ARA

Interview Questions Guide

Public Service Transition Program · November 2026

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide lists questions that veterans and public employees often hear in private-sector interviews, explains what the interviewer is trying to learn, and suggests how to approach each one. It ends with questions that need special care and questions you can ask the interviewer.

Do not memorize scripts. Prepare true stories with the Interview Story Worksheet, and practice adapting them to the questions below.

Opening questions

QUESTION	WHAT THE INTERVIEWER WANTS TO LEARN	HOW TO APPROACH IT
Tell me about yourself.	Whether you can summarize your background clearly and connect it to this job.	Answer in 60 to 90 seconds: what you do now, one or two relevant highlights, and why you want this role. Use plain language.
Why are you leaving the military or government service?	Whether your move is considered and whether you are likely to stay.	Give a brief, neutral, forward-looking reason. Do not criticize your agency, command, or any administration.
Why do you want to work here?	Whether you have researched the organization and want this job in particular.	Name something specific about the work, customers, or values, and connect it to your experience.
Walk me through your résumé.	How your career fits together and where it is going.	Move from oldest to newest in two or three minutes, highlighting results and the thread that leads to this role.

Questions about your transition

QUESTION	WHAT THE INTERVIEWER WANTS TO LEARN	HOW TO APPROACH IT
How does your experience apply to this role?	Whether you can translate public-sector work into this employer’s terms.	Give two translated examples with numbers that match the posting’s main requirements.
Have you worked in a for-profit environment?	Whether you understand customers, competition, and profit.	Acknowledge the difference, then describe work that involved budgets, efficiency, customers, or contractors, and what you have done to learn the industry.
How will you adjust to a less structured workplace?	Whether you can work well without formal procedures and a clear chain of command.	Describe a time you made decisions with incomplete information or built a process where none existed.

QUESTION	WHAT THE INTERVIEWER WANTS TO LEARN	HOW TO APPROACH IT
You held a senior position. Are you comfortable at this level?	Whether you will be satisfied and stay.	Express genuine interest in the work, explain what you want to learn about the business, and note that you are glad to prove yourself.
Do you hold a security clearance?	Whether you can start cleared work, if the role requires it.	State the level and whether it is active or current. Do not describe programs or classified work.

Behavioral questions

Answer each with a true story using the situation, task, action, and result method. Spend most of your time on what you did and what changed because of it, and end with a number or a lesson.

QUESTION	WHAT THE INTERVIEWER WANTS TO LEARN	HOW TO APPROACH IT
Tell me about a time you led a team through a difficult situation.	How you lead under pressure.	Choose a story where your decisions changed the outcome, and describe how you kept people informed and motivated.
Tell me about a conflict with a colleague or supervisor.	Whether you handle disagreement professionally.	Show that you listened, focused on the problem rather than the person, and reached a workable result.
Tell me about a mistake you made.	Whether you take responsibility and learn.	Choose a real but recoverable mistake, own it plainly, and explain what you changed afterward.
Tell me about a time you influenced someone without authority.	Whether you can persuade peers, partners, or customers.	Describe how you understood their concerns and used evidence to bring them along.
Tell me about a time you managed competing priorities.	How you organize your time and make trade-offs.	Explain how you decided what mattered most, what you delegated or delayed, and how you communicated it.
Tell me about a time you improved a process.	Whether you take initiative and get results.	Describe the problem, the change you led, and the time, money, or errors it saved.
Tell me about an ethical dilemma you faced.	Your judgment and integrity.	Choose a story you can tell without sensitive details, and explain how you reached the right decision.

Practical questions

QUESTION	WHAT THE INTERVIEWER WANTS TO LEARN	HOW TO APPROACH IT
What would you do in your first 90 days?	Whether you have a realistic plan to learn and contribute.	Describe how you would learn the business, build relationships, and deliver one early result.
What are your salary expectations?	Whether your expectations fit the budget.	Give a researched range, or ask for the posted range first. You do not need to share your past salary.

QUESTION	WHAT THE INTERVIEWER WANTS TO LEARN	HOW TO APPROACH IT
When can you start?	Whether your timing fits the employer's needs.	Give a realistic date that accounts for your separation date, any notice period, and any ethics requirements.
Are you willing to travel or relocate?	Whether you can meet the job's demands.	Answer honestly, and say what would make travel or a move workable for you.

Questions that need special care

QUESTION	WHAT THE INTERVIEWER WANTS TO LEARN	HOW TO APPROACH IT
Do you have PTSD, or any injuries from your service?	This is a disability-related question, which employers may not ask before a conditional job offer.	You do not have to answer. Redirect calmly, for example: "I am fully able to perform the duties of this role, and I am glad to talk about how I would approach them."
Did you see combat?	Often curiosity rather than an assessment of your qualifications.	Share only what you choose to share, then turn to what the experience taught you about leadership or performing under pressure.
Will you be deployed or called away for Guard or Reserve duty?	Whether your obligations will affect your availability.	Employers may not deny employment because of military service obligations. You may describe your typical schedule briefly and note that you plan ahead for absences.
How old are you, or when do you plan to retire?	Usually an attempt to judge commitment.	Redirect to your commitment, for example: "I am looking for a role where I can contribute for many years."
Why were you let go?	Whether you left for performance reasons.	If your position was eliminated in a reduction in force, say so plainly; it reflects a budget or policy decision, not your performance.

Questions you can ask the interviewer

- What would success look like in this role after the first 90 days and after the first year?
- What are the biggest challenges facing the team right now?
- How is performance measured and reviewed?
- How does this team work with other parts of the organization?
- What do you enjoy most about working here?
- Does the organization have a veterans' network, mentoring program, or other support for new employees?
- What are the next steps in the process, and when should I expect to hear from you?

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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