

HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE  
SENIOR EXECUTIVE SERVICE



A DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY HANDBOOK

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## OVERVIEW

This guide is designed to help you assess your readiness for the Senior Executive Service (SES), by leading you through an evaluation of your existing competencies, presenting you with tips for preparing résumés and applications, and offering you insight into the interview process. At the end of this guide you will find recommended resources that you should consider as you prepare to become a member of the SES.

Many people strive to become a member of the SES as their careers in public service progress. However, few actually take a systematic approach to preparing for and ultimately applying to the SES. The United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has published the [OPM Guide to Senior Executive Service Qualifications](#). The OPM guide provides an explanation of Executive Qualifications and Competencies and examples of the various application components. This Department of Navy (DON) guide is intended to be a supplemental resource based on advice and experience from current members of the SES.

First, this guide will help you assess your eligibility today against the requirements you will need to meet in the future. By taking a few key steps today, you can assess the experiences and skills you have already gained and those that you still need to acquire. With those insights, you will be able to make strategic decisions about your career that will allow you to prepare successfully for a leadership position.

Second, you will learn tips on preparing your application package and résumé. Using an iterative approach, you will see how your leadership competencies progress, and how to relate your experiences to the SES qualifications. A key aspect of this step is using mentors to help guide you in your preparation. By working with current SES members you will gain insight into new career opportunities, how to overcome challenges, and learn what leadership experiences you need.

Third, we will outline how the interview process works. The SES interview is a critical step in the selection process. Because the interview panel is comprised of SES members, active and retired SES members serve as excellent resources for practical advice as you prepare. This guide is designed to give you the confidence you need to be successful.

Finally, additional resources are provided to assist you in exploring the vast amount of material published on this subject.

## ASSESS YOUR READINESS

The very first step in your journey toward a leadership position is to gain a detailed understanding of what is required to become a Senior Executive and then to assess your skills and experiences against those requirements. At the center of that assessment are the Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs).

- Leading Change
  - Leading Change
  - Creativity and Innovation
  - External Awareness
  - Flexibility
  - Resilience
  - Strategic Thinking
  - Vision
- Results Driven
  - Accountability
  - Customer Service
  - Decisiveness
  - Entrepreneurship
  - Problem Solving
- Technical Credibility
  - Building Coalitions
  - Partnering
  - Political Savvy
  - Influencing/Negotiating
- Business Acumen
  - Financial Management
  - Human Capital Management
  - Technology Management
- Leading People
  - Conflict Management
  - Leveraging Diversity
  - Developing Others
  - Team Building

Based on desired leadership attributes, each ECQ is described in the OPM Guide to Senior Executive Service Qualifications. One of the most critical parts of the SES application package is a discussion of your specific ECQs. You need to relay events in your career that succinctly demonstrate each of your ECQs.

Each ECQ has fundamental competencies, outlined in OPM's Guide to Senior Executive Service Qualifications. ECQs are complex; they are designed to demonstrate well rounded leadership experiences and document your specific leadership philosophy. The competencies help you explore your unique skills and perspective for all five ECQs. There are an additional six competencies, fundamental leadership attributes, that can be found in all of the ECQs; be sure to incorporate those as well.

After you understand the ECQs, their supporting competencies, and the role they play in your SES application, it is time to articulate your current skills and experiences. For each ECQ, document several experiences that challenged your leadership skills and helped hone your leadership approach. Again, turn to the OPM Guide to Senior Executive Service Qualifications for advice and examples of how to write your qualification statements. Remember, ECQ responses should be succinct, compelling, and clearly demonstrate your executive qualifications.

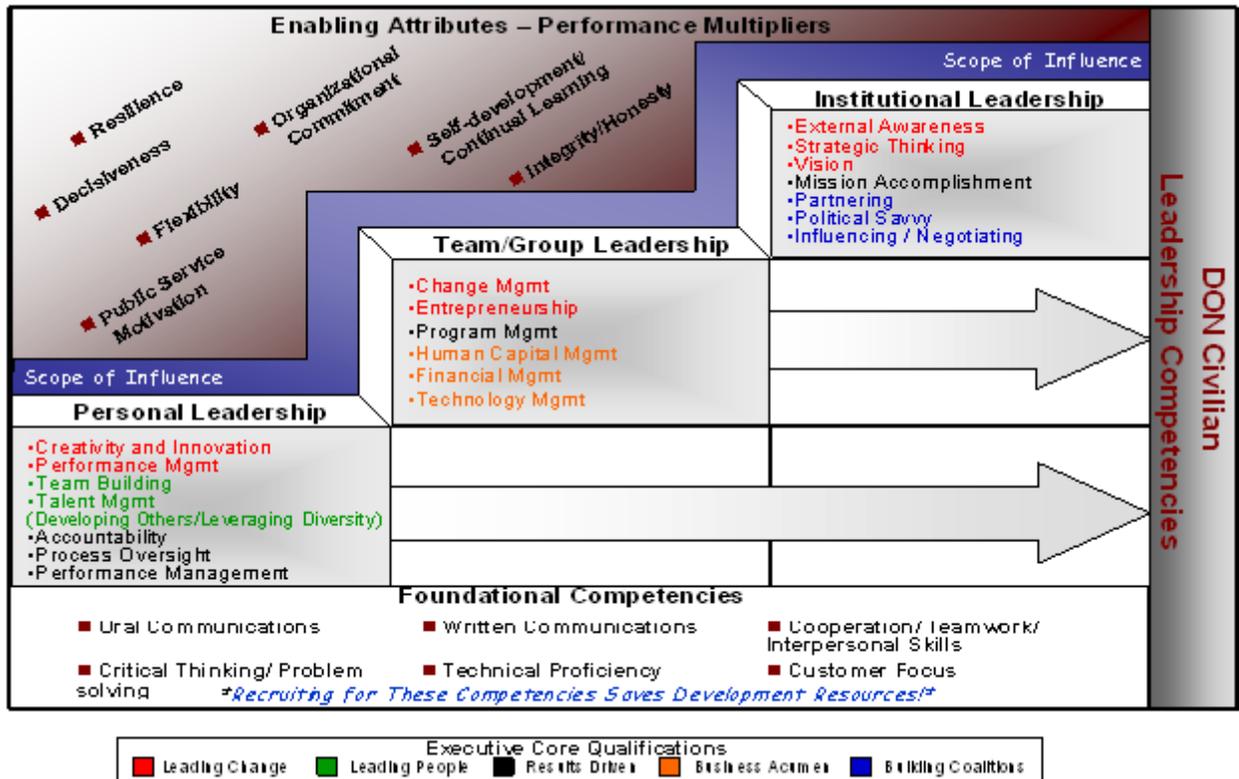
Once you have written your qualification statements, you should assess them for strengths and weaknesses. Be honest with yourself during this process and realize that everyone will need to strengthen at least one area. Make a list of all of those qualifications that you still need to demonstrate, or would like to demonstrate in a more robust way. Your first priority should be to focus on those qualifications that can be quickly demonstrated within your current position.

In addition to your ECQs there are other qualities you will want to evaluate. Members of the SES, presidential appointees, and general/flag officers consistently talk about other leadership traits that are essential, including:

- Executive Presence – do you conduct yourself as an executive in your daily activities?
- Effective Communication Skills – are you able to communicate effectively both orally and in writing with a broad range of people?
- Ability to Listen to Opposing Views – are you able to use opposing views to strengthen your own?
- Interpersonal Skills – are you able to effectively interact with colleagues and participate in social events successfully?
- Critical Thinking – are you able to analyze and resolve complex problems?
- Manage and Understand Talent – do you understand how to bring your team and their talents together to create an effective team?
- Adaptability – are you able to successfully navigate change in a winning way?

Strong leaders should also have a broad perspective that allows them to manage the complexities of large organizations. SES positions often have Enterprise, National Security, and Joint leadership responsibilities; you need to have experience or training in those broader areas. These experiences are necessary for you to know how to build organizational relationships when you become a Senior Executive.

## DEVELOPMENT OF EXECUTIVE COMPETENCIES – MOVING FORWARD



Now that you have taken the first step by assessing your qualifications against the ECQs and other recognized leadership attributes and experiences, it is time to develop your strategy for obtaining or strengthening your qualifications. Using your prioritized list, determine what new experiences you need and can gain in your current position. Seek out opportunities to demonstrate or build leadership capabilities and enhance your personal development opportunities. Discuss opportunities with your supervisor and ask for opportunities in support of your overall plan:

- Rotational Assignments – seek broader roles/responsibilities
  - Within your Command
    - Cross Competency
  - Outside your Command
    - Consider assignments in OPNAV, the Fleet, Secretariat, Joint DoD, and other Federal agencies
    - Supervisor & Managerial Experience – lead teams, groups, and/or organizations

- Be Visible
  - Take a proactive leadership role within your Command
  - Volunteer for difficult assignments
  - Write well, get published
  - Be a speaker, participate on panels and conferences

Next, seek out any necessary opportunities for training that will give you exposure to areas unavailable to you in your current position. Consider training and development opportunities:

General Training Offerings:

- General/Mission
- Funding Management
- Budget Management
- Navy Working Capital Fund (NWCF) Management
- Planning, Programming, Budget & Execution (PPBE)
- DOD 5000
- DAU Continuous Learning
- Corporate Operations
- Workforce Leadership
- Lean Six Sigma
- Supervisor Training
- Business Unit Management
- High Performance Organizations

Sources for Executive Development Training

- Navy Executive Development at the Naval Postgraduate School
  - Navy Senior Leader Seminar
  - Strategic Communication Workshop
- Federal Executive Institute
  - Executive Leadership for America
  - Leadership for a Democratic Society
- Center for Creative Leadership
- Brookings Institution Executive Education
- Defense Senior Leadership Development Program (formerly DLAMP)

## IMPORTANCE OF MENTORS

In your journey toward a leadership position, mentors can play a significant role in your development. They can guide you as you gain new career opportunities and develop over time. Ultimately, they may act as your advocate when the time is right for you to become a Senior Executive. Your mentors (ideally you will have several) can include a broad spectrum of senior leaders including SES members, presidential appointees and general and/or flag officers. However, building a relationship with your mentors that is devoted to increasing your leadership capacities is not always easy. These individuals often have many pressing priorities and hectic schedules, so you will need to be flexible and properly organized to make the most of your time together.

Make sure to share your strategy for gaining experience and demonstrating competency with your mentor. Let them know of the types of positions and training you consider necessary to grow professionally. Share your ECQ qualification statements with them and ask for their feedback. Your mentors may even be willing to share their ECQ qualification statements with you. Always be open to their advice, guidance, and critiques.

## PREPARING YOUR RÉSUMÉ

Your résumé should provide additional information but not repeat what is in your ECQs or Technical Qualifications. This is your opportunity to demonstrate how you have progressed over the course of your career, how your positions have increased in responsibility over time, and how you have gained leadership experiences. Highlight how your career has prepared you for this specific position. Document skills, responsibilities, results, and impact from your work that demonstrates your ability to fill a specific leadership position. Perhaps most importantly, your résumé should always describe your experiences in your own words, and **never** parrot your position description (PD). Your PD simply states what your job is, not necessarily what you **did**.

While complying with the prescribed resume format, be sure to show creativity and find ways to highlight personal attributes you cannot emphasize elsewhere in your application package. At the same time, your résumé should be polished and contain no errors. As with your application, have as many people as possible read and closely check your résumé. You should choose a mix of detail oriented and creative people to give you the broadest possible feedback.

## PREPARING YOUR APPLICATION

SES vacancies are posted on the OPM USAJOBS website, <http://www.usajobs.gov/SES>. When the right SES position for you becomes available, it will be important to make your application package a priority. You will need to spend a significant amount of time preparing your application; some SES members indicate they have taken a week of leave and dedicated that time to preparing their packages. Because your application is tailored to the specific position, you may need to spend significant time reworking your previously drafted ECQs around a specific position. Pay close attention to the “How to Apply” instructions in the vacancy announcement and note the closing date of the announcement:

Required Documents:

- Résumé showing relevant experience
- Occupational Questionnaire
- Mandatory Technical Qualifications (narrative)
- Executive Core Qualifications (narrative)
- Copy of your most recent SF-50 (Notice of Personnel Action)

It is critical that your ECQs, in addition to the technical qualifications, be tailored to the specific position. Focus on experiences that best demonstrate the unique talents you would need to fill this specific leadership role, even if they are not ones of which you are most proud or the most recognized. The selection panel will be looking for applicants who have tailored their application to demonstrate experience and capability to fill this specific leadership position. Some panel members may know you and your skills, but they will have to evaluate you based on your application.

Make sure your application complies with all the requirements. Have as many people as possible review your application to offer different perspectives and feedback.

- Consider a 1-page summary of your career experience
  - State what you bring to the job in terms of the skills and experiences that make you the best qualified
- Ensure responses are brief and to the point
  - Limit each Mandatory Technical Qualification response to 2 pages
- Avoid writing like a position description
- Use underlining or bold text to draw attention to key points
- Be mindful when using technical jargon – external reviewers may not be familiar with your work
- Follow the “Challenge-Context-Action-Result” Model
- Prepare early – don’t wait for a vacancy to open to get started
- Have a mentor or another SES review your ECQs prior to submission
- Refer early...and often...to the Guide to SES Qualifications

## PREPARING FOR YOUR INTERVIEW

Typically, a selection panel will receive a large number of packages. They will review these packages individually and then meet to determine which applicants are “Highly Qualified,” “Qualified” or “Not Qualified.” In most cases only “Highly Qualified” applicants will be selected for an interview. The interview is a “structured interview.” A structured interview is an interview in which all candidates are asked the same questions in the same order and all candidates are evaluated using a common rating scale. When you get called to interview for a SES position, it is important to spend significant time preparing for the interview. You have worked very hard for this opportunity and the final stage is to prepare in order to have a successful interview.

First, never assume the panel knows who you are, or is able to connect you with any specific information in your application package. Your answers to their questions must be tied back to your application and résumé. Study your ECQ qualification statements and be prepared to talk about them in very concise ways. It is critical that you use your time wisely: answer the question and move onto the next question. Remember, in a structured interview each answer is scored individually and you must succinctly answer all parts of each question. Before you go to your interview, it is advisable to research the organization and the role of the SES position in that organization. Try to view that role from the broad perspectives you have gained throughout your career.

There are two questions to which you should have polished answers before you go into the interview. First, be prepared to explain in a compelling way why you are the best person for the job. Tie your explanation to your experiences, leadership philosophy, and career goals. Never be afraid to highlight your dedication to public service and your passion for leadership acumen.

Second, you must be ready to describe how you have had a demonstrable impact through your leadership capabilities. Be compelling to the point where they can easily see how you would have an impact on the Department through the position you hope to fill.

You should also have two prepared statements rehearsed and ready: your opening and closing statements. The opening statement should reflect your sincere interest in the position and your confidence in your qualifications. The closing statement should touch on those things that came up during the interview and your specific leadership style. These two questions and two statements should be rehearsed through mock interviews. You can conduct these mock interviews yourself with peers and mentors. Consider videotaping the interviews - visual feedback is very helpful.

Here are some useful tips for interviewing:

- Make eye contact with the entire panel.
- It is OK to pause and contemplate an answer before you speak.
- If the interviewer asks a follow up question, it could mean you did not answer the first one clearly and you should try to answer this new question differently.
- Try not to repeat negatives, instead focusing on positive attributes of your past experiences.
- Speak at a normal pace, not too fast.
- Listen, listen, listen!
- If they ask you more than one question within a question, ask them to repeat the second part (you may avoid this issue altogether by taking your own notes during your interview).
- When answering questions, try to articulate your perspective using the context, challenge, approach, and results.
- Let silence be your tool. Answer the question confidently and then be quiet. Let the panel ask the next question. The urge to fill the “blank verbal” space is strong, but you are the authority on the topics of your career, so you can confidently sit in silence.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The SES Selection Process: Once a vacancy announcement is advertised, the general timeframe to official selection notification is a minimum of 4-6 months. There are several steps in the selection process:

1. A Human Resources specialist reviews all applications to ensure basic qualifications are met
2. An Ad Hoc Executive Resources Board (AERB) is formed to evaluate and rank applications
3. Highly qualified applicants may be invited for an interview with the AERB members
4. AERB Chairperson submits selection recommendation to the selecting official
5. Additional round of interviews may be held with the selecting official
6. Final selection requires concurrence by the Echelon 1 of your Command and the Under Secretary of the Navy before it is official
7. ECQs must be certified by OPM if the selectee will be newly appointed to the SES

Becoming a member of the SES is not easy; you may spend a large portion of your career preparing for it. Realize there are many paths to the SES – explore the many opportunities available to you. Search out developmental assignments within and outside your organization. Remember, YOU must take charge of developing your executive skills!

## RESOURCES

U. S. Office of Personnel Management: <http://www.opm.gov/ses/>

DOD Senior Executive Service: <http://www.cpms.osd.mil/sespm/>

DON SES Biographies:

<http://www.public.navy.mil/DONHR/EXECUTIVEMANAGEMENT/ABOUTSENIOREXECUTIVES/Pages/Biographies.aspx>

DON Human Resources Resource Library:

<http://www.public.navy.mil/donhr/executivemanagement/Pages/ResourceLibrary.aspx>

DON Human Resource Training:

<http://www.public.navy.mil/donhr/TrainingDevelopment/Pages/Default.aspx>