

Marketing Yourself for Advancement in the Senior Executive Service

1. Expand your personal network. Don't limit your consideration to your agency or Department. There are more than 100 Federal agencies.
2. Inform your boss. You need to let your boss know that you aspire to go into the SES and that you would like his or her support. This should be done as soon as possible—don't wait until an SES vacancy to inform him or her.
3. Inform the Chain of Command. You need to let your boss's boss and other executives up the line know of your interest in the SES. You may need their support and endorsement.
4. Be part of the "management team." Actively support management initiatives, volunteer for special management projects, and recommend ideas for promoting the welfare of the organization.
5. Get the word out. Notify colleagues, friends, and former bosses that you're looking for SES opportunities. Ask for their support and referrals of key agency officials that you can talk to.
6. Send a resume (not application) to officials of agencies that you would like to work for regardless of whether or not vacancies exist.
7. Visit with ERB (Executive Board Members) and key agency officials. Discuss career interests with their agencies, and ask them about current and future opportunities. Tell them you will be following up with them periodically.
8. Attend conferences, meetings, and social activities to expand contacts.
9. Join and contact members of professional organizations. Contact key members to find out about opportunities in their agencies.
10. Push for special assignments and details. Try to arrange for a special assignment or detail to the position or office where your career interest lies. Make sure you document this in your application.
11. Make a special effort to ask your boss to designate you acting as often as possible. Make sure you document this in your application.
12. Volunteer for task forces and focus groups. Volunteer and make yourself known in high visibility task forces or focus groups.
13. Publicize your successes. Submit articles to your agency or interagency newsletters that feature you, your office, and its successes. Always mention yourself and your organization in the weekly activity reports.

14. Volunteer to make high level briefings to top management, Congress, or OMB and make sure you are successful.

Effective Interviewing Techniques

15. Recent research in communications shows some startling results about the way your communication is actually received:

Words: 7%

Tone of Voice: 38%

Body Language: 55%

Merely rehearsing words you're going to say is not enough. You need to practice with a friend who can provide an honest critique. Taping yourself may also be helpful.

16. Remember that the interview is a two-way street. They want to learn about you and you want to learn about them.

Kinds of Interviews:

Traditional – questions tend to be hypothetical, e.g., “What would you do if, etc...?” or “How would you handle a situation where you were confronted by, etc...?” Research shows that traditional interviews are poor indicators of a candidate’s future success. However, such interviews are most common.

Behavioral – questions are more factual, e.g., “Please give us an example where you were required to etc...?” or “What evidence in your experience demonstrates that you have the ability to, etc...?” Behavioral interviews are gaining popularity and are better indicators of a candidate’s future success. Some interviews combine both of the above and you should be prepared to respond effectively.

Before the Interview

17. Preparation is everything:

- Dress and personal grooming. Personal appearance and grooming are very important—you should look and act like a successful Fortune 500 executive when you enter the interviewing room.
- Do homework on agency and interviewer. Know the strategic planning goals, objectives, size of the organization, and major problems and issues. Try to find out who will do the interview—organizational position, and if possible, communication style.
- Have questions prepared—notes are okay but asking from memory is more impressive.
- Know your application. Thoroughly review it and make sure you can answer questions that may be asked about it.
- Go for a mid-morning or mid-afternoon appointment. Many interviewers and interviewees report that the best time for interviews is 10AM and 2PM.

During the Interview

18. For most SES jobs, there may be more than one interview. Depending on delegations of authority and agency preferences, you may be interviewed as many as four or five times. The interviews may be with one person or with a panel. Sometimes you may be interviewed again by the same individual. There is no set pattern on how interviews are conducted or questions asked. However, the following general observations are provided.

19. The first interview(s) is usually with the recommending or selecting official or a selection panel and may be the most grueling. The focus will be more on leadership, managerial and technical competencies; how you deal with specific agency problems; how you would “fit in” the organization.

20. If there is another interview, it is usually with the selecting or approving official. By this time, the field may have been narrowed to a few or a recommendation has been made for your selection. At this interview, if you are being recommended for selection, the interviewer is ‘double-checking’ the recommendation for your selection. If there are still others in competition, the questions may shift away from technical competency or issues specific to the program office. Generally, the focus of this interview may be on how you are as a “team player,” support for Administration policies, or ability to see “big picture” issues.

21. Maintain good eye contact. If this is uncomfortable for you, look at the middle of the interviewer’s forehead—the difference is imperceptible. If you are in a panel interview, look at all members throughout the interview—don’t focus on just the one who is in charge of the interview.

22. Be professional and friendly (smile).

- Speak clearly and confidently
- Sit up straight but be comfortable-don’t slouch
- Avoid excessive or wild movements of arms and hands—don’t fidget, e.g., don’t play with your pen, pull on your hair or mustache, chew fingernails, crack knuckles, etc.
- Do not drink any beverage even if offered, except water, if necessary
- Do not chew or eat anything, including mints, gum, or candy
- Avoid using slang or questionable humor
- Avoid extraneous discussions—stay on the topic of the job
- Avoid taking notes—some interviewers have stated that it seemed like the interviewee was documenting the interview for a possible complaint
- Avoid name dropping. It appears pompous and your VIP may not be the interviewer’s VIP.

23. Read the body language of the interviewer—are you losing his or her interest? Does he or she seem to gaze off while you are speaking? You may need to stop and ask the interviewer if he or she has any questions or needs clarification of points you were making.

24. Don't panic if you don't know the answer to a question. Never try to bluff or fake an answer. You may say that you do not know or you would like to think about the question and defer an answer to later in the interview. You can also ask the interviewer to repeat the question or you can paraphrase question you don't understand.

25. The following are examples of questions that interviewers especially enjoy hearing good responses to:

- How you created a vision and turned it into a reality.
- How you provided leadership in a challenging program area.
- How you accomplished a major objective within budget.
- How you succeeded against seemingly overwhelming odds.
- How you succeeded in getting Congress, OMB, or top management to give you additional resources.
- How you successfully handled a highly sensitive political or EEO/employee relations problem.
- How you were successfully able to get various groups to agree to support your program.
- How you were able to maintain such a high level of morale and productivity while significantly reducing staffing levels.

26. Below are some typical questions you will be asked. Some suggested responses, if they apply to you, are provided.

Why did you apply for this position? Never say for the money. Some suggested responses:

- This position is fulfillment of your career aspiration
- Your interest has always been in this program area
- You have talents which you think you can bring to the job
- You thrive on challenges

What do you bring to this position? Some suggested responses:

- Enthusiasm
- Commitment to specific program goal
- Uncanny ability to overcome obstacles
- Getting things done successfully through people

What is your greatest strength? Some suggested responses:

- Driven to getting the job done
- People skills
- Innovative ways of getting resources to get the job done

What is your greatest weakness? Be careful—don't pick a glaring weakness. Instead turn a weakness into a potential positive. For example:

- I tend to be a little impatient when it comes to getting the job done, but I'm working on it.
- I tend to be a perfectionist and it drives people crazy sometimes.

Tell me about yourself. Do not reveal personal information about yourself. Keep your responses job related.

What is your greatest accomplishment? Pick an accomplishment that relates to the position for which you are applying. Be specific on bottom line results.

27. Ask questions, especially those which indicate you did your homework on the agency. Interviewers are always impressed with a candidate who took the time to find out about the agency, program, and personnel:

Ask for clarification of agency priorities, e.g., “Your strategic plan states that customer service is your number one priority. However, your annual report states that reducing the backlog of widgets is your number one priority....”

- Impact of a specific proposed bill on agency operations
- Impact of proposed OMB budget and staff reductions
- Changes in Mission or goals within the past 5 years

Other possible questions:

- What does top management expect from you?
- Delegations of authority for your position
- Organizational culture, e.g., informal or strict chain of command

28. Talking too much or not enough. Don’t monopolize discussion but don’t be a wallflower either. Don’t answer a question several times—once is enough. If you find yourself rambling, just stop. Let interviewer lead but make sure you ask your questions.

29. It’s okay to ask about job travel requirements but stress that you are flexible (unless you are absolutely sure that you cannot travel or have severe travel limitations). It’s better to negotiate travel demands once you’ve been hired.

30. Questions about pay, benefits, and hours—don’t ask. Pay and benefits are generally standard and you can research it yourself. As for hours, these are best negotiated after you have been hired (unless you are absolutely sure that you cannot work certain hours).

31. Watch for inappropriate or illegal questions. There are questions which you are not obliged to answer. These are personal questions regarding your:

- Political or religious beliefs
- Marital status, age, national origin
- Provision for child care
- Race, sex, color, height, weight
- Mental or physical disability

If you prefer not to answer such questions, you may respond by saying “I’m not sure how that question relates to my qualifications for the position.” If you were asked such questions and feel that you were unfairly discriminated against on account of your race, sex, national origin, age, religion or physical or mental disability, you may contact the EEO Counselor of the agency to which you applied. Please note that if you voluntarily reveal a disability to the interviewer for the purpose of requesting reasonable accommodation, the interviewer can legally ask you related questions about your request.

32. Tell the interviewer that you want the job (if you do) and why. Toward the end of the interview, leave the interviewer with a “zinger” – a memorable short phrase that sums up your qualifications. This will help the interviewer(s) remember you as they review all the candidates later.

After the Interview

33. Send a short thank you note to the interviewer. Include a short statement that reinforces a point about your qualifications that you made or forgot to make during the interview.

34. If you are not selected, make an appointment with the interviewer to find out why. You need to know where you need to improve. The meeting should be friendly and professional, not threatening or defensive. Focus on the following:

- What specifically was lacking in your qualifications?
 - Did you make any mistakes in the interview? If so, what were they?
 - What specifically do you need to improve?
 - Can he or she recommend sources where experience, education, or training can be obtained that would be favorably accepted by the interviewer or the agency?
- You may ask who was selected, but do not ask questions regarding the qualifications of the person selected.*

35. If you are selected, congratulations—but you are not through yet! Your qualifications still need to be reviewed by the Qualification Review Board (QRB). Make an appointment with your Executive Resources Office of your agency to discuss your application. The QRB will only examine your Executive Core Qualifications, not your technical qualifications. Do not assume that because you were selected by your agency that you will pass the QRB review. While a majority of cases are approved by the QRB, some are disapproved, and have resulted in rescinding the selection. Don't assume your agency will take care of it—even if they say they will. It's your selection. It's your responsibility.

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