



10 Things to Know Before Selecting a Background Screening Firm

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Selecting a background screening firm can be a daunting task. An online search for background screening firms will reveal countless organizations that provide these services. This certainly muddies the waters enough to make any selection more than a little difficult.

Choosing a reputable and proven background screening firm is one of the most critical business decisions you will make. Yet, the background screening industry itself has not helped to make this an easy decision.

Unfortunately, a lack of transparency still forms the foundation of the screening industry. A close examination of listings will reveal that screening providers are more focused on providing what they want to provide rather than what is needed. What does that mean? It means speed and low price has become the key competitive advantage points. And quality often takes a backseat.

Granted, the efficient use of technology can drive down costs AND shorten the turnaround time. But when screening companies purport to complete background checks not in days, but in minutes, I take pause.

Yes, more and more courts records are becoming automated and readily accessible. However, many courts records still necessitate a court researcher to do the job correctly. In certain regions of the U.S., clerks are required to do the search. Sometimes, when a county has upper and lower courts that are not connected, each has to be searched separately.

When I read that a screening company is completing a background check in minutes, it leads me to conclude that they are relying on databases and they are neglecting to search lower courts. Nor do I have any idea what they are doing with the counties that require a county clerk to conduct the search.

Background screening is a risk-management solution. This is not a process that allows you to check a box and claim you have done your due diligence. Poor research can foster complaints of negligent hiring and negligent retention as well as give rise to a proliferation of federal lawsuits related to federal Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) violations.

We understand that it would be impossible for a lay person to know many of the problems inherent in the screening industry, so we have assembled a list of questions that should be asked of your prospective screening companies.

1. **How do you define a background check?** There is no standard definition; however, background screening relies heavily on incomplete public record sources. A thorough background screening program should consist of multiple checks and balances that include identification, multi-state databases, county criminal searches and federal courts.



2. **Is the background check instant?** There is no such thing as a dependable instant database search. I assume that if a background check is “instant” that it is a database only search. There is no single database, not even the FBI’s NCIC, that is comprehensive enough to stand as a single-source screening program. Using only a database for employment purposes can open up FCRA violation issues. It is not even a viable option for volunteer organizations because most databases have a high failure rate even for convicted sex offenders.
3. **Cost of a background check?** You cannot do quality background checks for \$5, but at the same time, it should not break your piggy bank. Comprehensive employee background checks should range from \$20-\$40 for a core national criminal background check. Volunteer checks can range from \$10- \$20 for a core criminal check.

Always Read the fine print carefully. Many screening firms do not clearly articulate all of the hidden costs e.g. aka names, additional counties, expanded past 7 years, etc.

4. **How far back do your background check reports go?** This is a question you should always ask as there are several factors that impact this answer. A thorough background check should go back as far as allowed. We believe it is critical for our clients to have all the information they need to make informed decisions. Even so, there are strict guidelines from the EEOC, FCRA as well as state and local laws that must be followed. Consequently, what factors can impact how far back a background check extends?
 - a. **Convictions vs Non-Convictions.** The federal FCRA restricts reporting of non-convictions to no more than 7 years unless the salary for the position is \$75,000 or more. Some state laws further restrict convictions or do not allow their reporting.
 - b. **Individual state.** Several states have further restricted the reporting of adverse information.
 - c. **How far back court records go.** Some states maintain criminal records that extend 30 years or more. Other states purge misdemeanor records at 10 years.
5. **How are alias names searched?** Alias names bring up thoughts of Jason Bourne and espionage, but really, it is a fancy way of saying any other name your candidate has been known by. With name-based background checks, it is critical to include any possible alias names to ensure your candidates do not have a criminal history under a former married name, maiden name, birth name, etc. Many screening firms do not include this service in their pricing and then, clients are unpleasantly surprised when hit with additional fees because a candidate has 3 different names. We do not charge extra for searching other names. We consider it an important part of a thorough search. It is included in the original quote.



6. **Are employees of the screening firms screened regularly?** It seems like a question you would not need to ask, but I would encourage you to inquire about the backgrounds of the people you will be trusting with such sensitive information. Some screening firms “offshore” parts of their screening process like verifications. How do you ensure that none of your sensitive data on your employees, vendors, volunteers are not being sent to another country with little to no quality control? One of our large international volunteer partners told me that several of their affiliates were adamant about using a specific local background screening company. A quick internet search by our partner revealed that the screening firm operated out of a house where the owner also sold jams and jellies. This was not the secure environment they had hoped for. We re-screen our employees on an annual basis.
7. **Security of Data.** We mentioned in #6 that some screening firms “offshore” data which creates security issues for how the data is transferred. More importantly, what happens to it on the other end where it could be taken, printed, sold, etc.? Security is a huge concern with all of our data, and you can be confident that our screening firm uses industry ‘best practices’ for securing your data both in transit and at rest. What does that mean? We use SSAE 16 and provide quarterly reports. In addition, we engage with cyber security experts to perform penetration testing to expose any vulnerabilities in our software.
8. **Is compliance a core mission?** Complying with federal laws such as FCRA, DPPA and EEOC should be part of the core mission of any screening firm. The majority of compliance is incumbent upon the end user; however, you want a screening partner that will keep you abreast of changes and what is happening in the industry. We provide a number of educational opportunities each month i.e. live training events, live webinars, articles, and email communications.
9. **Customer service.** Yes, everybody claims to have it but very few organizations truly do. With unemployment at all time lows in most communities, hiring is extremely competitive. When you have a question about a background screening report, you should be able to receive an answer quickly. We have removed all barriers to customer service communications by appointing a Chief of Client Strategies who oversees a team that works all day, every day, with clients. All of our clients have access to a direct line to the team, email, and chat. We believe technology is key to the background screening process, but we will not remove human eyes from the equation.
10. **Education.** Things change in the background screening world very quickly. New movements like “Ban the Box” can start sweeping the nation making it critical that your screening partner provide opportunities for learning and education. We provide almost daily education opportunities with articles, live training, live webinars and one-on-one events.



In summary, a background screening firm should be more than willing to answer these questions. If they are not, move one. There are numerous screening firms that will. You do not want to place the safety and security of your background screening process in the hands of an organization that is cutting corners or providing low quality products or services. If a company won't take the time to answer your questions in order to win your business, how responsive will they be when you are a client?

Please give us a call or an email, we are glad to answer any questions you have: 866-434-0002 or sales@safehiringsolutions.com