



Conducting Comprehensive Background Investigations

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Background investigations are essential in many different settings. The most common is employment where a new applicant or job incumbent seeking promotion must be screened. Obviously due to concerns with employment performance and vicarious liability due to the hiring of a person with dangerous proclivities; positive screening or *vetting* is important. While not all background investigations are conducted by private investigators; there is certainly a growth in this industry sector. Companies that specialize in this are becoming much more popular. In the United States it is common practice for private employers as well as the federal government to contract out their pre-employment background investigations. Often the individuals conducting these inquiries are retired federal investigators who are licensed private investigators. Many are also young college graduates who are beginning their careers and work for specialized private investigative firms.

While the bulk of background investigations involve the employment arena; this is by far not the only setting in which they are employed. Background investigations are also used, in one way or another, when reviewing witnesses, suspects, missing persons or potential business partners. Each of these cases require some type of background investigation of the subject. The witness, suspect or missing person must be examined. The firm being engaged must be reviewed for financial stability and the integrity of its executives. There must be some check into social, organizational, family and occupational relationships. It must be known who they are associated with. Before proceeding into an investigation that may go to court or with a business venture, one must know who they are dealing with. Perhaps the most common example of this in the investigative realm would be the subject profile performed before conducting a surveillance.

Pre-sentence investigations also mandate the thorough examination of someone's background. Judges need detailed and accurate information in order to make the best decision regarding the sentence to be meted out. Often probation or parole officers perform these inquiries.

Clearly private investigators take the lead in conducting background investigations. They do this work continually and in a cost effective manner. This paper will address background investigations as conducted by private investigators. The principles and practices of background investigation, are, however, generic to other settings.

It is a very familiar task for many private investigators to try to explain to a potential client the difference between the thorough, in depth background investigation that they provide and the "*Find-out-anyone's-background-for-\$9.99*" website that the person is probably asking about. Adding to the difficulty might be some erroneous, pre-conceived notion gathered from some crime-thriller TV shows that everything one might want to know about someone is available at the click of a button.

While it is true that an astounding amount of information about a person might be available to the prying eyes of an investigator; a true background investigation often will require far more diligence, patient legwork, and time than the average person expects.

An actual thorough, comprehensive background check conducted by a licensed investigative professional is distinguished from the \$9.99 search in numerous ways. In all actuality, the cheap search the client thinks will suffice will probably be one of the several elements that you

incorporate into the foundation of your research at the *beginning* of the investigation. From there you, as the researcher, will be required to make a series of decisions based on the facts and reasonable logic, leaving no stone unturned, and in the process gaining a very personal knowledge of the subject whom you may never meet. You then may be required to draw analysis from the facts that have been established, and finally provide those documented facts in a written report that will reflect the professionalism that was required throughout the entire process. There is no \$9.99 *Internet Background Check* that is capable of all that.

Reasons to conduct a background investigation

The reasons for conducting a background check are numerous. A few of them are:

- Frequently, a high-end background check will be sought by the subject's potential employer or his current employer who might be seeking to promote him or her to a more sensitive position
- A corporation may seek to conduct some degree of due diligence on another company or an individual that it plans to do business with or provide an investment to.
- A corporation or insurance company may conduct its own investigation (including background checks on suspects) after a serious loss or other incident.
- Attorneys frequently conduct their own independent background checks on defendants, witnesses or other litigants, in both criminal and civil proceedings.
- An individual may seek a background on another person for any number of reasons, like a checking a new love interest for themselves or a family member.

The techniques explained in this article often assume that the subject has provided his full consent and thereby granting the highest level of access to his personal records in the event that the entity which holds the records challenges the inquiry. However, regardless of the purpose or the level of consent by the subject, the techniques provided below are still applicable to all forms of background checks. It is the full responsibility of the investigator to know the laws that might govern his permissible purpose for obtaining some records, public or otherwise.

Legal Issues

The purpose of the background check will determine whether or not the information obtained is regulated and sometimes what is done with the information will also be dictated. It is the responsibility of the individual researcher to know and understand all applicable laws governing his business, but it doesn't hurt to have access to an attorney that is well versed in the laws as well. Human Resource professionals are also usually up-to-date on the legal issues that effect conducting background checks

The type of background investigation most heavily regulated is the pre-employment screen. The Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA), the federal law most applicable to that type of investigation, mandates that the subject, referred to as the consumer, must provide written consent and is also entitled to receive a copy of the background report which may have been influential in the decision to hire him or not. The FCRA in its entirety may be reviewed at:

<http://www.ftc.gov/os/statutes/fcra.htm>

Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act (GLBA) is another relevant law. As defined by *ConsumerPrivacyGuide.org*, part of the act "...regulates the sharing of personal information about individuals who obtain financial products or services from financial institutions." The GLBA is most visible to investigators when they access information obtained from "credit headers" (see more below) as many information brokers require us to state a permissible purpose under the act before accessing the data. More details about the GLBA may be obtained from the following two links:

<http://www.keytlaw.com/Links/glbact.htm>

<http://banking.senate.gov/conf/>

Public record searches

The public record search serves as the solid foundation for every comprehensive background investigation. As the name implies, the information covered in this section is "public" information which can be accessed by anyone at anytime for any reason. There are, however, certain legal regulations that will limit the investigator's access and ability to report certain types of public records depending on their purpose for obtaining them.

Search Criteria

Possessing adequate identifying information on the subject of your background investigation is essential. The key identifiers for conducting an effective search are:

- **Full name, including maiden name or any known aliases.**
- **Date of Birth.**
- **Social Security Number.**
- **Current and/or all past addresses.**

At a minimum the subject's name is the most important piece to get started; however, the date of birth and SSN are crucial in identifying a criminal record with the subject, especially in the case of common names. Other types of public records, such as civil suits, may never actually contain a subject's date of birth or SSN, but will most likely contain an address that may be matched back to them.

There are several legal techniques for developing identifying information of the subject when it is not known, but preferably the client or parent organization will be able to provide this information. It is recommended that any information provided as such be first confirmed through an alternate source.

Subject Disclosure of History

In a pre-employment background inquiry or even in a criminal investigation, an investigator may be able to present an opportunity for the subject to disclose any previous events that may be of interest. Most commonly potential employers, for example, will ask an applicant to share his criminal history back over a certain number of years.

These reported histories can often be the most enjoyable read of a background application as people tend to use the small amount of space provided to tell about youthful indiscretions or how whatever happened was not really their fault; however the question and answer serve a few very important purposes:

1. If a criminal history is disclosed it will provide something to start investigating right away. Ideally the subject will provide the time, place, charge and disposition and it will be up to the investigator to document the charge and confirm if the information provided was accurate.
2. It presents an opportunity for the subject to be truthful. If they answer, "None," when asked about their criminal activity and it is later found that they indeed have a colorful criminal record, or even a single one minor charge, then it will be up to the client to determine the subject's motivations for not answering the question honestly.

One common problem frequently encountered is the poorly worded question in an application that allows for the subject to not provide adequate detail. Sometimes, even when the question is thorough, the subject will not answer accurately leaving out crucial pieces that will be needed, such as a date of the charge or even a location, leaving you with little with which to work. Additionally it is common to see a "bait and switch" tactic where the applicant might feed you some information about a real or fictitious lesser charge in hopes that you won't find the actual more serious offense. Or there is also the odd instance where the subject will attempt to describe what happened but not actually name the charges, such as, "I borrowed my friend's car but he forgot he lent it to me and he called the police." You may find that the subject actually pleaded guilty to grand theft auto and served some prison time for his friend's "memory lapse."

Where to look

Knowing where to look for the right public records is just as important as knowing what types of records to obtain. The real difficulty lies in understanding different court structures in each of the fifty states. Common problems come in identifying different court names, what types of records are housed in which court, how far back are records accessible, etc.

This makes a perfect case for having a network of professional public record researchers available. There are several hardcopy and Internet directories available that will provide contact information for this research. An excellent source is www.brbpub.com, a site which allows a search by county and state for a researcher that will cover the jurisdictions needed.

When setting up research in a jurisdiction it will be most advantageous to hire a firm based in that county. A researcher should know his home jurisdiction best, i.e. what courts contain what

records, how far back the records go, how many days will the search take and will copies be available? A local researcher will most likely know the court clerks on a first name basis, and may be able to get them to do a special favor from time to time, such as pulling an archived record faster or expediting the copying of a case file.

The investigator will also have to consider in what specific jurisdictions they might find records on the subject. There are four basic ways to determine this. Asking the following questions will address this issue:

- 1. In what jurisdictions has the subject lived?** Many people spend their entire lives living in one city; however, many others are highly migratory, moving to entirely new cities every year for any number of reasons, most commonly because of employment.
- 2. In what jurisdictions has the subject worked?** Does he live close by to where he is employed, or does a commute take him into a city an hour or two away from his residence. Perhaps the subject travels the county spending a week or more on the road in a branch office. Jurisdictions through which the subject passes during a commute might also be considered.
- 3. In what jurisdiction might the subject have spent a significant amount of time in other than at home or work?** Does the subject have relatives or a significant other in jurisdiction outside of where he lives or works that he might spend time in? Does a hobby or sports interest take him away for the weekend to one location frequently?

There are several ways to obtain answers to the questions above. One of the most common techniques is to have the subject provide the information to the screener directly or through the client, such as during an interview or in an employment application. However, when information hasn't been provided there are other options.

Many private investigators frequently use proprietary information databases to compile and address and sometimes employment history. Access to these databases is usually "pay-per-search" ranging anywhere up to \$20 for a comprehensive report or much less if the information is bought piece by piece. The most critical information provided through these databases is access to the "header" section of an individual's credit report. It should be noted that the actual financial data is never available via these databases, as access to these information requires full consent of the subject in all cases.

The credit header sections, however, are sold to these information databases by the major credit bureaus and are accessible by investigators with a permitted use which must be stated prior to accessing the records. By analyzing the credit headers it is possible to compile an address history often dating back up to twenty years. Full addresses and the dates that they were reported to the different credit bureaus are provided; however, it should be noted that these dates can often be unreliable, but they are better than nothing. The addresses of residences are key in determining which jurisdictions the subject may have resided in for the purposes of retaining a researcher to check public records there. Simply identify the county in which a city resides and the researcher has created a checklist for setting up a public records review.

Although rare, employment information is also sometimes listed in credit headers. Many of the information databases have begun to make these records available. A little further research may be necessary when an employer is identified to determine if the company's address lies in a jurisdiction which the subject does not appear to reside. This may require an additional public record check in that county.

Two of the best, affordable, proprietary information databases available are:

<http://www.irbsearch.com/>
<https://www.pi.knowx.com/>

Types of Public Records

There are many different types of public records that may be useful depending on the nature of the investigation. For instance, in a pre-employment screening or loss investigation, identifying a previous criminal history can be essential. If the goal is to determine someone's financial worth; an analysis of civil judgments, tax liens, and bankruptcy records or other asset records is important.

The most commonly researched public records are:

- 1. Criminal, felony and misdemeanor records.**
- 2. Traffic records.**
- 3. Civil, upper and lower court records.**
- 4. Civil Judgment records.**
- 5. Tax Lien Records.**
- 6. Bankruptcy records.**
- 7. Asset Records.**

1. **Criminal Records.** Criminal records are accessible at two basic levels, Federal and State. Federal records are housed in the U.S. District Courthouses throughout the country, requiring a specific request of any public records researcher that might be retained. Fortunately there does exist a nationwide Federal District Court search in the form of the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) system, a subscription service. However, this database typically only provides general indexing information; if you need further details you will still be required to send a researcher into the court. PACER can be accessed at:

<http://pacer.uspci.uscourts.gov/>

State records are usually housed at the county level, thus requiring research in each specific county courthouse. At the state level it is also important to search both felony and misdemeanor records, which may actually be housed in different physical locations in a given county court. A good free source to identify in which county a particular city is located at:

http://www.naco.org/Template.cfm?Section=Find_a_County&Template=/cfiles/counties/usamap.cfm

Some states, through their state police agency, will provide public access to a statewide criminal index. These databases compile criminal information from all county courts in the state; however, research in the specific county is recommended as a back-up. Statewide searches are very useful for identifying a criminal record in a jurisdiction which may not come back as an area of residence or employment. To find out if a state has a statewide criminal search and for instructions on how to access it check:

http://www.virtualchase.com/resources/criminal_records.html

Furthermore, you have some success in accessing the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP) Inmate Locator database or each state's corresponding prison enforcement database (if one exists). Once again, this search is best used to identify a criminal record in order to point you to a local court where the full record will be housed. Be aware, however, that some states will only maintain prison records for inmates that are currently incarcerated. This is an excellent source for photographs as well. The FBOP Inmate Locator database may be found at:

<http://www.bop.gov/iloc2/LocateInmate.jsp>

2. Traffic Records. While the occasional speeding ticket or seatbelt violation may seem harmless, it is important to note that in many states Driving Under the Influence (DUI) charges and Reckless Driving records are maintained in a court separate from the regular criminal records. They may not show up as part of your criminal records database. Searching traffic records can also identify a history of excessive tickets and suspended licenses, which can be very important for a potential hire how will be driving a company vehicle. While not normally housed in county courts, each state's DMV is also searchable (sometimes only with a release). These driving history reports will provide a basic physical description, current status and expiration date of the license, and a three-year driving history.

3. Civil Records. Understanding civil law can be quite difficult at times, so it is always good to have an expert researcher who is very knowledgeable of his the civil court structure in his home jurisdictions. Building a rapport with your general legal counsel is also advisable as they can assist you in deciphering the plethora of different legal situations that are encompassed under civil law. Civil suits, housed at both the Federal and county levels, cover numerous matters ranging from contractual disputes to debt collection to personally injury and may sometimes correspond to a criminal matter. Family court cases, such as divorces and other matters are also significant in that they can contain descriptions of violent behavior which may result in the issuance of a restraining order or protection from abuse order without any associated criminal charges. This could potentially speak volumes to your subject's character.

Civil court documents, especially the Complaints, can provide great detail about a subject, the nature of his business, and his actions; however, the possibility that the complainant may have an axe to grind and be filing a false account of events should be considered. As such, it is equally important to obtain and Counter-Complaints or Answer filings to be able to analyze both sides of

the case. Likewise, it is useful to examine civil case in which your subject is involved as the Plaintiff. In rare instances, you may be able to piece together that your subject has a history filing lawsuits (such as job discrimination or sexual harassment) with every company he has ever work for, possibly signifying some scheme in the works.

4. Civil Judgment Records. These records are housed in the county level and will typically be associated with a civil proceeding filed in another division of the court. The Civil Judgment is a formal record of a judge's ruling in a civil matter that may or may not also be accompanied by a Release of Judgment, an order acknowledging that the litigant has "paid up" on any debt or damages owed to the Plaintiff or the court. There may be no civil judgment filing available if the civil suit was settled out of court or dismissed by the judge.

5. Tax Lien Records. Tax liens may be issued from Federal, State, or County and municipal entities, but are usually filed at the county level. Simply put, a tax lien is a formal filing ordering an individual to pay past-due taxes. Like civil judgments, a Release of Lien may be found with the record denoting that the individual has paid off his tax debt.

6. Bankruptcy Records. Bankruptcy records can be very useful in gauging your subject's financial situation. These records are maintained at the Federal court level and are searchable nationwide through the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) system. Although a handful of bankruptcy courts do provide copies of important documents in electronic format on PACER, it still will be necessary in most cases to hire a record researcher to go into the court to obtain documents for you. An examination of any records is especially prudent in conducting due diligence on an individual or his company who may have approached your client to conduct business or retain a loan.

7. Asset Records. Although not typically part of a standard background check, it may be necessary at times to examine your subject's assets. Asset searches can be tricky, and the topic warrants its own chapter; however, it is possible to identify some assets via a county courthouse search. Real property records are the most commonly searched asset records at courthouses across the country. In fact, you may find that many record research firms you contact specialize in title and property searches; you will find that some of these firms deal in property records exclusively; therefore, you may need to hire a separate company to take care of your criminal and civil research requirements. Additionally, it is possible to identify some assets in some instances after an examination of civil litigation records (see above).

The Importance of Copies

Obtaining court record copies of any public record that you identify with your subject is often necessary. Requesting copies will typically add a few days onto your turn-around-time as well as additional expense, but presenting copies of official documents stamped by the court showing your subject's name, date of birth, and SSN will prove to be invaluable especially if the subject tries to refute any findings.

Knowing what copies to obtain is important, but once again, the public record researcher you retain in a jurisdiction you are not familiar with should be able get you what exactly what you

need. You will find however, that from state to state what is available varies greatly. For instance, in some states you may only be able to obtain a printout of the index screen of criminal offenses, while in other states you may be provided copies of the original police report, criminal complaint, and even testimony transcripts.

Civil record copies can also be difficult to obtain depending on jurisdiction you are dealing with, but are just as important as getting criminal record copies.

Media and General Internet Searches

Thorough research and analysis of local, national or international newspaper and magazines can quickly distinguish your background investigation from others, often adding a personal element to compliment the public record research. It is possible, in some cases, to develop a near-complete biography of your subject that by piecing together media articles that document his career and background, even sometimes reflecting glimpses of his personality.

Construction of Search Criteria

Before examining the sources of media research, it is critical to discuss the proper construction of your search criteria. There are two important elements of which to be aware:

- 1. Combine the most effective search terms.**
- 2. Understanding completely the how to structure searches in the particular database you are accessing.**

Combing the most effective search terms. Sometimes you will be fortunate in that your subject's first or last name is so unique that you are able to search on the name only and get good results. More often, however, in the case of a common name it will be necessary to add in other terms that will eliminate matches to others that share your subject's name. These added terms should be something that you have found to be unique to your subject. Some examples might include his towns or states of residence, the name of his business or employer, terms relating to the industry in which he works, and so on.

In some instances, such as during a background investigation of a high-profile executive, you may be faced with a situation where the amount of media hits returned when searching his name only returns an unmanageable amount of results. If you have the time and resources, all hits should be checked. However, if you lack either or both, it will be necessary to focus your research depending on the goal of the background check. For example, if you are searching for negative media pertaining to your subject, you will need to add terms that will pull out such findings. For example, you could combine the subject's name with words like "fraud," "theft," "litigation," or "lawsuit."

Understanding completely the how to structure searches in the particular database you are accessing. Unfortunately, not all databases use the standard Boolean search strings. Each is unique and you will be required to learn each one. Normally, there is a "Help" screen in each that will advise you how to construct a proper search and will include several examples for reference.

If not, it is recommended that you run some test searches that you know will produce results. For example, will a search type exactly as “John Smith” return articles with the words “John” and “Smith” found anywhere in the articles, maybe even paragraphs apart, or will you find the two words appearing only next to one another? Failure to understand the nuances of a particular database may result in you missing a critical piece of information about to your subject.

Sources for Media Research

There are numerous sources for media research on the Internet. These resources are classified as follows:

1. **Mega-media databases.** These databases collect articles from thousand of newspapers and magazines, and allow them to be searched all at once. Two of the best databases available to investigators are Lexis-Nexis (www.lexisnexis.com) and Factiva (www.factiva.com). Both systems require an account to access and charge a fee per complete article viewed. Running the same search term in both will produce nearly identical results, but occasionally one will provide an article not found in the other; thus, it is worth it to search both.
2. **Local Newspaper Websites.** Most local newspapers maintain a website, the majority of which offer a search of their newspaper archives. It will be important when searching these sites to understand exactly how far back the system will search; in some cases, searches on one of the mega-media sites will be more thorough. Additionally, a local paper’s archive search might only search from articles from certain parts of the newspaper such as the local section. Some of these sites will require a fee per article searched, but the majority of these archives are free to the public. When cost is an issue, you may be able to find free articles on these sites that you would have to pay for on the mega-media sites. Two of the best websites for locating local and international newspapers are:

<http://www.paperboy.com/>

<http://abyznewslinks.com/>

3. **Local Television Station Websites.** Each major television station affiliate in a given area will also have a website, normally with a news section. While these sites usually are stronger in reporting immediate current events, many maintain an archive search function also. Additionally, you will frequently find free downloadable Internet video news clips on these websites, which provide an excellent physical description of your subject if it is not otherwise known. An index of television channel news websites can also be found at <http://abyznewslinks.com>.
4. **General Internet Searches.** This section truly deserves its own write-up, but it is definitely important to note that a search of the general Internet is an excellent source of “alternate” and non-traditional media. For example, your subject might maintain a personal website or one for his company that may contain his resume or biography, providing you with a perfect opportunity to make comparisons to the one submitted to you or your client. Analysis of “weblogs” or “blogs” may reveal much important insight into your subject’s personality,

ethics, etc. Finding postings by your subject on Internet message boards or discussion groups might also prove to be very valuable as well. An analysis of these findings could identify an interest or hobby that could potentially be a serious conflict for your client. One of the more popular Internet search engines is www.google.com.

Reliance on the Source

Please be advised: **DO NOT treat your media findings as statements of fact!** Newspaper and magazines frequently made mistakes, unintentional or otherwise. Anything found on the Internet is also to be handled very carefully. The basic investigative tenet of corroboration is key.

You should always exercise caution in the manner in which you report any media findings. ALWAYS include in your reports a copy of the complete article or webpage that references your subject so that your client may read the piece in its full context. Any article, regardless of its length, can be abstracted or summarized in four sentences or less. Ideally, this is what goes in your report giving your client the option to read that entire attached article if he so chooses. Be wary though, that when summarizing an article to use phrases such as, “This source reported that...” to make it clear that you only are quoting the article. Additionally, in most cases there is no room for speculation in your media summaries as this might confuse your client as to what the article actually reports. That is not to say, however, that you should not point out correlations to certain facts that you may have verified in another aspect of your research, such as in an analysis of public records.

Verifications

A thorough background investigation often requires a fair amount of “legwork” in the form of verifying information which the subject provided to you or information that you may have identified from only one source. The following verifications are most frequently conducted during background research:

- **Employment history.**
- **Education history.**
- **Professional licenses.**

The subject may make the beginning of the process easy by provided you, via a resume or application, the name, dates, contact information, etc., of the entity that you need to contact. Verifications of this information allow you once again to ensure that your client has been provided accurate and truthful information by the subject.

Alternatively, you may be working only from a published biography of the subject or information that you have pieced together from media reports. You will most likely be required to obtain the contact information yourself in this case. This allows for you to learn a bit about who you are about to contact, which may assist you in formulating the questions you are

preparing to ask. In that regard, it is advisable to conduct some preliminary research on contacts that your subject may have provided to you.

Employment History. Thorough analysis and solid verification of your subject's work history can be very valuable in any background verification. You will normally have no trouble verifying dates of employment and positions held with the former employer. Some companies, however, are less likely to volunteer the following:

- Reason for termination of employment.
- Salary.
- Comments on work performance or disciplinary history.
- If the subject is eligible for rehire.

You will typically encounter three situations when you contact a personnel office:

1. A small company where you might speak to the owner or human resources assistant that knew your subject personally who can provide the best character reference.
2. A medium to large-sized company where the personnel agent has no personal knowledge of your subject and is only accessing records via a database or personnel file. Such is usually the case when you contact a government agency for an employment verification.
3. A third-party verification "warehouse," which is an information system used by companies that will be in the form of some Internet database or automated phone system. You can expect to pay a small fee for the verification and you will never speak to a warm body.

For several different reasons, many human resources departments will verify no more than the basic information. With a little creativity, however, it may be possible to contact the former immediate supervisor or other co-workers who may be willing to volunteer more personal information that could speak to your subject's character. A second call directly to the department of the company that the subject worked in may yield better results.

Apparent gaps in your subject's employment history should be investigated. It may be possible that during periods of unemployment ranging from one month to several years that your subject was incarcerated. In one background we conducted, the subject reported a two-year "sabbatical" during which he took time off to "write novels." We later verified that the dates of this "time off" matched exactly with dates during which the subject served prison time for the hit-and-run vehicular manslaughter of a child in a foreign country.

Education history. If the subject stated that he attended some secondary education institute like a college, university, or trade school. It will be necessary to make contact and verify. By contacting the school's registrar or record's office, you will be able to verify the following:

- Dates of attendance.
- Major course of study
- Type of degree earned (if any).
- Graduation honors.

Although you may experience few results, it may not hurt to inquire about any disciplinary actions that may be noted in your subject's record as well. Many schools also have a policy that requires a signed release from your subject before a verification has been conducted.

You may find frequent inaccuracies between the information your subject reports and what you are able to verify. Sometimes, for example, your subject may report that he received a degree when in fact he may have attended the school but never graduated. There have also been cases where one type of degree was actually received, but another reported to the employer. In this case the subject reports the degree falsely because it better matched the potential employer's line of work.

It is also important to be able to recognize the more serious cases of education fraud wherein the subject may have purchased education credentials from a so-called "diploma mill." These false universities are routinely exposed by the media and other watch-dog groups. In one case we encountered, the diploma mill offered to sell us a degree, titled to our liking, for under \$1,000. They claimed that we had to prove to them that we worked in a given field for a few years and they would equate that "experience" to education. The "proof" from our end required no more than sending in a resume. This group had even set up a verification line and website so that employers would not notice anything out of the ordinary when conducting verifications.

In the event that you do not recognize the name of the school or university, it is a good idea to do a little research. If the school has a very small or uninformative website or contact information outside the U.S. it may be a warning sign. Legitimate colleges and universities are normally registered with accreditation boards.

Professional licenses. Most state or national agencies that issue professional licenses consider their information to be public record and will be very willing to provide it with verification. Some examples of professions that are licensed include stock brokers and financial advisors, accountants, doctors, lawyers, real estate agents, contractors and even private investigators (in many states). An excellent source for online license verifications is www.searchsystems.net, which provides links state-by-state to licensing agencies.

Investigators will frequently be able to verify the following information with ease:

- Type of license.
- Dates issued and expired.
- Current status or standing.
- Address and phone number of licensee.
- Employer name and contact information.
- Existence of disciplinary action.

In many cases, adequate verifications can be conducted using the agencies' website; however, often it is necessary to contact the state via telephone to complete the most important part of the verification, the disciplinary actions inquiry.

Most licensing agencies will provide details regarding any disciplinary action ever taken against the subject regarding his license including fines levied or the reasons for a license being suspended. The licenser may also store complaints from the public against the subject even if they decide to take no action against him. In the best circumstance an investigator may even be granted access to agency documents that provided very specific details regarding the action taken.

Additional Research

There are many ways to research someone's background. The most frequent types of research conducted have been categorized above. There are many other specific methods of research that investigators might not always find necessary to conduct in a basic background check. Some examples include:

State DMV Reports – All states offer access to individual driver's licenses records, most often requiring a release from your subject. Available information will include issuance and expiration dates, license status (valid, suspended, etc.) and a synopsis of the subject's three to seven year driving history at the statewide level.

Credit Reports – Obtaining credit reports directly for the major credit bureaus is a very frequently practice, but doing such *strictly* requires the full consent of your subject and a signed release. Much information can be gathered from a credit report, such as addresses, previous employers, and public records like bankruptcies, tax liens, and judgments. Most importantly, credit reports will reflect the total amount of debt including details of each consumer account, current and past late payment information, and whether any accounts have been sent to collections or written off as bad debts.

Sex Offender Databases – These databases are easily accessible on the Internet in the majority of states and are most often accessible at the statewide level and may even be sponsored by the state police agency. In the event that no Internet database exists in a state, a call to a local agency will be necessary. Records frequently contain pictures, current address, a description of the crimes, and the current registration status.

Conclusion

The key to making any comprehensive background search thorough is creativity and adaptability. The techniques highlighted above are by no means the only steps needed in conducting an investigation, but this writer has found them to be the most common. Checkers must constantly be finding new ways to obtain old information as well as scanning for new types

of information that may become available. Likewise, some facet of the subject's life may require some research first to determine what exactly can be found out.

Although not covered in this paper, it is very important to understand that the results of a background investigation are best utilized when combined with a thorough interviewing process. Sometimes, in the case of a discreet investigation, interviews will not be possible as the investigator's cover may be jeopardized. In the case of a pre-employment screen or any other investigation that has the full consent of the subject, however, interviews done properly can surely add a personal element that is rarely obtained through the analysis of public records or media. The effective interview starts first with the applicant, but then should spread to family, friends and neighbors and/or co-workers and supervisors. Facts obtained during the comprehensive research will certainly aid an expert interviewer in posing the most effective questions to his interviewees.

Careers in Background Investigations

There are several viable career opportunities for those wishing to make a living conducting background investigations, including:

- Private Investigators and Security Consulting firms: PI's are frequently approached to conduct background checks for any number of reasons or can use the techniques to support another investigation on which they are working. Investigators such as this are more flexible when working with a client into tailoring the investigation to their specific needs.
- Pre-employment Screening Agencies: Several firms exist whose sole purpose is to conduct background checks for companies that wish to check out potential employees. Varying in size, these firms can sometimes employ hundreds of people which are able to process thousands of background checks a year in an "assembly-line" fashion. These agencies often offer package-type background investigations at low cost for larger firms with a high volume of new hires.
- Government Agencies: Any number of government agencies will employ background investigators to conduct investigations on potential hires or current employees who must be issued high-level security clearances. This is often a requirement of private-sector government contractors to which several private investigative firms cater. Additionally, many of the techniques described above are used by law enforcement agencies during their investigations.

Where to Start

Education. Although a college education is not required to be an effective background researcher, it certainly helps. The vast majority of this writer's professional colleagues that are considered to be good researchers can attribute their success to some element of their secondary education.

There is not any specific college or university that offers a degree in conducting background checks. Even Criminal Justice programs rarely get into the specifics of conducting background checks as these techniques usually end up being learned on the job. With that said, there are a number of degrees that are extremely useful. Criminal Justice programs certainly are beneficial as they are known to produce ‘investigative-minded types’. The familiarity gained with the criminal court systems is also beneficial for understating that aspect of the law. Regardless of your major, at least a few criminal justice courses should be taken. Any type of pre-law or paralegal degree will also be of great benefit, and will most likely provide a very proficient understanding of criminal law as well as civil law. *Any degree which requires extensive research for its completion or actually teaches research techniques will be useful.* An excellent example here is journalism, which stresses media research techniques, interviewing skills, and the importance of effective written communication, which is essential.

Continuing Education. Whether or not an investigator receives a college degree, obtaining professional education both on the job and through seminars and outside training programs is highly recommended. Many such programs tailored to conducting background investigations do exist and can be usefully, especially to the beginner. Seasoned background research professionals will typically always benefit from some type of training as well by keeping up to date on legal issues, finding a brand new technique, or at least confirming that they are at the top of the game.

Professional Licenses. Short of going to work for the government, just about everyone conducting background investigations will benefit in some form by having a private investigator’s license. This may be a requirement in some states to legally perform this type of work. In addition, other states or provinces may offer some type of professional training as part of obtaining and/or maintaining the license. While this varies considerably between states and countries; it is a sound practice to be licensed or working for a firm that holds a license.

Career Path

The career path outlined below is just one possible set of options for the background investigations professional. It happens to be one that the mirrors the path that the author of this section chose.

The First Job. A great place to begin a career as a background research is right at one of the sources, the public courts. This is an excellent way to learn the “ins and outs” of a particular state legal structure. One will be familiarized with legal terms, filing and indexing, public access computer systems, etc. Actually working for the court is not the only option. Many firms, as described above, specialize in conducting courthouse research exclusively. Additionally, private investigation agencies often find themselves in local courthouses conducting research for any number of reasons.

Moving on. One logical progression after really getting to know how to work through a local court system is to find employment with one of the many pre-employment screening companies whose only function is to process thousands of background checks in a year. Working for a firm such as these is suitable to both entry-level employees and those with education as each aspect of the background investigation may be worked on by a separate department. For example, there

may be one team that facilitates the criminal record research only, while another team conducts all of the education and employment verifications. Working for a firm such as this provides quite a bit of useful knowledge. First, you get to gain learn about how other court systems function around the country. Second, you are introduced to other vital aspects of the background investigation besides public record searching. And finally, you gain an understanding and general overview of how to coordinate an entire background check from processing an application, to setting up public record searches and hiring public record research firms, obtaining credit and drivers reports, conducting verifications, then collecting all information together, analyzing, and submitting a final report. Since each of these tasks is handled by a separate department or individual, one can be confident that they will most likely run across experts since each is able to focus on his specific job function.

Moving up. After gaining a basic working knowledge of the courts and working for a pre-screening firm, the screener will definitely be prepared to move into more of a private consulting role. The single investigator, or a small team, will be well equipped to complete a background check in its entirety, the same product that it took an entire pre-screening company to produce! (Although the case load will be far, far less.) The decreased caseload will mean that each background you produce will be highly detailed and you will gain a very personal knowledge of your subject's history as you will be able to expand your research into comprehensive media research and other creative avenues. You may even be responsible for conducting field interviews or coordinating an interviewing expert to assist you. Additionally, as a consultant, the purposes for conducting the investigations will vary widely. Although some may still be conducted for pre-employment purposes, far more interesting opportunities will present themselves, such as providing support to loss investigations or assisting the media with investigative reports.