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Interview Preparation Guide

Public Service Transition Program · November 2026

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide helps veterans and public employees prepare for interviews with private employers, nonprofit organizations, and clients. It explains how private-sector hiring usually works, how to prepare, how to talk about your service, and what to do after the interview and when an offer arrives.

It pairs with the Interview Questions Guide, which lists common questions and how to approach them, and the Interview Story Worksheet, which helps you prepare the examples you will use in your answers.

1. How private-sector hiring usually works

Private employers have more discretion than government hiring systems. Instead of rating applicants against fixed criteria, interviewers weigh how you communicate, how you work with others, and whether you would fit the team, as well as what you have done. Most employers interview in stages.

STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS	HOW TO PREPARE
Recruiter or phone screen	A short call to confirm your interest, basic qualifications, availability, and pay expectations.	Prepare a one-minute introduction and a researched pay range.
Hiring manager interview	A conversation about how you would do the job and what you have done before.	Prepare stories that match the most important requirements in the posting.
Panel or team interview	Several interviewers, often from different parts of the organization, ask questions in turn.	Address each person, and bring examples of working well across teams.
Skills exercise	A writing sample, presentation, analysis, or practical task.	Ask what format and tools to expect, and practice under time.
Final interview and references	A senior leader confirms the decision, and the employer contacts your references.	Brief your references on the role and on what to emphasize.

2. Before the interview

Research the employer

- Learn what the organization sells or provides, who its customers are, who its competitors are, and what has been in the news about it recently.
- Read the posting again and mark the three or four requirements that appear most important.
- Look up your interviewers on LinkedIn so that you understand their roles.

- If the employer works with government, learn which agencies or programs it supports, and decide in advance what you can and cannot discuss about your former work.

Prepare your stories

Most interviews include behavioral questions, which ask you to describe a time you did something. Prepare six to eight true stories using the Interview Story Worksheet. Each story should follow the situation, task, action, and result method, take about two minutes to tell, and end with a measurable result. Together, your stories should cover leadership, teamwork, conflict, a mistake, problem solving, initiative, adapting to change, and integrity.

Prepare your introduction

Almost every interview begins with some version of "Tell me about yourself." Prepare an answer of 60 to 90 seconds with three parts: what you do now, in plain language; one or two highlights from your past that match this role; and why you want this job. Leave out ranks, grades, and acronyms.

Example (veteran). "I am finishing a 20-year career in the Army, where I most recently led a 38-person logistics operation responsible for $4.2 million in equipment. I have spent my career planning operations, training teams, and keeping complex supply chains running on schedule. I am applying for this operations manager role because I want to bring that experience to a company that moves products to customers every day."

Example (public employee). "For the past nine years I have worked in federal grants management, most recently leading risk and internal control reviews for a $310 million portfolio. I enjoy finding where a process breaks down and fixing it with the people who run it. That is why this compliance role interests me: it applies the same skills to your clients' programs."

Know your numbers

- Research the pay for the role before the first call. Many postings now include a pay range; New Jersey has required most employers with ten or more employees to include one in job postings since June 2025. Salary surveys and the Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook also help.
- Decide on a target range and the lowest figure you would accept, and know why.
- You do not need to share your past salary. New Jersey and many other states and cities restrict employers from asking about salary history. An employer may still ask what you expect to be paid.

Prepare the practical details

- Confirm the date, time zone, format, and names of your interviewers.
- For a video interview, test your camera, microphone, and connection the day before, choose a quiet room with a plain background and light in front of you, and close other programs.
- For an in-person interview, plan your route, arrive about ten minutes early, and bring printed copies of your résumé.
- Wear civilian business clothes that match or slightly exceed the organization's usual standard.

3. During the interview

- Listen to the whole question, pause, and answer the question that was asked.
- Use "I" to describe your own actions, while giving credit to your team. Interviewers need to know what you did.
- Speak in plain language. If an acronym slips out, explain it.
- Use numbers: people, dollars, time, and results.
- Keep most answers to about two minutes, and ask whether the interviewer would like more detail.
- It is fine to ask for a moment to think or to ask the interviewer to clarify a question.
- Be honest. If you do not know something, say so and explain how you would find out.

Talking about your service

Veterans. Speak about your service with confidence, and keep the focus on skills and results the employer needs. You decide how much to share about deployments, combat, or injuries. It is appropriate to answer briefly and steer back to the job.

Public employees. Explain why you are leaving in one or two neutral, forward-looking sentences, without criticizing your agency or any administration. “My position was eliminated in a reduction in force, and I am ready to apply my experience in the private sector” is a complete answer.

Everyone. Never discuss classified, controlled, or sensitive information. If a clearance is relevant, state its level and status, and nothing more.

Questions you do not have to answer

- Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, an employer may not ask disability-related questions before making a conditional job offer. An employer may ask whether you can perform the job’s tasks and how you would do them.
- Under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, an employer may not deny you employment because of past, present, or future military service, including National Guard and Reserve obligations.
- Questions about your age, religion, national origin, marital status, or plans for a family are rarely related to the job. You can redirect politely, for example: “I can assure you that I am fully able to meet the schedule this role requires.”
- If you believe you were treated unfairly, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission handles most discrimination complaints, and the Department of Labor’s Veterans’ Employment and Training Service handles complaints about discrimination based on military service.

If you are still a federal employee

Federal ethics rules apply as soon as you begin seeking employment, often earlier than people expect. Before you interview with any organization that your official duties could affect, talk to your agency ethics official. You may need to recuse yourself from matters that affect the prospective employer. If you file public financial disclosure reports, you must notify your ethics official in writing within three business days after you begin negotiating for future employment. Current and former New Jersey State employees should ask the State Ethics Commission or their agency ethics liaison about the state’s rules.

Questions to ask the interviewer

Prepare three to five questions of your own. The Interview Questions Guide suggests several. Ask about the work, the team, and how success is measured, and save questions about pay and benefits for a recruiter or for the offer stage unless the interviewer raises them.

4. After the interview

- Send a short thank-you message to each interviewer within one business day. Mention something specific from the conversation and restate your interest.
- Write down the questions you were asked and how you answered, and improve your stories for the next interview.
- If you have not heard back by the date the employer gave, send one polite follow-up message.
- Prepare three references. Ask their permission, send them the posting and your résumé, and tell them which of your strengths matter most for this role.

5. Offers and negotiation

- Ask for the offer in writing, and ask for a few days to review it if you need them.
- Compare total compensation, not salary alone: base pay, bonuses, retirement contributions, health insurance premiums and deductibles, leave, remote or flexible work, training, and job stability. Public pensions and leave are often more generous than private ones, while private employers may offer higher pay.

- Negotiate respectfully and with evidence, such as market pay data and the value of your experience. Pay is not the only thing you can negotiate; start date, title, leave, remote work, a signing bonus, and training are often open as well.
- If you receive a pension, military retired pay, or VA benefits, ask the office that pays them whether new earnings could affect them before you accept. Some benefits, such as the FERS annuity supplement and VA individual unemployability, depend on your earnings or employment.

Where to get help

Other program materials. The Résumé and CV Guide, the interview guides, the worksheets and checklists, the Referral Guide, and the résumé and cover letter templates are available to download at library.agardresearchassociates.org/public-service-transition.

One-on-one help. If you would like one of the program's directors to read your materials and help you tailor them to the jobs you are applying for, request one-on-one help through the program page at agardresearchassociates.org/public-service-transition. Requests are reviewed on a rolling basis as volunteer time allows, and veterans are served first.

If you are in crisis or worried about someone, help is available at any hour. Veterans, service members, and their families can reach the Veterans Crisis Line by dialing 988 and pressing 1, or by texting 838255. Anyone can call or text 988 for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

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