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15 tips to successfully complete the firefighter job application

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You have been doing your research and looking for fire departments that are accepting applications for firefighter positions. You have found a department that is accepting applications. Here is your chance to get that badge you've been working so hard for. Probably the first impression that fire department will have of you is when you pick up and / or complete that application. **Do not screw up a perfectly good chance (and easy way) at making a positive first impression!**

INTRODUCTION:

Obtaining and completing a job application for the position of firefighter should not be a situation that you take for granted or you do not take seriously. Unfortunately, some people do take it for granted and do not take it seriously. I've heard numerous candidates say "It's just another application," or "It's not that big of a deal," or "I've done numerous ones before, why should this be any different."

First of all, yes it is another application, but obviously something is going right on your end and you have to fill another one out since you haven't got the job yet. Second, yes it is a big deal – it is for the job of your dreams! Lastly, if you're wondering why this application should be any different from the other ones you've completed, go back to the answer for my first quote. It should be different because maybe you are not properly completing the application or are making a not so stellar first impression.

Why do you need to put everything you have into every hiring process you go through? **SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO TAKE ANOTHER TEST!**

MY BASIC JOB APPLICATION TIPS

You've done your research (either reactive or proactive) and you have found an opportunity to take a firefighter examination for a fire department. Pat yourself on the back (not too hard, you still need to make it through the entire process) for getting this far. Remember, this is an opportunity that might only come around once every three to five years (or longer depending on the department's situation). **DON'T WASTE A PERFECTLY GOOD OPPORTUNITY TO DO YOUR BEST!** Here are what I consider to be 15 tips to successfully complete the firefighter job application:

1. When you get an application, always try to get an extra one or two. Why? If you screw up the first one, you have a second one to save the day. I can't count the amount of applications that I started to complete and I made a major mistake in some form or fashion and I would have been dead in the water if I didn't have a spare. Think about this for a second. You are busting your butt, doing everything you can

do be a firefighter (I hope). When do you usually have time to complete the application? Probably late at night or some other non-opportunistic time where you are either tired or rushed for time. Some times, I know that getting a spare application is not feasible, since sometimes the department only hands out a limited number, or every candidate has to sign for each numbered application. You are really only able to get a spare if you are downloading it off of the internet or picking one up in person.

Also, you never know when a buddy might need one (don't make this a regular habit because people will come to expect you to always have one. Think of it as an insurance plan). You do someone else a favor (this is one of those major favors in life) and you never know when you might need them to do a favor such as this for you in the future. There are times when you can't pick up every application in person or you hear of a testing opportunity too late (all of your reactive and proactive methods obviously failed). Remember the old saying, "what you give is what you get."

2. Complete the application either on your computer (if you are able to complete one over the internet) or a typewriter if you have access to one. Only hand-write applications if you have neat handwriting. I know typewriters are getting hard to find, but they can look nicer than handwriting if you have poor handwriting. If using ballpoint pen, use a high quality pen of black ink. Red or blue colors are not good choices because it doesn't copy well (some departments make copies of your application for the oral panel members). Whatever you do, don't use pencil!

One of my first firefighter tests was for the City of Stockton. I remember going to City Hall to pick up an application (yes, I grabbed two) and I saw this man sitting at the table in the personnel office filling out his application. That is not a bad thing in itself. What did not seem appropriate was his using pencil to complete the application. Pencil does not come across as professional, and also allows items to be erased (which can lead to problems later). Also, if you look at many applications, it specifically says "please type or print your application in blue or black ink." He failed the first part of the test, which was properly following directions.

3. Have a copy of the job flyer in front of you. This is important because you want to insure that you are qualified to take the test and that you follow all of the directions they request. It is almost impossible (and impractical) to list every certificate you may have obtained, but if one of those certificates is required or highly desirable, you want to make sure that you list it.
4. Know all of your employment history that will be needed to complete the blanks in advance. How many of you know the exact details of every job you've ever held (salary, supervisors name, complete address, phone number, exact job titles, etc.)? If you don't, scrambling while you are filling out the application to get the information is not a good idea. Now is the time to find that information out.

Don't guess and just put anything or something close in there. That might get you disqualified during a background investigation or make you sound like an idiot when you're explaining to the background investigator "I wasn't sure, so I just estimated." That doesn't sound too professional or intelligent to me. Many job applications ask for information from either every employer you have ever had or for the last ten years.

For some of you, this isn't going to be easy. Planning in advance will save headaches and disappointment in the future. Even if they don't ask for it on the application, you can be assured they will during the background investigation. If you are not sure - don't estimate. Call that previous employer (hopefully you left on a good note) and someone in their personnel department might be able to help. The bottom line is that the information you provide better match up to what the employer will say about you - any discrepancy can lead to disqualification.

5. Know all of your educational history that will be needed to fill in the blanks. Many applications ask for information about each college you have ever attended (such as name and location, semester or quarter units completed, major, degrees received, and dates attended). Dust off those transcripts!
6. Do not leave any blanks! If the information requested does not apply to you, then put N/A on it (as opposed to leaving it blank). It shows you did not skip it.
7. Make sure that you check every box that is asking you information. Many times there are boxes with a yes or a no choice and it can be easy to skip over with out checking one or the other.
8. Make sure you put the exact job title you are competing for on the job application. If you read the job flyer, you will find the exact job title. I know it sounds basic, but I've seen a department test for Firefighter trainee, Firefighter (Lateral), and Firefighter/Paramedic all at the same time. Make sure you get considered for the appropriate position, and not disqualified because you don't meet the requirements of that "other" position.
9. Don't include copies of every certificate you have ever received. If they ask for it, then include it. If they don't ask for them, don't include them. Otherwise, don't waste their time having to dig through non-essential information, while also proving that you cannot follow directions. About the only copies I have ever seen a department ask for during the application phase are EMT, Paramedic, Firefighter 1 academy, and Firefighter 1 certificate. The reason they are asking for those is to weed out the people that have the required certificates from those who don't, and also to get a pool of the "most qualified" candidates. Trust me, if you're lucky enough to get to the background investigation phase, they'll ask you for copies of everything at that point.
10. Be honest. I know that should be an expected trait of every human being, but it is not. One lie or "stretching of the truth" can be enough to either eliminate you from

the process or potentially terminate you from employment after you have received the job (most applications have that little clause in them just before you sign it that says something to that effect). Even if it is not an intentional lie or deception on your part, it can still backfire.

Say for that you list you were employed from June 2000 through July 2002, but it was actually May 2000 through June 2002. I realize you're only off by a month in each direction, but put yourself in the shoes of the background investigator - what are they going to think? Even if you say, "It was a mistake," they are going to raise their eyebrows and wonder what else was just a mistake. Also, by saying it was a mistake; you're making yourself look less than competent. It is your past and your history, if you don't know it, who else should? Don't chance it - it is not worth it!

11. Stay away from using abbreviations except for accepted two-digit State abbreviations (like NY for New York), EMT, and maybe CPR. While you might know what they stand for, don't count on the person reviewing it to.
12. If you put down a pager number, make sure you actually answer it promptly. It amazes me when I page people and it takes them hours to return my page. I realize we're all very busy, but imagine you as the fire chief trying to page that candidate with a job offer. Do you think they are going to wait for you to return the page? How many others do they have to pick from on the list? While I'm on the subject, if you have a voice mail (home or cellular) recording, have you listened to it lately? Does it sound professional and mature?

I love it when I have students wanting fire information leave me a message with their cellular phone number to call them back on. When I return the call, it never fails. Sometimes I get the recording of "Yo, this is T's mobile phone (loud bass thumping in the background) and I'm not available....." Would you want to hire this individual? Another great recording is when you hear a little two year old voice saying that you've reached the home of the Johnson's, Timmy, Margaret, Lisa, Jimmy, Bobbie, Fido, Kittie, etc.

While it might show you are a family oriented person, it doesn't present you in a positive, professional way. I returned a phone call the other day and introduced myself, said that I was from the college fire technology program, and that I was returning their call. He seemed angry that I was bothering him since he replied, "who?" Then of course his tone changed when I repeated myself. Be consistent, polite, and courteous - you never know who is going to be on the other end offering you a job (or thanking you for applying, and advising you to have a nice life).

13. If you list an email address, make sure it is professional and appropriate. How are you going to convince an oral panel that you appreciate and understand diversity when you have an email address that is politically incorrect, sexually suggestive, or downright offensive? Remember who your audience is and that you are trying to convince the oral panel and fire department that you are mature, professional, and of

the highest ethical standards. My suggestion is to have one with a first name (or initial) and last name. That is considered professional and appropriate.

14. Do not fax your application in. Most departments don't allow you to anyway (faxes usually do not come out looking that good). If at all possible, drive it down and turn it in personally. Why? It gives you a chance to talk with the personnel employees and obtain information relating to the process (remember to make a good first impression, leave the Metallica shirt at home or under your jacket). It gives you the chance to see how long it takes to drive there (to make sure you properly plan your timetable for the testing process events. It gives you a chance to tour the city and perform some research, and the opportunity to stop by some fire stations and talk to some firefighters about the process.
15. Last, but not least, make a copy of your application prior to turning it in. It will go into a file for that specific department which should include a copy of the resume you also turned in, and any information that you obtained during your research of the department. Number one this helps when you get called in for that interview many months after you turned it in so you know what you actually put on there (and can show them "look what I have done since then"). Number two; you never know when you might have to take that test again. Since this is a very competitive process, it is not uncommon for someone to have to take the same fire department exam at least once or twice in the years to follow. I took San Jose's test four times over the course of four years. Welcome to reality. Now if you have a file, you can just do "updated research."

SUMMARY:

A properly completed application can be the key to success; an improperly completed application can be a recipe for disaster. Take the time to do it right so you don't have to fill out another firefighter application again!