



So, you want to be a firefighter...

Modern fire departments are charged with handling a broad spectrum of emergencies. As a result, firefighters must be better educated and more skilled than ever. Although the work is hard and the risk of injury is high, the excellent pay and benefits offered firefighters ensures that there is plenty of competition for jobs. When seeking new employees, Fire Chiefs look for the best candidates possible and will hire the most mature, educated and experienced people they can find. Young persons interested in a fire service career must recognize that they cannot compete effectively for jobs unless they have spent a few years getting prepared educationally, mentally and physically for the challenges of being a firefighter.

The competition is getting older and more educated

Gone are the days when an 18 year-old high school graduate could go take a Community College Fire Academy and an EMT class and expect to get hired full-time by the fire department. The Cadets in a recent Fire Academy at Porterville College were very reflective of the trend that competitors for entry-level fire service jobs are older and better educated than they were just a few years ago:

- Several Cadets in the class already had Bachelor degrees (in a variety of subjects)
- About half of the other Cadets already had Associate degrees (in a variety of subjects)
- More than half of the Cadets were over 25 years of age
- 95% were Emergency Medical Technicians, (and a few were Paramedics)
- About one-third of the Cadets were already Reserve, Volunteer or Seasonal Firefighters
- Only two Cadets were 18 years old and fresh out of high school!

Our purpose in sharing this information is to point out that an 18 or 19 year-old high school graduate, who has just taken an EMT class and the Fire Academy, is no longer a viable contender for a full time fire service job. Moreover, regardless of age, candidates with no College education, no fire service experience and no fire service training classes beyond EMT and the Fire Academy, are rapidly becoming a minority. The better candidates are older, more experienced and better educated.

About Fire Department “Minimum Qualifications”

Unfortunately, many potential fire fighters fail to recognize that job announcements for most entry-level firefighter positions do not reflect the qualifications and education that winning candidates will typically have. Fire Department job announcements merely state the MINIMUM qualifications individuals must possess in order to “APPLY” for a job, and this can be very misleading. Such announcements imply that it is easy to get a job if one just meets some generic minimums such as these:

- At least 18 years old (many say 21)
- A high school diploma or G.E.D.
- A valid drivers license
- EMT-I (many now say Paramedic)
- A Firefighter I certificate or completion of a Fire Academy

For every job opening there are hundreds of candidates in the hiring pool who meet the minimums, and hundreds more with BETTER qualifications. Those who want jobs must stand out from the rest of the candidates. Too often, potential firefighters look at job announcements and set their sights on obtaining just the minimum qualifications, not understanding that very few people with just these minimum qualifications ever get hired. It is not until two or three years later, when they still can't land a job with the fire department, that they finally realize that over the preceding years they should have done more than just attend an EMT class and a Fire Academy.

Who would YOU hire?

Put yourself behind the Fire Chief's desk for a moment. You are going to hire three new firefighters and have to pick from the seven candidates below. Which three would YOU choose?

1. Age 19, and meets the minimum qualifications listed above. No other education/experience.
2. Age 20, same as Age 19 above, plus has about 30 college units, including some Fire Tech Classes. Works full-time during the day, and attends college at night.
3. Age 22, same as Age 20 above, but has an Associate degree plus two years experience as a reserve or seasonal firefighter, and has taken some State Fire Training classes.
4. Age 23, meets minimum qualifications, plus has a Bachelor degree. Has no fire experience or training, but has worked a variety of jobs while attending college.
5. Age 24, same as Age 23, but 2 years reserve or seasonal firefighter experience.
6. Age 25, same as Age 24, but also has one year with an ambulance company.
7. Age 26, Bachelor's degree, Paramedic, 4 years fire reserve, 2 years ambulance.

Qualifications will not be the only factors weighed in selecting a candidate from this list. How well the person presents, and how well they answer the interview questions will also be considered heavily. But odds are those who are older will have experience in sitting through a fire department interview and will better answer the questions, know how to dress and speak, and will therefore be more competitive. Ask yourself: "Where would I fit on the candidate list above?"

Fire Chiefs are looking for mature employees who have a proven stable job history, life experience, and have demonstrated a willingness and ability to learn by going to school. There are obviously exceptions to this, but this is the trend today in the fire service.

Good Qualifications/Experience = Good Pay/Benefits

Competition for good jobs is fierce, but there are still opportunities for those with just minimum qualifications to get hired at small departments, with low pay, poor benefits and few chances for advancement. Not many people want these jobs, and of those who take them generally don't stay long before they are back out looking for another, better, position.

Those lacking college units or degrees also do not qualify for the extra pay, called an "Educational Incentive", that many fire departments now offer employees who have advanced educations.

Younger versus Older

The path a given individual takes to attain a fire service job depends a lot on the persons age, education, current job status, family obligations, financial ability and other factors.

Younger or Older, the Fire Academy can be taken anytime. It should not be the first priority. An Academy is much easier to survive when a student has been attending other classes regularly, has taken an EMT class, and has experience as a reserve or volunteer firefighter. Fire department affiliation also eliminates the need to rent personal protective equipment, and gives the Academy Cadet a place to go for mentoring and assistance with homework and hands-on skills practice.

Younger persons, particularly those just out of high school, likely won't be very competitive for fulltime firefighter positions until they are at least 21 years old as more departments are adopting age 21 as a minimum. People in this group should focus on getting College degrees, while working part time to build a job history and getting experience as a reserve or volunteer firefighter.

Older students should also be striving to advance their educations and get some fire service experience. No one impresses a Fire Chief in an interview better than the older applicant who, in pursuit of a career change, made the commitment to return to school and get a degree, attended EMT and a Fire Academy, and did so while serving as a reserve or volunteer firefighter.

About Degree choices – Look ahead

If you do not have an Associate degree, meet with a College counselor and get a plan put together. If you have an Associate degree, look at pursuing a Bachelor degree.

Porterville College does not offer a Fire Technology degree, but that is not important. An Associate degree (AA/AS) in any subject will give you a huge leg up in pursuing a fire service career. Associate degrees in Business Administration or Public Administration are good stepping stones to Bachelor degrees. And those with Bachelor degrees, particularly in Business or Public Administration, make excellent candidates for promotion to Chief Officer and other Management or Administration positions later in life in the fire department. Many fire departments, in fact, now require a Bachelor degree for promotion to, or above, the rank of Battalion Chief. Some even require it to promote to Captain. This is the wave of the future in the fire service.

Get some Reserve, Volunteer or “Sleeper” experience

Everyone seeking a fire service job should attempt to get on as a reserve, volunteer or “sleeper” firefighter someplace. Most fire departments have such programs. These positions allow an opportunity to gain excellent training and valuable experience that will pay great dividends in a fire service job interview. It also allows the fire department to see you in action and, provided you do a good job, may open doors to promotion to full-time status, or provide opportunities for your supervisors to make recommendations about you to others, etc.

Consider a Seasonal Firefighter job – but be ready to quit!

Cal Fire and the U.S. Forest Service are just two of the many Wildland fire agencies that hire seasonal firefighters. Taking the Basic Interagency Wildland Firefighter Academy at Porterville College will allow you to meet the minimum qualifications for these type positions. Working as a seasonal firefighter for PART of the summer is an excellent way to gain experience, and to make money for school. BUT... I want to stress the words “PART of the summer”!

Working beyond the start of the new school year in late August can result in the loss of an entire semester of educational opportunity. It can delay the completion of your degree, AND therefore your ability to compete for a good job, by six months! This could be a huge mistake.

If you are working on a degree you must be prepared to quit in the middle of fire season to return to school. This is far more important than the extra couple of months of experience (or pay) that will be gained by NOT going back to school. In the end, a degree will buy more than a few of months of experience. Better chances for promotion later, and that extra “educational incentive” pay that a degree might bring (EVERY month, for an entire career) will equate to far more money than a few extra months of seasonal firefighter pay one summer.

Look for other training opportunities

The California State Fire Marshal’s Office, Community Colleges, Fire Departments and Fire Training Associations are just some of the places that host free or low-cost training courses.

Seek Financial Assistance

Contact the **Porterville College Financial Aid Office at 559-791-2301**. You may be qualified to get student loans to cover educational costs for all of your classes, including the Fire Academy. If they can’t help you, they may be able to direct you to someone who can.

With a little planning and preparation, it may be appropriate and possible to attend the Fire Academy next year, and have it paid for.

The Bottom Line – Get Started!

If you are serious about getting a fire service job, you need an education and experience. The longer you wait... the more time others will have to get better qualified to compete against you!

*For additional information about the Porterville College Fire Technology program
visit us on the web at www.portervillecollege.edu/fire_tech*