicant's educational history manually through each respective agency or department.

Types of background checks

As mentioned above, the type of background checks that you run will impact how long the background check process takes. Here are some of the most common background checks that employers conduct:

Identity verification

The most basic form of background screening is identity verification. Identity verification is conducted in order to verify that the candidate is who they say they are. These checks verify that the identifying information provided by the applicant, such as their name and Social Security number (SSN), is correct and valid. This is often done through SSN tracing.

Criminal record checks

Criminal background checks are used to obtain information about an employee's criminal history. Many employers run federal background checks for criminal record checks. However, you may also want to conduct state or county criminal checks as not all jurisdictions share all of their case records with the federal database.

It is also a good idea to double-check if there are any local or state laws regarding the use of criminal record checks for making employment decisions. There are some local laws such as San Francisco's [Fair Chance Ordinance](#) that place restrictions on employers regarding when criminal records can be requested and how they may be used.

Education verification

Education verification is used to confirm the prospective employee's educational credentials. Typically this type of background check will confirm the degree(s) earned and the educational institution(s) attended. They may also show the employee's GPA.

Licensing verification

If you're hiring an employee to fill a role that needs a professional license or certification, you'll need to verify that they currently possess that license. This typically requires verifying with the licensing body that the employee possesses the license, that they're in good standing with the licensing body, and the expiration date of the license.

Employment verification

Some employers choose to conduct background screenings to confirm a prospective hire's employment history. This typically involves calling past employers to verify the candidate's dates of employment.

Keep in mind that a traditional employment verification screening will yield fairly limited information. Most employers will only confirm dates of employment and sometimes whether the employee is eligible for rehire. If you want to ask more performance-based questions, ask the job applicant for specific references to call that can speak to their past performance.

Driving record checks

If the employee will be driving for business purposes on behalf of your business, you'll want to check their driving history by obtaining a motor vehicle record (MVR) report. An MVR report provides a record of the applicant's driving history including tickets and collisions. It also provides information about their driver's license, such as its expiration date, license suspensions, and commercial driver's license information.

Credit background checks

Credit background screenings provide insight into a job candidate's credit history and current financial standing. The information for these reports is pulled from credit bureaus, similar to the credit checks done for financing or lending purposes. This is the type of background check that small businesses should be most wary of conducting. Reviewing a candidate's credit history can provide valuable insight into their financial situations and responsibility with money, which is helpful if they will have access to a large amount of cash or sensitive company or client financial data. However, this is the background check with the most legal conditions.

Employers need to comply with the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) when using credit checks to make hiring decisions. If you decide to conduct a credit screening and then choose not to move forward in hiring a candidate due to the results, there is a specific process that you must follow. This includes obtaining authorization on a compliant release form. If you choose not to move forward with a candidate based on the results of their credit report, you must send them a notice and a copy of the report and allow them to clear up any inaccuracies or provide an explanation.

Can employees start work before a background check is complete?

Most employers wait for background check results to come back before allowing employees officially start work. If a new hire needs to give their current employer a 2-week notice, this typically isn't a problem as background check results typically come back within that time frame anyway. However, small businesses tend to run lean. If an employee has unexpectedly quit or gone on leave, you may need someone to jump in as soon as possible.

Often, you can allow employees to begin work on a contingent basis while you await the results of their background checks. However, it never hurts to double-check your state laws before doing so. You should also be aware of any job or industry-specific guidelines or best practices. For example, if an employee will be driving a company car as part of their duties, you would likely be violating the terms of your insurance policy if you let them begin before their motor vehicle report has been processed and cleared. If a background check is being performed to verify a legally required license or credential, you will need to wait until at least that portion of the background check comes back before allowing them to work.

For jobs without such regulatory requirements or insurance restrictions, it is generally up to the employer whether to wait for the results or let an employee dive in. Consider the work environment and job duties to decide how risky it is to allow an employee to start before their background and credentials are verified. If you own a retail store, you may care more about a customer service applicant's enthusiasm and communication skills than their specific credentials. Thus if you are short-staffed and have a busy sales weekend coming up, it may make sense to let them start working the floor right away and just wait for the background check to clear before having them handle cash. If your store caters specifically to children, however, you'd likely want to be respectful to the parents that shop there and avoid allowing anyone to start work without a completed criminal background check.

Since a background check only takes a few days, you should also consider what the new hire will be doing during that time. If an employee's first few shifts at your business usually consist mostly of training or job shadowing, letting them get a head start isn't necessarily a bad idea. The worst-case scenario is that the results come back negatively and you have to let them go. You'll still have to pay them for their time, so there is some potential financial loss or waste to consider.

The importance of background checks

Many small businesses avoid conducting background checks due to concerns that they are expensive or will take too long. Since they only typically only take 1-5 business days, the turnaround time is not too much of a

hassle. Running a background check is also often not too costly, and it can help you minimize risk for your business.

Conducting a background screening can ensure that the prospective hire has the right qualifications for the role. Many job candidates stretch the truth on their resumes, and without conducting a background verification you can't be completely sure that they actually possess the experience, credentials, and education that you are looking for.

Background screenings can also reduce the risk of theft, fraud, harassment, and workplace violence by providing insight into candidates' past behaviors. While past behavior is not always an indicator of future behavior, background checks can help employers make more informed hiring decisions.