

FIREFIGHTER JOBS: FIREFIGHTER JOB DESCRIPTION

"We try to save things and protect people," said one New York City firefighter. Though we try not to editorialize, this is one of the nobler professions you can enter. A firefighter protects people, their property, and their goods against destruction or damage due to fire. The successful firefighter is an approachable, good communicator with the ability to take decisive action under trying circumstances. Firefighters must be able to perform strenuous physical tasks, such as carrying unconscious people down flights of stairs, directing the flow of a hose that carries 2,000 gallons of water per minute, or breaking down doors locked from the inside. The profession is very dangerous. Over one in four firefighters have to take time off for work-related injuries, ranging from slipped disks to disfiguring burns. You must have a strong sense of public service, commitment, and desire to become a firefighter.

Firehouses are manned around the clock. Firefighters must be able to deal with brief bursts of intense activity, then long periods of "crushing boredom." "Get good at solitaire," wrote one, alluding to the amount of downtime he faces. The firemen who responded to our survey were unanimous in their estimation of their colleagues: "The best people I've ever known," said one ten-year veteran, "I count on them to guard my life every day." This reliance on each other encourages close companionship among members of any firehouse.

Aside from taking on extra responsibilities, such as becoming a company leader or training other firefighters, firefighters don't have any kind of "corporate ladder" to climb. They keep abreast of technological or technique-oriented changes in firefighting through seminars, conferences, and conventions. Retirement is usually available at half-pay at age fifty for twenty-year veterans. Most firefighters enjoy structured raises based on seniority and job performance, and most love what they do.

How to Become a Firefight

While many colleges offer courses in fire science, these are usually taken by firefighting professionals after they've been in the field for a while. To become a firefighter you need to be between eighteen and thirty-one years of age, you need a high school diploma, you must have corrected 20/20 vision, and you must pass the firefighters examination, offered annually by local governments throughout the country. Applicants who have good scores on the written portion of the test and demonstrate physical dexterity, strength, and mental alertness, should be able to find employment. The hours are long, and you should check with the firefighter's association in your area for details (some have a 48 hours on/12 hours off policy, some have ten-hour nights). Firefighters can become members of the firefighters' union (affiliated with the AFL-CIO) and some become members of the International Association of Firefighters.

Associated Careers

Firefighters who leave the profession (14 percent annually, including those who are put on disability retirement) generally continue in public service. A number apply to become police officers, frustrated with the "reactive" nature of firefighting. Roughly five percent return to school to be trained in paramedic or medical duties. Others go into teaching or fire safety consulting. Those who wish to rise to positions of advice and influence, particularly on a national level, become private consultants or authors, or take high-profile political jobs elsewhere. Firefighters are in general very satisfied with their choice of career, and the majority of those who leave do so in the first few years. Those who remain firefighters for the first six years tend to stay for twenty.

Past And Future

Fire departments used to be locally organized groups of residents and merchants who would come to each other's aid in times of crisis. They formed unofficial "bucket brigades" that would make a human chain from the nearest water supply, passing buckets to each other to the mouth of the fire. Municipalities at the turn of the century formed professional fire departments of their own.

Nothing can or will replace human judgment at the scenes of fires. Although technology has improved considerably and safety records are set each year for the protection of firefighters, unforeseen circumstances and unique developments all rely on competent and experienced professionals to make snap decisions and take decisive action. The number of firefighters hired each year corresponds roughly to population increases, so an awareness of shifting demographics can help the aspiring firefighter find a location which needs him.

Quality of Life

Two Years Out

At the beginning of their careers, firefighters are put through a rigorous three- to sixteen-week training program to learn firefighting techniques. Attrition rate is highest in these initial years at almost 25 percent. Many find the lifestyle too uneven--extremely pressured or overly dull--and find it difficult to reconcile this schedule with any kind of personal life.

Five Years Out

Attrition falls off considerably these years, to between three and five percent for those who leave the profession due to dissatisfaction. Injuries become significant. Over 20 percent of firefighters receive on-the-job injuries in years four through seven, as those who have survived five years have battled a number of different types of fires and may become a touch overconfident in their abilities. Most of these injuries only result in three to twelve weeks of missed time. Those who wish to rise take additional courses during these years and begin to teach at local training academies or lecture at schools about fire prevention. Some get promoted to "chief" or "manager" of the firehouse.

Ten Years Out

Ten-year veterans have more control over their hours and higher pay, but do basically the same job they were initially hired to do: Fight fires. Halfway to their pension, most firefighters who've lasted this long have enough experience in action and respect of fire to avoid disabling injuries. A curious note: Of those who have the option to retire at 50, only about half accept. People who see themselves as firefighters enjoy the profession for as long as they can.

Professional Profile

# of people in profession	305,000
% male:	90
% female:	10
average hours per week:	55

Professionals Read

Firefighting USA

Books, Films and TV Shows Featuring the Profession

Backdraft

Blown Away

Red Adair: Profile in Courage

Recipies of the 8th Fire Company

Major Employers

Emergency Medical Service 54-15 48th Street Maspeth, NY 11378 Tel: 718-349-4110	California Highway Patrol (CHIPS) No Mailing Address--candidates must call. Tel: 818-240-8200	New York City Fire Department 250 Livingston Street 7th Floor, Room 741 Brooklyn, NY 11211 Tel: 718-694-2000 Fax: 718-694-2697
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You'll Have Contact With

Paramedics
Police Officers
Safety Inspectors

Major Associations

International Association of Fire Chiefs 4025 Fair Ridge Drive Fairfax, VA 22033-2868 Tel: 703-273-0911	International Association of Fire Fighters 1750 New York Avenue, NW 3rd Floor Washington, DC 20006 Tel: 202-737-8484	National Fire Protection Association 1 Batterymarch Park Quincy, MA 02269 Tel: 617-770-3000 Contact: Public Affairs
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