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Better Understanding the Firefighter Job Flyer

By Steve Prziborowski

Have you ever read a firefighter job flyer and wondered what certain items meant and how (or if) they actually applied to you? If you have, you are probably not alone. The real key is what you have done to educate yourself about all of the portions of a firefighter testing process, the actual job description of a firefighter (for that specific department), and the wage and benefit packages that are being advertised for the specific position you are applying for.

INTRODUCTION

When I turned in my first firefighter application, I really didn't spend a great deal of time evaluating the job flyer. About the only things I looked at were the minimum requirements (to make sure I was able to take the test), and the final filing date (to insure that I got the application in on time to be considered). It didn't take me long to realize that there was a great deal of valuable information to be found on the job flyer. Information that could actually assist me in preparing for the department's testing process (including the oral interview), as well as educating me in how fire departments differ from each other based on their makeup, demographics, wage and benefit packages, and testing processes.

BETTER UNDERSTANDING THE FIREFIGHTER JOB FLYER

What type of information does the job flyer contain and why is it important to you, the firefighter candidate that is aspiring to work for that department? Here are some of the main points to a job flyer and why you should pay attention to them:

Job Title: This is the exact title that the agency is recruiting for. This exact title should go in the objective portion of your resume (the first heading underneath your personal contact information (name, address, and phone number). This title will also be required for the application. Make sure you are familiar with that job title. Countless candidates come by the fire station and say they are testing for the firefighter position. Well, our entry-level position is actually Firefighter / Engineer (each company has at least two Firefighter / Engineers who rotate driving and riding backwards), not Firefighter. By calling the position by the wrong name shows me that you have not done your homework.

Overview of the position / job description: Make sure you know what the basic duties of the position are so you know what you are getting into and will be expected to do. If you are asked the question "Tell us about the duties of a firefighter for this agency," you can quote information from the job flyer (hopefully you also did more research such as stopping by fire stations and talking with the firefighters, visiting the web site, etc.). For

those of you that are Paramedics, here is an important section. Many departments that provide ambulance service to their community expect the newly hired firefighters to work on the ambulance or keep their paramedic license for so many years. This is the section that might explain any such duties or expectations. Don't wait until after your hired to say, "Nobody ever told me I was going to have to spend the majority of my time working on the box (ambulance)."

NOTE: I would always attempt to get a full job description for every position I was testing for. Many times, the job flyer only has an abbreviated version. Go to the Personnel / Human Resource office and ask them for a copy of the full job description. They are expected to have job descriptions for *EVERY* position in *EVERY* department, from the top to the bottom.

Overview of the department / community: Many job flyers include basic information about the fire department and the communities served. Here is the start to your research that you can build upon. Many oral panels ask the question "Tell us what you know about the fire department and/or the community." Well, here is your starting point.

Minimum Qualifications (to take the test or remain employed after getting a job): These items can vary from department to department. Some departments only require a candidate to be 18 years old and have a high school diploma or G.E.D. Others may require a candidate to be at least 21 years old, be a paramedic with at least two years of paramedic experience, and also have a state firefighter 1 certificate.

KEY POINT #1 - Make sure you meet the minimum requirements or your application will usually be rejected. If you don't meet the minimum requirements, take note of what you do need to take that test in the future. Those are things you should be striving to obtain!

KEY POINT #2 - If there are minimum qualifications to take the test, does the application state that you are to provide a copies of those qualifications with your application? If so, follow those directions or your application may be rejected. I've heard too many candidates say they were rejected because they didn't include a copy of a certain certificate. Don't let yourself fall into the same trap - set yourself up for success by reading the job flyer and highlighting things such as what copies need to be included with the application.

Final Filing Date: This is probably one of the most important things to note. Highlight this date and time. I've heard too many candidates say "I thought they were still accepting applications" after the filing period had ended. Note this date and put it in your calendar. You should actually turn that application in a.s.a.p. Some departments (like the one I work for), actually use the date that the application was filed as a tie-breaker in case of a tie score on the hiring list. Why sit on it and take that chance? Also, some departments only pass out a certain amount of applications and accept a certain number back. I've seen filing dates as saying "Friday February 20 (or until 500 applications have been received - whichever comes first.)."

Application Filing Location: Some departments allow you to mail in your application, while some say you can drop them off in person at a certain location, on a certain date, and/or during a certain time frame. Some departments also only allow the person putting in the application to turn in the application. So before you have your friend or loved one drop it off (and have to face the rejection), read the fine print and follow the directions. I would always suggest going in person because then you know it was received.

Wages and Benefits: You are usually not in the position to pick and choose between fire departments. If you are not already a full-time firefighter, there is virtually no reason why you shouldn't be taking every test you qualify for and then accept that first job offer. However, you still need to be aware of the wage and benefit differences between departments. Some of the wage and benefit issues you should be aware of are as follows:

- ***Salary*** - I can't think of anyone that becomes a firefighter to get rich. Don't get me wrong, I believe I am well compensated for the work I do, and it allows me to lead a comfortable life. Regardless, you need to be aware of salary issues. Every now and then I hear candidates say that they wouldn't work for a certain department because they don't pay that well. If you don't have a job, are you really in a position to say that? I don't think so. Also, why are you becoming a firefighter - because you really want to do the job, or because you want to make great money? I know many firefighters that work at great departments for less money than they could make at not-so-great departments. To them, a great department might mean a high call volume or high fire volume.

Salaries can be deceiving. Many departments start out their recruits at a little over minimum wage. One person told me they wouldn't work for this one big city because they only paid \$2000 per month, and they couldn't afford that. I then asked if they had read the job flyer or done any homework. They said no. I told them to not believe everything they read. Yes, that department only pays you \$2000 per month during the four-month recruit academy (many departments pay a lower wage during the academy because you really haven't proven yourself yet and because they can). Upon completion of the academy, that department then bumps you up to the range of \$5000 per month (step 1 firefighter), and then once a year from that date you complete the academy, you are eligible to receive "step" raises to a top firefighter salary of around \$7000 per month.

If you're not familiar with the term "step raise," it is a civil service term that most (if not all) fire departments use. Most departments have anywhere from five to seven steps. So, day one on the job (usually after the academy), you start at step 1, one year later you're at step 2, two years later at step 3, then finally four years later, you max out at fifth step. From there, the only way to get raises are to promote or if there are annual cost-of-living wages. Hopefully you see how that \$2000 per month turns into \$7000 per month within five or so years. Don't be deceived by what might just be academy pay or first year pay. If you are that concerned about salary, look at how much you top out and how long it takes you to get there.

- **Specialty pay:** In addition to the base salary, many departments pay extra money for any degrees you might possess (2 year, 4 year), certificates you might possess (EMT, Paramedic, Haz Mat Technician / Specialist), second languages you might speak, and so on. This extra pay can be up to 40% extra, on top of your salary. Do the math, it can truly add up. If the top step is only \$5000, and you add 40% to that, you get an extra \$2000 per month. Some departments pay a lower base salary (with a number of ways to receive specialty pay), while others pay a higher base salary (with very few ways to earn specialty pay). Either way, when you make a comparison, make sure you are comparing apples to apples.
- **Vacation leave:** All departments offer some form of paid vacation. Usually anywhere from a few shifts up to 15 or so shifts per year, depending on length of service.
- **Sick leave:** All departments offer some form of sick leave. Not that you should be planning on sick during your probationary year, you should be aware of the length of time available to you in case of illness or injury.
- **Holidays:** As a firefighter, you're going to work holidays. While you usually don't get overtime for working holidays, you do usually receive some form of compensation such as extra time off or additional pay throughout the year.
- **Tuition reimbursement:** Many departments offer a form of program so you can attend training classes or complete your degree and receive all or partial reimbursement.
- **Medical Plans:** Most fire departments pay for an employee and their immediate family to be covered by medical insurance. Know the different plans available to you. Some bay area cities don't actually pay for an employee's medical insurance. Instead they provide a higher base wage and deduct a certain dollar amount every paycheck based on the plan you choose. Why is this beneficial? Because if you have a spouse that has a better plan, then you might be able to get on their plan, and have that money you would have used, go towards your salary!
- **Retirement Plans:** Most fire departments do not participate in social security. Instead, they usually either offer a state or city administered retirement plan that allows you to retire after so many years of service, and receive a certain amount of money based on your total number of years of service. Many fire departments pay your retirement contribution, while others actually deduct the amount from your paycheck. Before you think that is bad, think again. The department I work for deducts my retirement contribution every check. To offset that payment, we are paid a slightly higher base wage than other similar local departments that have their department pay the retirement contribution. It allows me to retire out at a higher rate than if the department paid my retirement contribution. This is the same concept as if I paid my own medical benefits (as mentioned above).

NOTE: The main thing to be concerned about regarding retirement plans is if you plan to leave a department for another. Make sure that other department has the same plan, because if it does not, you may not be able to transfer that service credit (and thus, work more years before you can retire in the new system). This is especially critical if you plan to move out of state, because there might not be any reciprocity. If you're planning on moving out of state, it is probably best to do it when you have very little time on the job (and won't be out too much if you lost anything) as opposed to when you are half-way through your career.

Testing Process: Most job flyers give you an idea of what the testing process will consist of. Sometimes tentative dates are listed as well, so that you can plan ahead and make sure you are available (or do not plan anything else on that day, or plan to get the day off if needed). **KEY POINT** - Do not believe everything you read. Almost anything can (and will happen).

I've heard candidates say that they didn't take a certain test because they were going to be out of town, or had some type of conflict with the tentative dates that were listed on the flyer. That is ridiculous. Are you 100% positive that they will keep that date? NO! Take the time to complete the application anyway. You might get lucky by them changing the date for some reason. If the dates then stay true to what was printed, then so be it. All you are really out is the time it took to fill out the application and the effort you made to get it. I would rather take that chance than miss out on a job opportunity because I believed what I read or what I heard.

Typical testing process components include:

- *Application review*
- *Written Test*
- *Oral Interview*
- *Physical Ability Test*
- *Chief's Oral Interview*
- *Background Investigation*
- *Medical Examination*
- *Psychological Evaluation*
- *Polygraph Examination*

NOTE: Testing process components can vary from department to department. I will cover typical testing components in a future article.

SUMMARY

The firefighter job flyer should not be looked at as an unimportant or useless batch of information. Take the time to read the ENTIRE job flyer and you can only benefit from the knowledge you obtain while doing so. Knowledge is power, and you never know when you might need to use it or show that you have it! Proper planning and preparation can only lead to one thing - success!