

January 2005

This is a reprint of an email that I wrote in October of 2000. It is a reply to a message posted on an Internet fire service message area by a high school student. The message to which I replied is shown at the end of my message. I've shared this information many times in my career. I hope this information is still beneficial to men and women who seek careers as firefighters.

I would be happy to correspond with anyone about this message or discuss the steps that can be taken to help you prepare for a fire service career. My email address is shown below.

**Phil Johnston
phil@fireFAQs.com**

From: Phil Johnston
Subject: Firefighting Career
Date: Tue, 31 Oct 2000 21:07

Joe:

This is a lengthy reply to your question about how you can prepare for a fire service career. Ordinarily, I reply by email and don't say much on this list. However, I know that other prospective firefighters lurk about this list. Perhaps my comments can help one or two of them. I've shared these comments with other folks in one form or another for many years.

First, let me say that I have no disagreement with the advice you've been given about pursuing a college education. You've received good advice in the replies that I've seen so far. In addition to a college education, though, there are some other things to consider in terms of a "life education" and various forms of vocational education.

Where Do You Want to Live?

The first thing I suggest you think about is where do you want to live. Once you've examined that aspect of your life, then look at the fire service employment options in the vicinity of where you want to live. I've never lived in an area that I didn't like, but I suspect that everyone doesn't feel that way. Consequently, find a place you will like in terms of the community in which you want to live. During the first several years of your career, you will most likely work "shift work" and will be "off duty" about two thirds of the time. Therefore, you need to reside in an area that is compatible with your personal preferences. Years ago, I met some fellows who told me they didn't care where they lived as long as they were firefighters. I've lost touch with them, but I figured they wouldn't be too happy after the initial excitement of being a firefighter wore off. We all need to be balanced, and there is more to life than simply where we work.

Visit With Folks Already On the Job

When I visit with prospective firefighters, I advise them to visit the firefighters in the department in which they contemplate seeking employment. Not everyone I counsel wants to work where I do. Some are young people visiting our city. Others are college or university students who will return “home” when they complete their education. I also suggest that each prospective firefighter contact the fire chief or training officer for that same department if the prospect is encouraged by what he heard when he visited with the firefighters. Some fire chiefs and training officers won’t or can’t take time to visit with prospective firefighters, but I always encourage prospective firefighters to make the effort to set up the meeting. As a fire chief, I always enjoy speaking with prospective firefighters. You should make contacts locally for starters and see what results.

Career Preparation Include Many Options and Varies from Person to Person

Fire departments are always looking for dependable, intelligent, responsible, trustworthy, enthusiastic and personable employees. So does just about every other credible employer.

While a college degree won’t hurt anyone, simply possessing one doesn’t help me determine if a prospective firefighter is dependable, intelligent, enthusiastic or personable. Personally, I would rather hire someone who could be described in this manner rather than someone who had the degree but wasn’t balanced. The attributes I just listed can be demonstrated most easily by the way you handle your time between high school and where you seek employment as a firefighter. Most of us have to work to support ourselves, and you - as a high school student - may not realize how important it is that you take your part-time jobs seriously and begin developing a satisfactory employment record well before the day comes when you want to become a paid firefighter.

To my knowledge, I don’t recall ever hiring a firefighter who never worked somewhere else before becoming a firefighter. Therefore, it is important that everyone I consider for employment demonstrate a good work history. It doesn’t matter to me if a prospective firefighter worked part-time making pizza or boxing groceries at the local supermarket. What matters are characteristics like showing up for work on schedule, possessing a good attitude, approaching the job in a manner which demonstrated concern for customers as well as co-workers, accepted responsibility, and learning quickly. What better way to demonstrate these characteristics to a fire chief than having done so in each and every job you have between now and when you land that position you are seeking?

We can teach probationary firefighters how to do their jobs, but we can’t teach them to be dependable, intelligent, responsible, trustworthy, enthusiastic, and personable.

Not everyone who wants to be a firefighter can attend college and complete a degree between high school and when the tests can be taken for the first time. Likewise, some people decide to change careers and may be working two jobs, changing diapers, or fulfilling other responsibilities which preclude their attending college before they become firefighters.

Specific Things to Do Now

Almost every prospective firefighter asks me the same question: what can I do to prepare for a career as a firefighter. My answers to them usually include the following:

- a. Read the *Reader's Digest* regularly. Read other publications regularly. Most entrance exams with which I'm familiar test extensively for reading comprehension. Obviously, there won't (or shouldn't) be any questions on the test which are taken from the Reader's Digest. However, I've found that lack of reading skills - particularly the inability to understand what one reads - will inhibit a firefighter to the point that he/she may have difficulty studying for promotional exams even if he/she is able to be hired initially. While it is great to remain a firefighter if that is what one wants to do, it is prudent to improve your reading skills if you are lacking in this area.
- b. Join a volunteer fire department, become a Red Cross volunteer, or find some other way to gain experience working with others. Not only will you gain valuable experience that may correlate to being a firefighter, you will be able to learn how to work with others, how to take direction, and how to be seen as a team player.
- c. Take a CPR course, attend a First Responder course, or become an EMT. A lot of what the fire service does is medical related. If the thought of helping people with medical problems turns you off, you need to overcome it or find another career. Two thirds of most fire department responses in most areas probably are medical related. If you mix with other students and instructors in these classes, you will gain a lot of insight during class as well as during breaks.
- d. Meet 3-5 firefighters who have joined the service in the last two years. Ask them about the testing processes used to pick them. They ought to be able to give you some valuable insight. A recently employed firefighter will be able to answer many more of your questions - if you ask the right questions.
- e. Visit the fire stations/departments nearest to your home, several times, over the course of a few months. No one ever scored points with me during a pre-employment interview when I asked about their last two or three visits to a fire station - and the candidate said, "I've never visited one" or something similar to that. How really can someone convince a fire chief (or manager of any business, for that matter) that he/she wants a job in a place the applicant has never visited?
- f. Read *Fire Engineering*, *Firehouse*, or other suitable fire service publication. If you want to learn about a profession, read the trade journals. Learn the lingo, see the tools and equipment of the trade, read the classified ads in the back which list the qualifications of the jobs advertised in the various issues. Few departments seek firefighters through these publications, but many fire administrative positions are announced in classified ads in fire service publications.

- g. Cut out newspaper clippings with any references to any fire service or fire department activities. Read them. Decide if you still want to pursue a career in the fire service.
- h. Contact the employment office, personnel office or human resources department - the office/agency that distributes job announcements for firefighter positions where you would like to work - and review the document(s). Ask also for a copy of the job description as well as a position description as these documents will tell you about the knowledge, skills, and abilities required of the people who fill the position of firefighter as well as help you understand the duties, form of supervision, and other requirements of the position. An increasing number of cities are requiring prospective firefighters to complete Firefighter I and Firefighter II courses before even testing for a position. Some cities also require that applicants be Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs). Some fire departments require other forms of education, but most don't yet require college credits for firefighter positions. There are always exceptions to what I'm sharing with you, but you can find out what is required by obtaining the job announcement, job description, and position description documents.
- i. Consider a tour in the military as a way of bridging the gap between high school and a fire service career. My son tried college right out of high school. He didn't like it even though he had a full scholarship based on grades and test scores. He didn't know what he wanted to do. Most of the people who ask me about becoming a firefighter probably believe they really want to be firefighters, but some don't. I can tell that after visiting with them for a half hour. My son worked for a year or so after he dropped out of college. He then joined the Army. He is really enjoying the challenges of Army life, and new opportunities are opening up for him almost weekly. When he enlisted, he received a healthy enlistment bonus and a written guarantee of \$40,000 for college expenses when he completed his first four-year enlistment. At this point, he wants to make a career out of the Army. However, if he changes his mind, he can separate from the military and find himself better prepared for the future due to the increased personal maturity, the leadership experiences gained during his Army enlistment, the knowledge that he can work as a team player, and whatever other benefits which result from his military experiences.
- j. Seasonal firefighting positions exist within National Forests and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Many seasonal firefighters are college or university students. Some are even teachers. Being a seasonal firefighter is a good way to save money in the summer to help pay for college expenses during the school year. Plus, it helps prospective career firefighters acquire new skills, work in a team environment, and develop a base of experience that will remain for years to come.

There is No “One Size Fits All” Answer

Ask other people what they would suggest - just like you did when you inquired on this news group. When I began my fire service career, I was willing to listen to anyone who would make a suggestion. Some of the things I've told you in this message were what I heard when I started my career. In the early 1960's, few firefighters I knew were thinking about going to college. Fire science courses were scarce then. Many of us served in the military before or during our firefighting days. For those who were drafted, their jobs were saved until they returned from military service. With very few exceptions, the men who were fit enough to be firefighters were fit enough to serve in the military. Uncle Sam's G.I. Bill program helped many firefighters pursue college course work after military duty was completed. Although some of my colleagues took classes as much for the money they received as for the educational value, those who took fire science and business administration courses seem to be helped on promotional exams. Hopefully, they were helped in their jobs as well.

When I was a rookie firefighter, I was willing to listen to other peoples' suggestions as to what I should do. Few back then said, "go to college" because they hadn't seen firefighters with a college education. Today, one really cannot expect to advance to the top without a bachelor's degree or a master's degree in some fire departments. However, you don't have to have the degree in order to become a firefighter in most instances.

You can, if you so choose, pursue college courses while you are a firefighter. While it may be easier for you - in the 11th grade - to plan for college and then a career in the fire service, there are prospective firefighters who are already raising a family or working two jobs that simply cannot find the time now to take college courses to prepare themselves for a career change to that of a firefighter. Accordingly, I tell those folks to seek the college training after they've landed the firefighting job.

Well, Joe, I think this is enough for now. Best wishes as your consider your options. You are wise to be contemplating your career while you are still in high school. This is a great time to consider a fire service career.

Best regards.

Phil Johnston

JD37 wrote:

- > Hello,
- > I decided to post this message to obtain some info on the process to
- > become a professional firefighter. It is my 11th grade year and I'm near
- > the time to make a decision on what to do. I was wondering if I should go
- > to a school to get a fire science degree if thats what I need? I also saw
- > that the minimum age is 19 in some of the paid/vollie combo counties. If
- > you have any advice feel free to post it. Thanks a lot!
- >
- > Joe