



# How To Get a Job

## Introduction

Getting a job isn't always easy, especially in the fisheries field where jobs are limited. During each step of the process, you must make yourself stand out amongst many (oftentimes very competitive) candidates. The first step is to find an opportunity. Craft your application package--typically a cover letter and résumé/C.V.--to fit that opportunity (see the "How to Sell Yourself" guidance here), and apply! Nail the interview, and follow up appropriately. Each of these steps is detailed below, along with personal advice from AFS members who have recent experience with getting a job.

## The Search

Start your job search early and with an open mind. Although six months to a year ahead of time is probably adequate, it never hurts to start watching jobs now. You'll get a better feel for the number and variety of jobs available in the current market, which may help you decide later on whether an opportunity is one-of-a-kind and requires aggressive pursuit. You will also get a better feel for seasonal oscillations in job listings. For example, some agencies regularly post temporary positions during a certain time of year. Be open to unique or unexpected opportunities, and be willing to move for a good one. It is not uncommon for a fisheries career to involve several cross-country moves.

In the words of the Chinese philosopher Confucius, "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life." The job search stage is the perfect opportunity to find that perfect job, or at least something close! Natural resource careers do not generally pay much, especially in the public sector, so finding a job that you are genuinely passionate about is imperative. Not only will finding a job you are passionate about be good for your mental health, it will make you a better candidate for the job market in general.

Job opportunities can be found online, at conferences and meetings, or through word of mouth. Never underestimate the value of your professional network. Someone who knows someone who is looking may mention your name, especially if you've given a talk on a relevant topic or demonstrated your excellent "people skills" with them. Or, they may forward a job announcement to you because when they read it, they thought of you. Networking occurs at professional meetings, so attend them! While you're there, you will also have the chance to check out the job board. Annual meetings typically have an area dedicated to current M.S., Ph.D., post-doctoral, seasonal, and permanent positions across the globe. Plus, the person posting the position is typically in attendance, so you can discuss the opportunity with them in person.

If you're looking for a digital job board, here are some recommendations:

- American Fisheries Society
- World Aquaculture Society
- Texas A&M Wildlife and Fisheries
- ASLO (Limnology and Oceanography)
- Academic Careers Online
- USAJobs - Official job website of the US Federal government
  - Search for NOAA on USAJobs
- StudentJobs - Official student job website of the US Federal government
  - Search for fisheries on StudentJobs
- NOAA SeaGrant

In addition to these digital job boards, state agency websites will also have job/career information. (Sometimes, positions are actually listed on a centralized state government website.) Some universities, AFS Chapters, and AFS Subunits also post job openings, although an exhaustive list of these is not available. If possible, subscribe to updates for your job search, so you'll receive an update each time a position matching your search is listed. Otherwise, check the websites regularly, as many positions are open for only a few weeks and turn around very quickly.

## Applying for a Position

Once you have found a good opportunity, prepare your application. Make sure to tailor your application to the position by following the recommendations in our "How to Sell Yourself" guidelines. We strongly recommend printing the position announcement for reference, in case the original listing is moved or removed after closing. Pay special attention to the requirements and qualifications, but don't underestimate your own value. For example, a job announcement may indicate that a Bachelor's degree and three years of experience are required. If you have two years of quality experience, don't assume that you are a poor candidate or ineligible, especially if the work experience pertains directly to the position. You may be an excellent candidate, enough so that the hiring committee will be flexible on your years in the profession. The stringencies of experience requirements may vary between workplace sectors (private vs. public), but it never hurts to get your name in the pool of applicants.

Send your application when you are ready. You may want to send it immediately upon the position opening (to make an early impression) or toward the end (to avoid being at the "bottom of the stack"). There are no set rules on timing but one. **Don't be late.** If the application is on paper, get that package in the snail mail with plenty of time for shipping. If the application is online, try not to wait until the final day. Your Internet may go out, the web server may go down, or you may miss the deadline because it closed on Eastern Time while you were on Western Time. These things happen, and a potential employer will not be impressed by excuses.

## Nailing the Interview

After the position to which you applied closes, wait at least one week before following up with the point of contact. Express your interest in the position, and let them know that you are looking forward to their selection of interview candidates. If you do not receive further communication for another week or two, you were likely not selected. However, follow up again, especially in the case of public sector positions where hiring freezes or complications can occur unexpectedly.

If you receive an invitation to interview, ask for the following pertinent information immediately: 1) time and place of the interview, 2) whether you need to arrive early to check in, go through security, fill out paperwork, etc., and 3) who will be on the interview committee. Thank them for the opportunity to interview, and make any plans necessary to get there. Note that for many public sector positions, you will not receive any travel assistance for the interview. While requesting a phone interview may be tempting due to reduced personal cost, be there in person if you are serious about the job. You will make a much stronger impression.

## Prepare for the Interview

Nailing an interview is all about preparation. Remember that job announcement we told you to print? Read it. Research it. Study it until you have a thorough understanding of what the interviewers are looking for. Read linked content such as position descriptions or agency career materials. Research the employer to understand their mission and organization. Talk to previous and current employees regarding the agency culture, interview process, and typical questions. Know the job you are applying for and the employer you will be working for!

A useful approach for dissecting a job announcement is to analyze the knowledge-based skills, transferable skills, and personal traits needed for success. Knowledge-based skills are specific to a job or field (e.g., the fisheries field), whereas transferable skills are more general and useful across many fields. Personal traits are characteristics about your personality, temperament, or work style that make you unique. Examples of each are shown below.

Knowledge-based Skills	Transferable Skills	Personal Traits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Motorboat operation and maintenance</li> <li>● Electrofishing experience</li> <li>● Statistics and modeling</li> <li>● Writing and speaking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Leadership</li> <li>● Teamwork</li> <li>● Problem-solving</li> <li>● Project management</li> <li>● Time management and prioritization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Self-starter</li> <li>● “People” person</li> <li>● Sense of humor</li> <li>● Patience</li> <li>● Ability to work with minimal supervision</li> </ul>

Using the job announcement, make a list of the knowledge-based skills, transferable skills, and personal traits that would be expected of a superior candidate. Then, identify the three most important skills from each list that the interviewers will want to see. Think about (and write down)

how exactly your experience and individual traits match and reflect those skills. When they ask, “Why should we hire you?”, you should be prepared to present your case.

**Example: Analysis of desired skills and traits for a fisheries research biologist working for a state agency**

- Knowledge-based skills from experience and education
  - Study design, statistics, and modeling
  - Communication to technical and non-technical audiences
  - Field skills using a variety of gears and understanding of on-the-ground realities of field sampling
- Transferable skills
  - Organization
  - Time management and prioritization of my schedule and my team’s schedule
  - Leadership
- Personal traits
  - Independent with minimal supervision
  - Self-starter
  - Big picture-oriented

This analysis led to the following answer for the question “Why should we hire you?”

“Based on our conversation so far and the job description, it sounds like you’re looking for someone with a variety of skills, not just technical skills or administrative skills or communication skills, but rather all of the above. With my past work experience in California and at Mississippi State, I have honed all of these skills. Because of my statistical background, I’ve become a go-to-girl for people in my office and the statewide reservoir team to discuss experimental design and statistical analysis. I’ve already provided numerous reviews for reports, proposals, and a Fish and Game journal article, along with conducting several of my own research projects. I initiated and manage those projects myself and have recently taken on the budget planning for my portion of the lake and reservoir project, as well as overseeing two temporary employees. Our team meshes pretty well, I think largely because we talk in a very straightforward manner with each other regarding work scheduling, how they’re enjoying their jobs, and how I can make it better for them. You’re also looking for someone with a broad and forward-looking perspective who can not only understand current research needs but also prioritize work at a statewide level. That is something I’m already doing in California, much of it reflected in my complete rewrite of our Sport Fish Restoration grant and my efforts to train the field biologists that work across the state. With my education and experience, I’m confident that I would be a valuable addition to your reservoir research team.”

Prepare answers and specific stories for a variety of questions. Write them down if you need to. Questions may range from situational (e.g., “What would you do if...?”) to behavioral (e.g., “Tell me about a time when...”) to straight-forward (e.g., “Why should we hire you?”). Get advice on typical question types from colleagues who have interviewed with the employer if possible, and study other common situational and behavioral questions. (An online search should do it.) The more straight-forward questions will be specific to the position and should be related to the

competencies and duties listed in the job announcement. It may also help to review past course materials and textbooks from school. Finally, be prepared for a question or two about the employer. Review your answers, but don't memorize them word-for-word. You will want to speak naturally during the interview, so just get the big ideas and the best stories in your head so they are ready to pull out at the right time.

Now for the fun part. Prepare some follow-up questions for the interviewers. Follow-up questions not only get you the answers you need, but also demonstrate to the interviewers that you have put thought into the position and all it requires. They also provide the opportunity to turn a potentially-very-formal interview into a two-way conversation. They allow more of your personality to shine through, and they make you more memorable as a candidate. Of course, you don't need a hundred questions. Ask questions that are truly relevant to you.

- Good: What skills or traits do you think made you successful in this position? (This question was directed to the previous incumbent who was on the interview committee.) Are you going to miss it?
- Bad: Will you pay for moving costs?

## The Interview

On the day of the interview, make sure you get plenty of sleep. Dress appropriately (typically one level more formal than is expected for the position), and wear comfortable clothes that will not be distracting during the interview. Prepare for an uncomfortable temperature in the room by bringing or wearing a suit jacket, shawl, or cardigan. Avoid strong cologne or perfume, as it is distracting and can cause allergic reactions. Wear a watch, and turn OFF your phone before entering the building.

Bring a professional portfolio with you to hold a pencil and any necessary documents, including a copy of your application and follow-up questions. Print directions to the interview location, and plan to arrive 15-20 minutes early (or earlier if requested). Bring the point of contact's phone number in case you get lost or are running late (but PLEASE don't be late!). Review your application materials if that helps you. Use the restroom, and double-check your appearance. Finally, while you are waiting to be interviewed, maintain a professional and friendly composure. Tip: If you tend to have cold hands, keep them as warm as possible while you are waiting. No one

likes shaking a clammy hand.

When you enter the interviewing room, introduce yourself and shake hands with everyone present. Smile, stand up straight, and be confident. Set your portfolio down and, if necessary, adjust your jacket according to the room temperature. Sit down, after being offered a seat, with your back straight, shoulders back, and head up. If you tend to fiddle with your hands, fold them and put them in your lap. It's time for the questions you've been preparing for.



A common interview technique is to rotate questions amongst interviewers on the hiring committee. When you answer a question, make good eye contact with everyone, especially the person asking the question. Maintain a natural and friendly but also professional composure, even if you know individuals on the committee. Allow your enthusiasm to show, and use inflection and emphasis to keep them verbally engaged. If you need a moment to think, pause and think. The moment seems like eternity to you, but it will not be noticeable or negatively viewed by the interviewers. If you need to write a question down, open your portfolio and ask them to repeat the question. If you feel an answer needs a bit more thought and organization, let them know you are organizing your thoughts for a minute. They won't mind! A well-constructed answer is far more valuable than a nervous quick answer. Also, know when to stop. Fluff and tangents are not valuable to the interviewers, so wrap up your answers after you've made your point. Wait patiently through the silence, as oftentimes they must record your answer and their reactions for recordkeeping and scoring. They are not expecting you to continue, nor are they being rude.

After the interviewers have completed their questioning, it is your turn. Get out your list of follow-up questions, and turn the interview into a two-way conversation. Smile, listen, and make notes of their answers. This is a good opportunity to summarize your skills and abilities and reiterate why you would be the best candidate for the position. Finally, ask when you can expect to hear from them, and let them know that you look forward to it. Thank them for the opportunity to interview, and depart on a positive note.

## After the Interview

Immediately after the interview, compose and send a brief thank-you note to the point of contact. This will not only refresh the interviewer's memory, but also make another positive impression about you. Also, call your references to let them know how the interview went and

remind them of the potential call they may be receiving.

Follow up via email or phone after at least one week. This gives the interviewers time to complete the interview and scoring process but is early enough that you will still be fresh in their mind. Let them know you are looking forward to hearing their decision, and wait patiently for at least one more week before additional follow-up.

If you don't get a job offer, first thank them for the opportunity to interview and their consideration of you. Then, ask them what you could have done to be more competitive, getting as specific of answers as possible. If you are still planning to apply for future openings with the same employer, let them know your interest and desire to be part of their team. Try to end this call with a positive outlook and a good relationship with the interviewer.

If you do get a job offer, congratulations! Thank them, but don't feel obligated to give them a definite answer on the spot. Give them an idea of your answer if possible, but let them know if you need time to make your decision (e.g., consult with family). Some questions that are appropriate at this point include:

- When would you like me to start?
- Can you provide support for my relocation costs?
- Is salary negotiable?

When you receive the official offer letter, reply in a timely manner and thank them again for the opportunity to be a part of their team. You nailed it!

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