

A Fellow Student's Road to the Badge

18 months ago I didn't know the difference between a fire engine and a fire truck. Today I have a firefighting job waiting for me. This is the story of how I did it, with what I did to prepare myself, books to buy, web sites to visit, classes to take, and more. This is not meant as a guide to getting the badge. I am by no means an expert in that field. It is simply an outline of what worked for me, and what didn't.

I'll start out with a Top 10 list (slightly expanded beyond that) of things I really feel helped me get that first firefighter job. The order is not meant to be emphasized too much, but numbered more as a reference for me (as I am slightly dyslexic). I will later discuss each point in details.

1. Setting short term and long term goals
2. Lack of TV
3. Chabot Fire Science website
4. Always having a valid CPAT
5. Obtaining an EMT certificate
6. Signing up for automatic notifications when jobs are available
7. Completing a Firefighter-1 Academy
8. Take Fire Science Technology classes
9. Written test prep books
10. Volunteering in the community
11. Working on an ambulance
12. Staying in shape at all times
13. Test everywhere
14. Prepare 100% for each oral interview
15. Pick your friends wisely
16. Get your resume and background information ready now

1 – Setting short term and long term goals

I learned in a previous career that setting goals and holding yourself to them is crucial to being efficient in any endeavor you start. I like to divide it up into “up to 6 months” and “6 months to a year”, and call them short term and long term goals. To help myself remember what I promised myself to do, I post the goals somewhere I will see them daily, such as the bathroom mirror or the kitchen fridge. Make sure your goals are measurable. A short term goal can be “finishing Introduction to Fire Science with an A”, instead of “taking some fire science classes.” A long term goal can be “Obtaining a job with an ambulance company.” I also recommend sharing the list with someone you trust, who is a generally positive person. A lot of people are very negative, and don't believe that something can be done. “Someone else always gets the job” and “there are too many people applying and not enough jobs” are things I've heard over and over again. For a less determined person, such things can get you down. For me it is just more of a challenge. I want to be that other person who gets the job. As my teacher for the “Intro to Fire Science” and my personal mentor, Nicol Juratovac, always said: “Luck is preparation meeting opportunity.” My advice is to create your own luck by planning and executing your plan with determination.

2 – Lack of TV

This might be a strange thing for some, that I would list as one of the first thing I thought of. However, feel that having a TV is a negative draw on people's time, and distracts you from your ultimate goal. It is so easy to sit and watch your favorite shows for an hour a day instead of hitting the books, the web, and making contacts. It is not that I never watch anything at all, but I use it as a reward for myself, once I have accomplished all the goals for the day. In item number 1 above I wrote about short term and long term goals, however, I also have goals for each day. The night before I write down all the things I need to get done the next day. Once that is done I prioritize and reorganize them into the most efficient list possible. You've probably left home many times before without bringing the mail with you when you go to work, or the shopping list for the store. Organizing everything the night before saves you those extra trips, and frees up a lot of extra time in your day. It isn't hard to find an extra 30 minutes to an hour every day by just doing your errands in a better way. Eliminate the TV as well, and you'll have tons of time to dedicate to yourself to improving your future.

3 – Chabot Fire Science website

When I first became interested in becoming a firefighter I remembered a friend of mine tell me about the Chabot Fire Science Program. I didn't even know that I could also get this program at City College of San Francisco. The site www.chabotfire.com has tremendous amounts of information regarding how to become a firefighter. On the very first page there are 3 steps listed that will get you started. The brochure *"So, you want to become a firefighter? 5 guidelines to assist you in becoming a firefighter!"*, by Steve Prziborowski, is what got me going in the right direction. While the classes you take might be different from the order listed in his paper, as you might be going to a different college, the general path and goals are very good. I also called Steve Prziborowski, and he helped me discuss the path that would be best for me, based on my past experience in other fields. He was also the one who directed me to Captain Connors and City College of San Francisco's Fire Science Technology program. All the information on the site is for free. You can even sign up for free newsletters. If you haven't spent hours and hours on this website you are really missing out on a lot of very helpful guidance.

4 – Always having a valid CPAT

CPAT is short for Candidate Physical Ability Test, which is a standardized test, used by a lot of departments in both the US and Canada, as a benchmark for the minimum physical ability required to be a firefighter. The test is not that hard if you have been staying in shape. A lot of departments will require a CPAT and a high school diploma as the only requirements to take their entry level written test. I have seen far too many of my peers miss opportunities for testing because they were either too lazy to take the test, or they had let it expire. If you really want to be a firefighter I have no idea how you can let this happen. Once again, Chabot's site has a ton of information on the subject.

See www.chabotfire.com and look under the FIREFIGHTER HIRING PROCESS link for more info.

5 – Obtaining an EMT certificate

Some departments won't even let you take their entry level written test unless you submit a copy of a valid EMT certificate. Just like the CPAT, this is something you should obtain as soon as possible. I

took mine through a private company, but you can also take it at your community college. For me, I decided to pay more and get it done at a private company, because I could get it done quicker, and I had the funds available. Once you finish your EMT course, you'll be required to obtain a National Registry EMT, which is a standardized test given across the country. Some states use National Registry, while others do not. California now does. Once you pass this test you can call yourself an EMT, and apply to jobs requiring this certificate. You might see both EMT-B and EMT-1. These are the same. EMT-I and EMT-P are more advanced classes. You have to start with the EMT-B or EMT-1.

6 – Signing up for automatic notifications when jobs are available

These days I am receiving emails weekly, telling me what departments are hiring, where and for what position. Don't miss out on a job opportunity because you weren't aware they were testing. I signed up with www.firerecruit.com, but there are other companies as well. See below for the ones I know of.

www.firecareers.com

www.firerecruit.com

www.firehouse.com

7 – Completing a Firefighter-1 Academy

In a Firefighter-1 Academy you go through training that you will later do when you get hired with a fire department. Not only will it make it easier to pass the academy later on, as it will be a lot of review, but it also helps you to be able to better answer the interview question “What have you done to prepare yourself for a career in the fire service?”. I learned so much going through as the 3rd academy class at City College. My teachers were all professionals in the fire industry, and work for fire departments in the local community. Not only did it teach me a lot of hands on skills, but it also provided me with other certificates along the way, such as Confined Space Rescue, S-190 wild land, Vehicle Extrication, and Hazardous Materials – Operational Level certificates, as well as a chance to meet and talk to the people who now are where we one day all want to be. I have taken two tests so far that required me to submit the EMT-B and CPAT, as well as a Hazardous Materials – Operational Level certificate. Chico Fire was one of them. Be respectful, polite, and study hard, and you might just find yourself with some good references for future jobs. If you are a lazy student who does the bare minimum to get by, I am sure the teachers won't have much good to say about you if the chief for their department consults them about your performance.

8 – Take Fire Science Technology classes

As I said in the beginning, when I started out, I didn't know the difference between a fire truck and a fire engine. I signed up for classes at City College of San Francisco, and started with Introduction to Fire Science, taught by Lt. Nicol Juratovac (now Acting Battalion Chief). I learned so much about the fire service and what it was all about within just a few months. I started my previous career without talking to anyone who worked in the field. Once I got to where I thought I wanted to be I quickly realized that it wasn't for me at all. Taking this class by Lt. Juratovac was not only educational, but also motivational. I finally got to meet someone who worked in the field, and she LOVES what she does. Thinking that perhaps this was just a perfect match for this one individual, I decided to talk to more firefighters. I would not make the same mistake again. The more firefighters I spoke with the more sure

I was that this was the right career for me. Not only did the job description fit my ideal job requirements perfectly, but the people I met were all so happy with their jobs. A book I once read said that firefighters are the 2nd most trusted profession by the general public, and the #1 profession where the parents will recommend their kids follow their footsteps. I have no doubt that this is true. There are so many classes to choose from and so many paths your career can go within the fire service. You can take classes from basic fire science to fire investigation, or rescue practices. See the link below for more information of classes currently offered at City College of San Francisco.

<http://www.ccsf.edu/Catalog/Civic/admjcurr.html>

9 – Written test prep books

Every fire job I have seen available so far requires you to first take a written test before you can qualify for an interview. To prepare myself for these tests I purchased a lot of different books. Some were much better than others. The books I obtained were from recommendations on the Chabot Fire's website, as well as a list given out by Orange County, as recommended study material for their upcoming written test.

The first books I purchased were a part of a very complete kit from Don McNea.

http://fireprep.com/fire_school_s_gold_bonus_packa.html

Other favorites are:

Norman Hall's Firefighter Exam Preparation Book

Barron's How to Prepare for the Firefighter Exam

Art Couvillon's FIREFIGHTER PRACTICE WRITTEN EXAMS

Try finding the books on www.half.com or www.amazon.com before you buy them new. It saved me a ton of money.

10 – Volunteering in the community

If you want to be a firefighter, a large part of why you want to do so is probably because you want to serve your community, and be there in the time when the less fortunate needs your help. There is no need to wait with this until you get hired. At all the interviews I went to, without exceptions, they asked me how volunteering had played a role in my life so far, and they wanted me to let them know where I had volunteered. Pay notice to the fact that you should have a mix of fire related and non-fire related volunteering experiences. At one interview they didn't want to hear about any volunteering that involved fire departments in any way. I am sure this is to ensure that you are a well rounded individual. I volunteered for the San Francisco Fire Department's Toy Program, as my only fire related gig, and Big Brothers, Big Sisters as one of the non-fire related ones. A great one that comes to mind is Habitat for Humanity (<http://www.habitat.org/cd/local/>) as you will be able to help the less fortunate in your community, as well as learning about general construction and tools. The fire departments seem to really appreciate construction skills. See Chabot Fire's site below for more info:

www.chabotfire.com - click on the Volunteer link.

11 – Working on an ambulance

In many departments, the medical related calls they go on can be as high as 80% to 90% of the total call volume. A very small portion of the day is spent fighting fires. The people reviewing your application, and sitting on the interview panels are therefore thrilled to hear that you have applied your EMT skills in the field, and that you know what you are getting yourself into. Once I had my EMT-Basic, I took the National Registry test and passed it. Once I received this in the mail I could apply for an Ambulance Drivers License. To obtain one you must have a medical clearance, which your private doctor can do for you, as well as a fingerprint service, provided by Live-Scan, and a County EMT card. This can be a quite confusing process, and takes weeks for some individuals. I had it all done in 1 day by doing it the following way:

- Called my personal doctor and said I needed a medical examination for an ambulance Driver's Certificate. Obtained an appointment at 2pm that same day
- Drove by the DMV and picked up the application for the Medical Clearance for an Ambulance Driver's Certificate, as well as the license application.
- Made copies of my EMT graduation certificate, CPR card National Registry Card
- Scheduled a Live-Scan test in Santa Rosa (<http://www.ameriprints.com/>)
- Called Coastal Valley EMS in Santa Rosa to get an EMT county card. They said to come in at any time with the copies listed above, as well as a proof of the Live-Scan test.
- Took the Live-Scan and obtained proof of the scan
- Drove to Coastal Valley EMS in Santa Rosa, gave them the copies requested, a check for processing, and 5 minutes later I was registered in the county as an EMT. Most counties in California do not require you to be licensed in their county, but in a county.
- Drove back to the bay area for my doctor's appointment. I filled in the application I had earlier picked up from the DMV and gave it to the doctor. The application tells the doctor exactly what they need to test.
- Took the results from the medical evaluation (a green card), the County EMT Card, and the application for the Ambulance Driver's Certificate and gave them to the people at the DMV. They gave me a written test.
- Passed the written test and they gave me a temporary Ambulance Driver's Certificate

To prepare for the test I purchased the Ambulance Driver's Certificate handbook at the DMV a few weeks earlier. Once you have this license you can apply to ambulance companies. I applied to 6 companies that I had either heard about, seen around town, or read about under EMT jobs on www.craigslist.org. I got 2 interviews and got hired with Royal Ambulance in San Leandro. I can honestly say that it is the most fun job I have ever had. Please remember that I am writing this paper before I start the firefighter job, so I hope this statement will later change. When picking where to apply, think about what type of service they provide. Some companies will only do code 1, pre-scheduled transports, while others are the main responders to the 911 calls for code 3 (emergency lights and sirens) calls. Royal Ambulance was a mix of code 1 and code 2 calls (BLS emergencies), which we sometimes had to upgrade to code 3. I can highly recommend this company, and they are hiring continuously.

Below are some ambulance companies in the Bay Area:

AMR - <http://www.amr.net/>

Royal Ambulance - <http://royalambulance.com>

Pro Transport-1 - <http://protransport-1.com>

Nocal Ambulance - <http://www.nocalambulance.com/>

12 – Staying in shape at all times

Exercising and eating right should be a lifestyle choice and not something you do just before a physical test. As firefighters we will be, like professional athletes, payed to work out. The job I ended up getting was a bit of a strange one. At the time of the written test we were told that there would be no oral board. Instead there would be a physical test (not the CPAT) and a Chief's Oral. The best 8 times on the physical test would be invited to the Chief's oral. For those who were not in shape at that point had no chance of getting the job. The CPAT was a requirement to be invited to take the written test, but was not enough to pass the written get the oral interview. Of the 550 who took the written test, 105 of us were well enough prepared to pass the test. Of those 105 who were left, 60 people did not even pass the hard physical test we were required to complete. 2 weeks before the physical test we received a paper in the mail telling us exactly what events would be on the test. I noticed that almost all of it was leg work. I then contacted a friend of mine, Brien Shamp, owner of Optimal Fitness in San Carlos. Brien won the World's Best Personal Trainer Contest by Met-Rx in 2000, and is an expert in nutrition and the effects it will have on your peak performance. He placed me on a special diet for the next 2 weeks, and told me how to work out to win the competition. For the next 2 weeks I followed his advice 100%, both on nutrition and exercise, and took the test the morning of Halloween, 2009. The test was brutal and I threw up three times after it was all over. A week later I got a letter in the mail saying that I had passed the physical test with the #1 time. It got me the interview, which lead to the job offer. Had I been out of shape, overweight or a smoker, there would be no way that I would have been able to fix this in the 2 weeks leading up to the test. My recommendation is to stay in shape and eat right. Not only will you feel better and do better on physical tests, but you will test better on written tests as well.

13 – Test everywhere

Okay, perhaps not everywhere. That would be a good way to go broke really fast. Figure out what areas you would happy working in, for at least the next few years. It doesn't have to be your dream location, however, after I had spoken to enough firefighters, who all said “test everywhere you can”, I started to realize that I should probably follow their advice. I began to think of where I would be happy living and decided that anything from Santa Barbara and north would be ideal for me. I would take tests in LA just for practice, but had no interest in living in the area (personal preference). I tested everywhere from Orange County to Seattle, Washington, and passed every single written test I ever took, except Palo Alto FD's test. It took me a year before I took the first test, since I was busy going to EMT school, directly followed by the FF-1 Academy at CCSF. My first interview was in Bakersfield, and I made the list. My 2nd interview was with Merced Fire Department, where I now have a job. A 3rd interview was scheduled with Chico Fire, but I canceled it as soon as I received the job offer with Merced.

14 – Prepare 100% for each oral interview

The first thing I did to prepare for an oral interview was to purchase *Smoke Your Firefighter Interview CD (Audio CD)* and listened to it until I knew it by heart. I think it definitely helped me get my mind prepared to think in the right way for the “oral interview world.” There might be a difference in the answers in the interview and what happens in real life, and you need to know how to play both games. As an example, I would probably have told my first interview panel that I would tell the firefighter who I caught drinking on the job, to simply take a sick-day and a cab home. This is how this situation has been handled in other jobs I have had before. Had I said this at my interview it would have been an immediate failure. Listen to the CDs, or read the book to find out what you should do.

I knew that if all I did was repeating what was said on the CDs I would sound exactly the same as all the other people who purchased the CDs. I therefore had to find out how to add a bit of myself to the interview. The best site I have found for this and the best books around were made by Captain Bob on his site <http://www.eatstress.com> You might think you know how to answer your oral interview questions, but chances are you are just another clone, who will bore the interview panel to death. Captain Bob helped me customize the interview, with personal stories to draw the panel in.

Once I felt prepared to answer general interview questions, I knew I was ready. However, for each department you have to do research that specific fire department, as well as the city. I downloaded a free software to make flashcards, called CueCards. http://download.cnet.com/CueCard/3000-2051_4-10075304.html - I would then dive into the city's website to find the official info for the fire department, including name of fire chief, division chiefs, battalion chiefs, number of firefighters, engineers, and captains, any and all specs on apparatuses (number of each, types, GPM of each water pump, engine size and make, and more), stations and more. I then found out the name of the local fire union to see if they had a web site, and got any stories and info they had there. Next I went to the city website and got info on the city, including size, population, demographics, name of mayor and city manager, major employers, target hazards, freeways, airports, schools, city history and more. Next I supplemented the information by what else I could find on Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) Lastly I did a search on the name of the Fire Chief. The search would often come up with papers the Chief had been a part of, newspaper articles, and personal history of the fire chief. As *Smoke Your Firefighter Interview* says, the Chief is more likely to pick you for the job if you have things in common. The board is looking for someone who they would want to live with for 48 hours at the time, for the next 30 years. Even based on the city demographics you might be able to think of a thing or two that the people there might be into. If you apply to San Diego Fire Department, and you had an interview, saying that you enjoy skiing every weekend might not be as effective as if you said the same in Denver, CO, where the Chief was an old downhill ski competitor.

15 – Pick your friends wisely

We have all done things that, if we lived in a fair world, would prevent us from ever getting a firefighting job. Luckily most of us didn't get caught and for that we must thank our lucky stars. However, we all have to grow up, and quickly. If you haven't already, make today the last day you do things that can get you in trouble with the law or people in general. For me this meant not associating with certain people who always got in trouble, one way or another. Some people seem to always get into fight, or always drink too much, or do drugs on a daily basis. It would be very hard to explain to an

interview board how all those things are in your past, and you don't do it anymore, when you just got arrested last month for a bar fight. Nicol told us in one of the first classes of Intro to Fire Science: "Don't be the person who drinks the most and smokes all the time. Get in shape and stay out of trouble."

16 – Get your resume and background information ready now

Most times I submitted my application for a firefighter job they would also ask me if I could attach a resume. It has therefore been important to keep a resume updated and looking professional. I started making my resume within a few weeks of starting on down the firefighter career path, after reading two articles on Chabot Fire's website – www.chabotfire.com - click on the links Must Read FREE Handouts and Firefighter Hiring Process called "15 ways to create a better resume" and "Basic information that should be on your resume." There are also two sample resumes on the site. I made my resume a combination of the two, and applied what I had learned in the two articles.

To get ready for the background package I once again went to Chabot Fire's site. They have great recommendations for how to be ready once you pass the oral interview process and pass on to the background. See www.chabotfire.com - click on the Firefighter Hiring Process and also Must Read FREE Handouts for more info. I called all my old jobs and got a list together of hiring dates and when I quit, as well as the address of the jobs, names of supervisors, and phone numbers for the background investigators to contact. I moved around quite a bit during my college years, so it took me a long time to track down all the addresses. However, once I got the call from Chief to complete a background package, I was ready for it. You only have a limited time to send it in, so that is no time to start the process from scratch.

So that is it. Those are the steps I took, and it worked for me. I hope this document has helped you get an idea of one way the job can be obtained. It is possible, and you can do it. It took determination, sacrifice, selfishness, preparation and an opportunity. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely, your fellow student,

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