

Preparation is the Key to a Successful Firefighter Application

Intro

The evolution of America's fire service has seen drastic changes in the past 25 years. These changes apply to service demands, service delivery, and staffing levels. Over this same period, the process to hire and promote firefighters has also seen significant change. We have witnessed a service that has navigated through some extreme changes regarding desirability, position inventory, duty to serve, and financial security. These shifts have altered the way fire departments recruit and hire their personnel. So, anyone wanting to get involved or promoted should also shift their strategies to match the needs and desires of the organization. This is where many first-time applicants fail in their quest to become career firefighters. As a hiring manager in today's fire service, I am constantly shaking my head at the lack of preparation of potential candidates. This business has become highly competitive and fire departments are constantly looking for highly motivated individuals who fit into their system. Potential candidates must take some time to prepare for this endeavor before the closing date of the application process.

Back in time when I was in college and pursuing my start as a career firefighter there was a hodge-podge of services and staffing strategies. There were the large municipal departments with four and five-man staffed units, the small to medium-sized municipalities with various numbers of personnel, and then there were the volunteer departments, which made up most of the fire departments across the country. It seemed, in my area at least, that there was not a national standard for staffing or best practices for responses. It was a system that was solely reliant on the vision of its leader (Chief) and the amount of resources the boards or commissions wanted to put into their fire department. History also shows that older larger and progressive fire departments of times past got their stature due to disaster and the desire to limit future tragedies. This variation of mission and vision also affected services offered as there was not a standard scope of practice. Some departments only offered fire services, some offered technical rescue, some offered basic first aid, while others ran full pre-hospital emergency medical care. The differences in service delivery are still a staple in today's fire service, which is why candidates need to ensure their goals, vision, training, knowledge, and abilities align with the mission of the department they are applying to.

While this posture was common up to the 9/11 era, there were many larger more progressive organizations making great strides to adhere to certification requirements, established staffing models, best practices, etc. The pre-9/11 fire service in America was not defunct, it was just a little behind the times as we know it today. The job of a firefighter was still highly sought-after, but the events of 9/11 and government support afterward propelled our service to a whole new level. The popularity of our job increased, funding to add personnel to meet standards and best practices skyrocketed, availability of specialty training was improved. All these conditions compounded an already competitive field and made securing a firefighter job one of the most difficult in America. Now some may say that as of recent, the desire to serve the government or community has dwindled and these jobs are less competitive. This article does not recognize that assumption because it is the view of this author that even though the overall number of applicants per position may be less, the competitive nature of the process remains. Additionally,

this article does not address the growing retention issues of the fire service, only the entrance and/or promotional processes.

So, what effect has the post-9/11 era had on today's hiring process? It has done quite a few things. First, it has placed a bigger demand on the application and screening process. As an organization receives hundreds or thousands of applications, it cannot thoroughly review every one of them. So, departments are forced to use processes or software that scans applications for certain KSAs or keywords. Second, it has placed an increased focus on matching. Matching a candidate to a job or vice-versus has become a large part of the hiring process. This process investigates all the materials submitted and a decision is made based on those components. There was a time when many would say the interview was the most important part of the process. While that is still true today, one must get to the interview for that to be the case. This is where I believe many applicants can set themselves apart from others, but they often fail due to a lack of preparation.

Art of Preparation

So, what does preparation mean to you? There are many definitions and many schools of thought on this phrase. There are also countless motivational posters, quotes, memes, etc. but it all comes down to what you believe is proper preparation. If I had to sum this up in two sentences, I would have to quote Lewis Caralla, "Lazy people do a little work and think they should be winning. Winners work as hard as possible and still worry if they're being lazy." This is my philosophy because I truly believe that you can never overprepare and there is always a stone left unturned or a topic left unexplored. I know. You are asking how this can be so important at this point in the process. Well, it should be pointed out that at this stage you are competing with not only all the firefighter applicants which could be in the hundreds. You are also competing for review time with all the other job openings the human resources department is processing at the time.

There are several key points you need to observe while completing the application. They may sound simple but trust me they are crucial: follow directions, complete all requirements, adhere to deadlines, properly label all materials, and proofread everything. When I am working on the first-round cuts from an application process the easiest ones to cut are those that are late, incomplete, or did not follow the directions within the packet. Poor grammar or mislabeled documents may not get you cut as fast as the previously mentioned points, but they will play a factor throughout the process especially if a decision comes down to one or more equally qualified candidates. So, if it comes down to selecting a candidate that has a neat well-constructed packet with all the information in a nicely presented manner that is easy to read and digest, versus a poorly constructed packet that makes one wonder if the applicant can complete simple work tasks, which would you choose? I cannot stress enough the importance of following directions and submitting complete work on time. You may be the best candidate for the position, but you will not get the opportunity to showcase your skills because these are the easiest applications to cut.

Motivations

So now that you understand the importance of a thorough application and supporting documents, what do you put in them? This is going to vary for everyone. Why is this different you ask? Everyone has their motivations as to why they want this position and before we get started do not tell me it is because you want to help people, we all want to help people. Helping people is an outcome or result not a motivation or purpose. Many applicants do not take the time to sit back and reflect on why they are pursuing this opportunity. It could be the job, employer, location, benefits, etc. The motivations are endless and unique. The key is finding your motivation and knowing your why.

Understanding why you are seeking this position will set the framework for everything you need to complete during the process. It doesn't always matter what the why is, but it opens you up for a more genuine process. This is what evaluators are looking for. They want an employee that is a good fit for their organization. Additionally, when a candidate is being real with their responses and work, it shows in their demeanor and product. So take the time necessary to reflect on why you want this and then draw from that motivation to develop a packet or response that reveals that passion.

Tailor your information

Now that we know why you want this specific position or want to work for this specific employer, you can start to compile information for a thorough and informative packet. How do you beat the system or the algorithm? Remember that the first review may come from a cursory or computer scan. These types of scans are looking for specific information. This could be certain degrees, experience, certifications, licenses, or even keywords. Every candidate should pay close attention to the information that is presented in their application and supporting documents. This is a vital step that is often overlooked and could cause a great applicant to miss the opportunity to move forward.

You may be asking how we know what information or "keywords" we should be using. The best source for this is going to be the job advertisement and/or job description. If a job ad or description is calling for specific education, experience, certification, license, skill, etc. applicants need to highlight these specifics in their documents. This can be done in their cover letter, resume, application, or any other supporting documents. As noted earlier it is very easy to dismiss an application that is late or incomplete. The second easiest way to dismiss an application is one that does not meet the minimum requirements or desired knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). When completing any material for an application packet make sure you are molding your information to match the job. I am not suggesting that you fabricate information, but you should take note of what is being presented and use that as a framework. Example: as you read the job ad and you review the KSAs associated with the position make sure (if you possess them) you include them in your responses. Make sure you state those KSAs in your resume bullets or your details in the cover letter. Every applicant must be clear in their packet on how they meet the desired KSA and utilizing the job ad or description is the easiest way. Take the information provided and add it to your documents. If a job ad is looking for an inspired, dedicated, and committed individual to join their fire department, then you need to include those attributes in your responses. This can be accomplished by a listed set of skills, or it could be an opening sentence in your cover letter.

Additionally, if the job ad or description lists required licensure or certifications, make sure you list those verbatim as in the ad or description. Failure to list these requirements is also an easy way to discard an applicant. I cannot express the importance here for verbatim responses. Remember that the first review is likely to be completed by a computer program or a human resource tech who may not know the difference between a Firefighter II and Firefighter III certification or the significance of a National Registry Emergency Medical Technician (NREMT) versus a state-level certification, which is what they are asking for. The human resources technician may not know that NREMT will get you a state certification in most states or that Firefighter III is a higher certification than Firefighter II and you probably have Firefighter II if you have Firefighter III. I know this all seems trivial but trust me at this point in the process there is very little time to try and decipher codes, acronyms, or what they think you mean. Remember, you must get past this process to make it to the interview.

Interview

Now that you have made it to the interview you must start preparation for that phase. There are so many resources out there to assist with interview prep - textbooks, how-to books, articles, websites, etc. You name it and you can find it, so why do people continue to struggle? My theory is they are just simply not prepared for this task. Most people cannot go into a panel interview and expect to ace it without some preparation. You must have a strategy and background information that you will use to answer your questions. This is where understanding your why or purpose comes in real handy. It is also where understanding what the employer is looking for as noted above in the job ad or description is very helpful. If you build your responses based on tailored information from your experience that matches the desires of the employer, your interview will be more successful. Along with information presented in the job ad or description, a candidate should also set out to learn as much as they can about the employer. You should seek all the information you can find. Know their history, know their operational model, understand their hierarchy, and reach out to gather data on their operations. If this is a fire department process know their National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) data, census information, growth trends, department makeup, major hazards, etc. Having this information in your memory bank will assist with building great responses to any interview question. The key to interview success is for you to tell your story to connect to the panel. This gives you the best chance of them remembering you when they reconvene to make decisions on who to offer the position to. You want to be memorable!

Practice also helps with understanding what types of questions are typically asked and what evaluators are looking for. This article will touch on a few of the types of questions, but as you are preparing for an interview, you need to understand that most questions in an interview, save from job-specific questions or those of a technical nature typically do not have a right or wrong answer. There are bad, good, and better answers. There are three things you should keep in mind that can keep a good answer from turning bad or turn a good answer into a better one.

1. Fire departments and government entities operate on a strict set of rules and regulations whether they are in law, policy, standard operating procedures, general orders, etc. So, when you are answering a question regarding any type of policy issue, make sure you reflect your answer to policy. If you are not with the agency, you can address this by

stating, “I would review the department’s policy on XYZ and make sure I act accordingly.” If you are going for a promotion, it will be expected that you know the policy, so you state it as it is written.

2. Fire departments have an image that is generally well-received in the community. As you are preparing an answer that may involve potentially tarnishing this image, keep this in mind. You should ensure that your answer protects the image of the department.
3. Firefighters have an image as well and this is built upon a culture of integrity. So, make sure your responses to any question keep this integrity intact.

Doing the right thing is often the hardest thing and while this is difficult sometimes in real life, it should be easy in an interview because it is hypothetical, right? However, many still struggle with this concept in interviews. Candidates get hung up on thinking evaluators are looking for long drawn-out answers, when in reality, many of these questions are simple. Follow policy, protect the organization, and keep your integrity intact. If you keep these concepts in mind while you are in an interview your responses will be better.

Personality-based questions are typically asked to gauge a candidate’s ability to be open, flexible, work with a team, have personal goals, work ethic, creativity, etc. Take your time and respond with real and honest information. Employers are trying to figure out if you are a good fit with their organization. Examples of personality-based questions: Why do you want to be a firefighter? What are you passionate about? Tell your story and make sure they remember your responses after the interview is over.

Situational-based questions are looking for your understanding of the job and are looking into your specific experiences. Make sure you can draw from your various experiences to be able to address the situation. Many people get hung up here because they feel that the experience needs to be from a current employer or fire department. Unless they specifically say where you need to draw this from use whatever experience you need to. It could be a previous job, military deployment, volunteer organization, or even a family issue. Just make sure you address the situation by describing the issue, identifying the tasks that need to be completed, detailing the actions you took, and describing the outcome of the event. A plus here would be if you learned something from this process then share it. Examples of situational-based questions: Tell me about a time your manager wasn’t satisfied with the results of your work. How did you discuss the issues and what did you do differently the next time? Tell me about a time when you were asked to work on a task that you had never done before.

Job-specific questions are the one area that could have right or wrong answers. Not all of them will be categorized in that manner. These questions are trying to determine your depth of knowledge for the specific position. This is the time for the candidate to showcase their skills and capitalize on their credentials to match the position. Do not hold back and highlight everything you believe is relevant and beneficial. This is another situation where understanding what the employer is looking for in a candidate can pay huge dividends. Examples of job-specific questions: What have you done to prepare yourself for this position? What will be the biggest challenge in your transition...? What is your strategy for approaching a structure fire, and what do you believe are the key tactical priorities?

The interview is a very important part of the hiring process for the employer and candidate. It is a two-way street where each party is learning as much about each other as possible in a short amount of time. That being said, the employer has learned a lot about the candidate during the process and now is the time for the candidate to learn about the employer. Do not ever end an interview without at least asking one question of your own. There are several reasons for this as it demonstrates that you also care to see if the employer is a good fit for you. Each candidate should come to an interview prepared with at least three questions even if you only ask one of them. I recommend having multiple questions because if you only bring one, it could get talked about and you shouldn't ask a question that has already been talked about. There are two primary types of questions a candidate can ask, and they should have these prepared and written down before the interview. Cultural questions can spark conversation from the panel. Examples of cultural questions. What is your favorite part of this organization, why do you like working here, why do people stay with this company, and what are the biggest challenges on the horizon for this organization? Role-specific questions provide an opportunity to better understand the expectations, challenges, and opportunities. Examples of role-specific questions. What are your expected accomplishments in the first 30, 60, and 90 days, what does a typical day/week look like for this position, what are some opportunities and challenges for this position in the next six months, how will my performance be measured in the position, what are the next steps in the hiring process. This is the only opportunity you may have to engage the panel in back-and-forth conversations and remember the key is for you to be memorable. Having a productive conversation at the end of the interview is an excellent way to increase your odds of the panel remembering who you are in a stack of similar candidates.

In summary, if you want to succeed in a highly competitive hiring process you must put in extra work and make sure you show your commitment to the process and organization. Build a portfolio of information and study it before the interview so you can recall this information and use it in your responses. This way you don't have to search for answers while the panel is staring at you. It is an intimidating process, but you can make it easier with proper preparation. One last little nugget of advice for anyone who is in the process of looking for a job or maybe working towards promotion in any field. Do not wait for the position to become open before you start preparing for it. Take some time to do some research whether it is a position, field, or employer that you are looking at. Identify what the employer is looking for or any special requirements the position may have and go ahead and start working towards those. Keep a running resume so you don't have to look for information at the last hour. Many qualified candidates omit valuable information because they just forgot about it or maybe it happened a while ago and don't think it is relevant. Having this information readily available will make the process less stressful.

At the end of the process hopefully you are the one, but if not don't get discouraged. Keep learning and keep building those skills. Good luck!

Allen Wilson

A Wilson FDIC Bio

Chief Wilson has over 30 years of fire service experience rising through the ranks of both volunteer and career departments. He has committed himself to higher education, completing three degrees, including the EFO Program, while working full-time and part-time jobs. Chief Wilson contributes to his community through volunteer service opportunities.

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