



## Applying for and Getting a Job that Requires a Federal Security Clearance: FAQs and Facts

Federal jobs that involve access to sensitive information often require a security clearance. Applying for these jobs is a four-step process:

- 1.) Receiving the job offer.
- 2.) A **basic background check** of the individual's criminal and credit histories.<sup>1</sup> A basic background check includes a review of law enforcement records, and verification of education, past employment, and citizenship. Being honest is more important than having a spotless record. Past mistakes will be considered on a case-by-case basis, but falsification of records (including omission of important events) will generally disqualify you for a job.
- 3.) A **more intensive clearance investigation** *once the offer has been made*.
- 4.) The agency's decision of whether or not to grant clearance, based on the clearance investigation. About 90% of background investigations go through one agency, the Office of Personnel Management.

The hiring agency makes the ultimate decisions about the job offer and granting clearance and therefore dictates how long these steps will take, but OPM's website answers many questions about the rest of the process (steps 2 and 3) at: [http://www.opm.gov/Products\\_and\\_Services/Investigations/FAQs.asp](http://www.opm.gov/Products_and_Services/Investigations/FAQs.asp)

### ***Which jobs require a security clearance?***

Here is a sample of jobs that require a security clearance:

- Foreign Service Officer ..... ([www.careers.state.gov/officer/faqs/index.html](http://www.careers.state.gov/officer/faqs/index.html))
- CIA, many positions ..... (<https://www.cia.gov/careers/faq.html#ga2> )
- FBI, many positions ..... ([www.fbijobs.gov/114.asp](http://www.fbijobs.gov/114.asp))
- Many other positions in the intelligence community. For a definition of the Intelligence community and a list of its component agencies (some surprising), see: [www.dni.gov/who\\_what/members\\_IC.htm](http://www.dni.gov/who_what/members_IC.htm)
- Many civilian positions in the defense department, including non-intelligence positions. List of links to the civilian agencies that make up the DOD: [www.goddefense.com/dod-links.htm](http://www.goddefense.com/dod-links.htm).
- At many agencies, HR positions and other jobs that require access to sensitive personal data like social security numbers require a security check.

### ***How long will the security clearance process take?***

If you have friends who dealt with the security process in the past you may have heard about long lag times between getting a job offer and actually starting work. While this can still happen, the process has gotten dramatically faster since February of 2005.

The process and time it takes varies for each position and depends on each individual's background. Talk to your agency to better understand how long the total process is likely to take for you.

- Investigations that supported a Secret or Confidential Clearance (the two lower clearance levels) averaged **145 days** in April of 2006. Priority requests for the two lower levels of clearance averaged **64 days**.
- Investigations that supported Top Secret clearances averaged **171 days** in April 2006. Priority requests for Top Secret clearance averaged **53 days**.

[www.opm.gov/news\\_events/congress/testimony/5\\_17\\_2006-house.asp](http://www.opm.gov/news_events/congress/testimony/5_17_2006-house.asp)

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<sup>1</sup> See: [www.opm.gov/news\\_events/congress/testimony/4\\_6\\_2006.asp](http://www.opm.gov/news_events/congress/testimony/4_6_2006.asp) for details.

## ***I'm just graduating from college. Is it possible that I will need to be approved for Top Secret clearance? Is it possible that I will be classified as priority?***

Both are possible. If, for instance, you have high-level fluency in a critical language, then agencies may approve a priority investigation if they need you to begin work as soon as possible. If they will soon need you to work with especially sensitive documents, they may approve an investigation for **Top Secret** clearance. Ask the agencies you apply to what is likely in your specific case.

## ***What things do the investigators look at?***

### **International Experience and Contacts**

"Candidates who hold dual citizenship, have had extensive travel, education, residence and /or employment overseas, or who have foreign contacts, a foreign-born spouse, immediate family members or relatives who are not citizens of the United States" may face a longer clearance process ([www.careers.state.gov/specialist/join/index.html#8](http://www.careers.state.gov/specialist/join/index.html#8))

*"Does that mean that international experience hurts my chance of getting a job that requires security clearance?"*

Not at all. Many of these same factors are actually an advantage in securing a job offer. Foreign experience and concomitant foreign-language skills, for instance, are often major assets when applying for jobs that require security clearance. However these experiences also require the agency to extend its investigation overseas, which is why it is likely to take longer.

### **Drug Use as it Relates to Employment Timeline**

Drug use can affect your chances of getting a security clearance, but it is not an automatic out.

- Details on the FBI's drug policy, which are among the most stringent: ..... [www.fbijobs.gov/52.asp](http://www.fbijobs.gov/52.asp)
- The CIA: ..... [www.cia.gov/careers/faq.html#gr4](http://www.cia.gov/careers/faq.html#gr4)
- The State Department: ..... [www.state.gov/m/ds/clearances/26912.htm#8](http://www.state.gov/m/ds/clearances/26912.htm#8)

### **Disciplinary Record**

Having been put on probation by your college or otherwise having faced disciplinary sanction is not an automatic disqualifier for a security clearance. Investigators are interested in assessing your moral character and trustworthiness, and will evaluate disciplinary infractions in light of your overall record.

## ***Tips for a Smooth Security Clearance Experience***

- One of the most common areas of delay is the submission of incomplete security packages or poorly collected fingerprints. Make sure your package includes all the required components, and that your fingerprints are properly rolled. ([www.state.gov/m/ds/clearances/c10977.htm](http://www.state.gov/m/ds/clearances/c10977.htm))
- Follow up after a reasonable interval (roughly a month after the closing date) if you have not heard back from an agency you have applied to.
- After you have gotten the initial job offer, but before you have received security clearance, it may be possible to work for the agency in a **non-sensitive position** (also referred to as a "low public trust") while you wait for the security clearance. Ask agency representatives about this possibility.
- Prepare in advance: know the kinds of questions that will be asked of you as you seek to get a security clearance. See the "Standard form 86" on OPM's website at [http://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf\\_fill/sf86.pdf](http://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf_fill/sf86.pdf)
- Consider a summer internship with an agency that requires a security clearance. If you need a security clearance after graduation, getting an updated clearance will be a considerably faster process than the initial investigation. Be aware that such internships have early deadlines, generally before November 1.

## **ABOUT US**

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to educate students about careers in the federal government. We've developed resources to help students navigate the federal job application process. You can access these resources by visiting [www.calltoserve.org](http://www.calltoserve.org). We're always happy to answer questions about navigating the sometimes complicated world of federal jobs and internships, so please feel free to contact [calltoserve@ourpublicservice.org](mailto:calltoserve@ourpublicservice.org) with any questions you have about federal public service.