

Why You Want a Security Clearance Job

Workers with security clearances earn up to 25% more and dominate the ranks of the top ten percent of wage earners. What does it mean to be cleared, and how do you qualify? EngineerJobs spoke with Joe Bilheimer, VP of Systems Integration at Pershing Technologies, and Nicole A. Smith, of Tully Rinckey PLLC, about the nuts and bolts of the investigative process. **What is a Security Clearance?**

An individual's security clearance indicates they have been vetted and approved for access to classified information of that level or lower. Access is still restricted to employees or contractors who require the information in question to fulfill their operational responsibilities. Having, for example, a Top Secret clearance does not automatically confer access to all data of Secret or lower classification, but only that which the individual can demonstrate a "need to know". There are three main levels of security clearance within the United States: Confidential, Secret, and Top Secret. Access is further controlled through Sensitive Compartmented Information (SCI, fictionalized as "above top secret" or "code word material") or Special Access Program (SAP) clearances, which govern either specific intelligence sources, sensitive research areas, or access to important personnel (such as the President or Vice President of the United States). Access at these levels is granted after a process similar, but not limited to, that for awarding a Top Secret clearance, and only to personnel with a demonstrated need to know. Confidential is the lowest clearance designation and the easiest to receive. (There is information deemed "Controlled Unclassified", which requires no clearance to access but may be illegal to redistribute.) Secret clearance is somewhat tighter, with variations on the investigative process for military, civilian, and newly-enlisted personnel. Top Secret clearance covers access to sensitive information vital to national security, counterintelligence, and counterterrorism. It is not often a blanket clearance, with information at this level further compartmentalized (Sensitive Compartmented Information) or restricted to Special Access Programs determined by the Department of Defense. Owing to its role in nuclear research and engineering, the Department of Energy has two Special Access Program clearances: L and Q Clearance. Roughly, L Clearance can be considered equivalent to Secret and Q Clearance equivalent to Top Secret. The difference between these Department of Energy classifications and standard levels is rather interesting, owing to their application in weapons research. The standard classification scheme treats information as public until classified. L- and Q-level information, however, is presumed secret until specifically declassified. This creates an interesting situation for personnel with these clearances, as Phil Broughton, a radiation safety specialist and former Q-class clearance holder, explained in a

guest post for author Warren Ellis:

This also means that people who have L & Q clearances are "Informed Individuals". With what they already know that is classified, they are capable of thinking entirely new, instantly classified thoughts and to speak them out loud in an uncleared area or to uncleared people is a felony. So, yes, it is possible to commit Thoughtcrime. In light of that, it should make sense

that workers in the nuclear complex tend to work very long hours and stay long past retirement age. Inside the gate is the only place they are free to think and talk. [...] This self-censoring doesn't end once you leave and no longer have an active clearance. You know what you know, but now you have nowhere to go to discuss it. The obligations of a Department of Energy clearance are for life.

Obtaining a Security Clearance

To demystify the process of obtaining a security clearance, we spoke with Joe Bilheimer and Nicole Smith. Bilheimer is currently VP of Systems Integration Services at Pershing Technologies. Amongst other things, his company handles AV infrastructure, command and control room design, centralized control systems, and security assessments, with past projects including involvement in the relocation of CENTCOM and FORSCOM Headquarters. Nicole Smith is an associate of Tully Rinckey PLLC, one of the nation's largest federal employment law firms, with offices in upstate New York and the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area. The firm represents federal employees and contractors and military personnel nationwide in the security clearance application process as well as in appeals before the Defense Office of Hearings and Appeals. "There are two ways to do this, primarily," Bilheimer said. "Either the individual is hired directly into a cleared position, or the employer may cover the individual via a facility clearance." A facility clearance can be thought of as a clearance issued to a company, or a specific plant within that company, with the employer assuming responsibility for security risks posed by their employees. "Facility clearances are maintained up to Top Secret by employers and must be associated with a particular sponsor or program requiring that level of security," Bilheimer said. (Clearance for programs or positions subject to Sensitive Compartmented Information or a Special Access Program is only handled directly by the government agency sponsoring the program.) If you do not have an established clearance at the time you are hired, and your prospective employer either can or will not cover employees under a facility clearance, you will receive a COE (conditional offer of employment) pending the approval of an Interim clearance. "Depending on the level of clearance, an applicant with either complete a SF85 or SF86 questionnaire," Smith said. "The SF85 is for applicants who are in non-sensitive positions." The SF85 is brief and only spans five years of history, like a standard background check. The SF86, for those seeking clearances of Secret or above, is far more comprehensive. The SF86 "requires the applicants to list activities going back ten years and requires the applicant to list derogatory information pertaining to drug use, criminal conduct, foreign travel/contacts, emotional health, financial responsibility, employment issues, misuse of information technology, and alcohol use," Smith said. Once the investigating agency receives your paperwork, if there are no immediately disqualifying factors in your record, an Interim clearance is typically quick to follow. "This process is very quick and basically involves a short background check," Bilheimer said. "We routinely process interim clearances in less than a month, usually about a week to ten days." (Interim Top Secret clearances take one to two months.) For the most part, your Interim clearance will function as a full clearance, allowing you access to information of that level or lower while your full clearance investigation takes place. "The individual must submit specific documentation identifying job history, places of residence, travel, friends and family contacts — basically a laundry list of everything you've done and everyone you've known for the last decade," Bilheimer said. "That documentation is reviewed by specially trained government personnel, who also conduct interviews with all the points of contact listed for each element to validate the risk assessment." The US Office of Personnel Management, Federal Investigative Services (OPM-FIS) conducts the majority of security clearance investigations in the United States. Their internal estimates place the number of annual clearance investigations at approximately 2 million per year, or about 90% of the annual total. The thoroughness of the investigation conducted (and, therefore, turnaround time to approval or denial of clearance)

varies directly with the level of clearance sought. In order to streamline this process and provide consistent results, OPM-FIS has developed standard investigative tools and procedures for awarding or renewing an individual's clearance. "Most individuals should expect this process to last at least six months," Bilheimer said. "The purpose of the interim clearance is to allow enough time for the real clearance process to run its course." **What Investigators Look For**

Depending on your desired clearance level, the investigating agency will employ different standardized tools and procedures to determine your fitness. For Confidential, Secret, or L clearances, contractors must pass a National Agency Check with Local Agency Check (NACLIC), while federal employees undergo the Access NACI (ANACI). Clearances must be renewed every 10 years for Secret or L clearance, or 15 years for Confidential clearance. The NACLIC includes:

Seven-year credit search

Law enforcement records check in all known locations of residence, employment, and education for the past five years.

Search of national agency databases, such as the FBI investigative index, fingerprint databases, Defense Clearance and Investigations Index, and Security/Suitability Investigations Index

The ANACI is the minimum investigative standard for Federal employees. It covers the same ground as the NACLIC, above, with extra residence, education, and employment coverage. For Top Secret, Sensitive Compartmented Information, or Q clearances, applicants must undergo a Single Scope Background Investigation (SSBI), with a renewal investigation every five years. Any investigation undertaken by an appropriate agency, during the scope of this inquiry, may be used to satisfy SSBI requirements. The SSBI is understandably quite thorough: Scope of the background investigation is to be either ten years or back to eighteen years of age, whichever is less.

The scope of the investigation may be expanded at the discretion of the investigating agency or to satisfy unique employment standards.

Full national agency check, as above, but the spouse or cohabitant of the subject is also investigated.

Trained security personnel will conduct a personal interview of the subject.

Verification of birth records and citizenship direct from the issuing authority.

Independent verification of educational history.

Verification of employment history within the scope of the investigation, for a minimum of two years. For any job held more than six months, two sources from within the organization or business will be attempted. All employment of more than sixty days is to be verified through records or sources.

At least four references are required, which must collectively span the scope of the investigation.

Neighborhood interviews will be conducted for any residence occupied for more than six months over the past three years. If no residences exceed six months, interviews will be conducted.

Credit and financial history checks will be performed everywhere the subject has lived, worked, or attended school for six months or more within the last seven years.

Local police and law enforcement records are to be reviewed wherever the subject has lived for more than six months, within the scope of the investigation, and at the current residence regardless of length of residency.

All public records- marriages, divorces, civil court appearances, criminal actions, bankruptcy, etc- are to be reviewed and verified.

Immediate family, spouses, or cohabitants may also be investigated.

The results of these investigations are passed to an adjudicator, who makes the final determination.**Security Clearance Red Flags and Mitigating Circumstances**

With such a wide net, some trepidation is understandable. Fortunately, there is a limited range of factors which an investigating agency would consider “red flags” and even these may be softened through an understanding of mitigating circumstances. “The process is designed to identify two things: whether or not you are trustworthy and how you might be compromised,” Bilheimer explained. “The usual suspects include substance abuse and violent behavior, but the one that surprises most people is debt.” Historically, one of the single most successful ways to induce someone to betray their principles is through simple bribery. “Large amounts of debt, legal or otherwise, is probably the single biggest red flag for any clearance. The risk that a malicious actor may compromise the individual via financial gain may be too great.” “If the derogatory information involves contacts with foreign nationals,” Smith added, “the applicant would want to emphasize that their loyalty is to the United States and that their connections with foreign countries or individuals cannot affect the applicant’s susceptibility to blackmail or coercion.” “The biggest concern the government has is the threat of compromise through blackmail,” Bilheimer concluded. “Now matter what your private issue is – drugs, an affair, gambling – you can’t be blackmailed for it if the government already knows about it.” According to Smith, when evaluating risks related to a potential red flag in your record, an adjudicator considers five main mitigating circumstances: elapsed time since the event, your age at the time of misconduct, extenuating circumstances beyond your control, whether the event is part of a pattern of misconduct, and how likely you are to do it again. If in doubt, it’s always best to be honest rather than attempt to dissemble or lie your way past an awkward piece of history. “First, the investigators are good at what they do,” Bilheimer said, “and there is a high likelihood that they will find out the issue, anyway. Second, lying on a security application is, at minimum, grounds for dismissal and possibly grounds for legal action.” Smith agreed. Applicants may claim embarrassment, fear of one’s application being rejected, or a belief that their criminal record being expunged made it acceptable to omit information, but honesty is really the only course. “These excuses,” she said, dryly, “will not result in a favorable adjudication for the applicant.” **Is a Security Clearance Worth the Hassle?**

The short answer is, “yes”. Due to rapidly expanding demand and a limited pool of cleared personnel, employees with security clearances average as much as 25% higher pay than those without

. Even with the infrastructure in place to push through new clearances quickly, many employers find it a competitive disadvantage to higher uncleared personnel. Quoted in the Washington Post in 2006, CSC recruiting director Jim Gattuso explained the wage disparity from an employer’s point of view. “You don’t have time to go to the marketplace and find people who have the technical skills but don’t have clearances, because that takes too long. You get task orders from the government and they want them filled — and fast — so that puts all the contractors under some degree of pressure to get staff quickly. It creates a supply and demand inequity and it means paying a premium.”

The narrow pool of cleared job applicants also means high retention bonuses paid to personnel at or near retirement age, which almost certainly affects national comparison of wages between cleared to uncleared personnel. It is unambiguously clear, regardless, that workers with security clearances often feature among the top ten percent of wage earners in the country. From a job-seeker's perspective, having an existing security clearance is an incredible asset. It demonstrates to employers that you've got the intangibles — lifestyle, personal responsibility, trustworthiness — which make for solid and successful employees, while positioning you to take advantage of growth trends in national security and sensitive industries. If a prospective employee can pass a SSBI to receive a Top Secret clearance, they are unlikely to offer unpleasant surprises.