



Pathways to Senior Executive Service (SES) Questions & Answers

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Why did you want to become an SES?

The desire to be of service, doing something greater than yourself to protect the Constitution, is what drew me to become an SES.

What do you think is one of the most important personal qualities to be a successful SES?

Start early thinking of yourself as a leader. Even if you are not in a formal leadership role, start thinking about how you want to lead and how you will lead. Watch the people around you who are leaders. Watch what they do that you want to emulate as well as what you don't want to emulate. Soft skills are also important. Leadership in general, working with people, how they interact, and how you can help them succeed are vital to your success as an SES. Be an inclusive leader and treat people the way you want to be treated.

What position or project do you feel prepared and propelled you into your first SES position?

Be willing to take risks and never be afraid to take on a challenge. Taking the jobs that nobody else wanted was the first catalyst for me becoming an SES. Taking a position in the resource management field where I learned the different colors of money was important. I also learned how to interact with Professional Staff Members on Capitol Hill. It was important to understand the difference between statute and policy and how do you make things happen. Make sure that with every position you take that you are trying to get better.

When you transitioned to SES, what was the biggest difference between GS and SES?

The need to think at a strategic level is one of the biggest differences between GS and SES. SES's are strategic leaders that visualize, plan, lead, and make the best out of the resources they have to execute strategies efficiently and successfully.

Why/how did you pick the mentor you did?

It is important to find a mentor who has attained specific goals you are aiming to accomplish. They should also exhibit a willingness to share skills, knowledge, and expertise. Candidness and honesty are also good qualities in a mentor. It is highly recommended to also have a mentor outside of your functional area.

How would you recommend someone not versed at networking go about identifying and engaging a prospective SES mentor...especially when most executives are presumably super busy in these times?

Finding a prospective mentor can be as simple as just asking. Be prepared to provide your resume as well as your short, mid, and long-term goals to facilitate the SES in providing you constructive feedback. Your respective services may also have tools to facilitate finding a mentor as well. For example, the Air Force has MyVector <https://myvector.us.af.mil/myvector/Home> that allows mentees to manage their career development with the input and guidance from a mentor. Mentees will be able to, in real-time, invite participants to serve as mentors, select mentors based on preferences, chat with their mentor online, and complete a mentoring plan.

How would you avoid the appearance of being considered a job hopper?

It is important to be in a job long enough to accomplish something substantial which will take some time. Understanding the people, the organization, what it needs and how it works will not be possible in six months to a year. In my experience it has taken three years to accomplish something significant. On the other end, if you find that you are not making contributions, then it can be a sign that it is time to look for another job. However, if you are changing jobs often, like every year, then that is when you are in danger of the job-hopping label.

How long did you stay in each position and how did you know when it was time to move to a new position? What would you consider to be too long to be in a position?

It is recommended to stay in a position for three years before moving to another. However, everyone's situation is different which does not preclude moving to a new position sooner than the three-year mark. You must have real accomplishments to make real progress in your career. Always look for opportunities to produce and generate results for the organization before moving to another position.

What is a rough timeline and time in station for a typical path from GS-13 to SES? Coming from outside the government to becoming an SES, does time in the government matter?

There is no specified timeline for becoming an SES. How quickly someone can meet the basic SES candidate qualification requirement varies. Executive Core Qualifications can be gained through jobs external to the government. Although time in government can be beneficial, it is not a prerequisite to becoming an SES.

In both instances the speaker has emphasized the importance of broadening experience by taking different positions. Typically the KSAs are explicit and if not experienced the GS would not be eligible. How does one (i.e., GS-14/15) apply for and qualify for positions outside their experience?

There are plenty development opportunities to accomplish broadening experience. For example, there is the Career Broadening Program. Within the respective services / agencies there are programs which will allow you to increase your breath of experience. Every year OSD has the Sustainment Fellows Program which is an opportunity for individuals to come TDY to get exposure to various strategic-level areas within the Pentagon. The nomination call goes out every year in February. There are also DoD-sponsored Civilian Leader Development and Broadening Programs that provide opportunities to expand experience as well. Visit the Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Services page for more information <https://www.dcpas.osd.mil/learning/civilianleaderdevelopmentbroadeningother>. These opportunities can be applied for through your respective service / agency's nomination call for Civilian Developmental Education. Make sure you stay connected with your Career Field Office to stay aware of the available opportunities. Detailed assignments are also a way to get away from your typical daily routine and test the waters to see if it is something in which you are interested. Look for opportunities to attend programs like the Eisenhower School that also provide broadening experience.

Do you have to be a supervisor or manager in the government to move forward? I have significant leadership outside of the government but trying to understand what is required within the government.

Even if you don't have an official supervisor role there are always opportunities to get people together to accomplish something. Look for chances where you can work with and lead other people. Don't forget about the things you do outside of work, like at church or social organizations, that could add to your resume as a reference to your supervisory skills. Leading people is one of the executive core qualifications in which prospective SES candidates must demonstrate. This core qualification involves the ability to lead people, whether in or outside of the government, towards meeting the organization's vision, mission, and goals.

What are some of the best sources you have found for training and developmental opportunities?

There are plenty of learning and growth opportunities to include DAU in which you can self-enroll. Going through the vectoring process and obtaining feedback helps leadership identify people who are interested in taking advantage of development opportunities. DAU is building a credential program that

will give people the opportunity to gain skills. There is also the informal piece, like goggling YouTube videos, where you can enhance your learning to yield the desired outcomes on your job. Each service / agency has their respective sources for training and development opportunities. The DCPAS website is an excellent source for training and developmental opportunities. Visit the DCPAS website at <https://www.dcpas.osd.mil/learningprofessionaldevelopment> for more details. Additional training and development program can be found on the DoD Civilian Careers website <https://www.dodciviliancareers.com/whyworkfordod/careerdevelopmentgrowth>. Contact your supervisor or respective Career Field Manager for more information.

Have we seen any SES positions move to remote telework? Do you expect to see remote telework SES opportunities in the future?

The option to telework as an SES is a consideration. Don't be shy about asking about opportunities. Many civilian agencies outside DoD have full-time remote telework opportunities for their SES's. In addition, some organizations are geographically dispersed which makes leadership's ability to remotely connect with their personnel a vital necessity. As a result, it is possible for an SES to remotely telework as the situation dictates.

How important do you think it is for a mentor to be in close proximity to their protégé as opposed to being in another state for example?

Technology enables mentors to effectively communicate with their mentees despite their geographical location. Mobility requirements can eventually create situations where mentors are geographically separated from their mentees as well. More important than location, is keeping the lines of communication open. The most important thing is you must be able to relate to your mentor. Proximity helps but it is not necessary to having an effective mentor and mentee relationship.

Do you have any management/leadership tips on how to deal with moving into a position where you may have employees that are more technically qualified than you in that particular area and may feel they could have been promoted into your current position?

A great deal of consideration is put into selecting individuals to SES positions. Technical qualifications are just one of the many components required to make SES. The best thing to do in this situation is to remain professional and strive to do the best at the job for which you were selected.

Can you speak about balancing family with SES responsibilities?

It is critical to success at any level of your career to maintain a healthy work-life balance. A conscious decision and subsequent effort must be made to make balance a priority. Always include family in on discussions relative to your career and what it really means to be an SES. Mobility and career progression requires a family discussion. Also, make determinations on when it is conducive to take on

the responsibilities of an SES. Establishing boundaries to help protect your family from the obligations of work and vice versa can help establish and maintain work-life balance.

Should we focus on one agency to reinforce the “network” aspect of establishing relationships?

It is highly desirable to have leadership positions at more than one base/installation/operating location and MAJCOM/CoCOM HQs, and OSD, Joint Staff, or HAF. It is possible to establish relationships at various agencies throughout your career.

What GS grade and at how many years should you start your SES journey?

The journey to SES should start as soon as you are eligible to participate in civilian development education (CDE) programs. It is highly recommended to submit a vectoring package to obtain feedback from senior leaders to gauge what opportunities you should endeavor. In some cases, a bachelor’s degree is required to participate in CDE. Because a master’s degree is highly desired to make SES, it is prudent to start pursuing higher education as soon as possible.

When should you start on your Executive Core Qualifications (ECQ) documentation?

ECQ documentation, at the GS-14/GS15 or equivalent level (i.e. NH-IV, DR-5, etc), should start as soon as you are interested in becoming an SES. OPM states in its SES guide that you can expect to devote 80 or more hours to develop your ECQs. Start on your ECQ’s as soon as possible. Do not wait until an SES opportunity becomes available. Documenting your performance and contributions along the way will help to develop a strong set of ECQs. As you identify gaps in the SES Accession template / basic SES qualification requirements, take additional assignments to fill those gaps. Work with your mentor to identify gaps and come up with a plan to fill them.

Are there workshops or training courses to help in writing ECQs and MQTs?

The OPM website <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/senior-executive-service/executive-core-qualifications/#url=Overview> has a *Guide to Senior Executive Service Qualifications* with detailed information on writing good ECQ’s. OPM also has workshops available. Another good resource is *The New SES Application* book by Kathryn Troutman and Diane Hudson provided to Civilian Strategic Leader Program (CSLP) participants. In addition, some of the services sponsor workshops through the career field managers or personnel center. Defense Senior Leader Development Program (DSLDP) participants receive ample training in writing ECQ’s and are given a mock interview as well. The best resource is the have mentors who can provide you career advice and feedback on your SES package.

What suggestions do you have on how to best present the 5 executive core qualifications, i.e. should they be from the most recent experiences or a variety from your past roles?

Make sure experiences and accomplishments are written in a clear and organized manner. Use action verbs and "I" instead of third person. Quantify experience using numbers, percentages, or timelines. Use measurable results whenever possible and make sure the examples used are current and relevant. Spell out acronyms and write in layperson's terms. It is most appropriate to use experiences / examples within the last 10 years.

Is short term mobility common or is it comparable to military PCS with regards to how long you're in one position?

Most SES's have rotated and had different jobs that facilitated obtaining breadth of experience. The length of the job assignment depends on the needs of the organization. Be prepared to sign mobility agreements as an SES. The key is to be flexible on job location.

Would you recommend applying direct to SES or start with White House Leadership Development Program?

The White House Leadership Development Program (WHLDP) is one of many premiere strategic level development programs highly desirable for SES applicants. WHLDP aims to develop high potential GS-15 employees (and equivalents) to be the next generation of senior executives. There are other programs aimed at developing senior executives as well. Completing the WHLDP does not guarantee nor is it a required prerequisite to making SES. As a result, it is a personal decision whether to pursue the WHLDP or apply directly for an SES.

Since a master's degree is "highly desired," what would be a recommended degree to look into and obtain?

The master's degree pursued should align with your career or personal goals. Once you have identified the specific skills you need, you should identify what schools offer programs to help you acquire those skills. It is important to ensure that the institution and specific degree program are accredited. Accreditation ensures that institutions of higher education satisfy certain standards.

Would a PhD degree increase your chances to be considered/selected for SES?

Obtaining a PhD is not a required prerequisite to becoming an SES. However, because a master's degree is higher highly desired, a PhD would be look upon favorably as well.

What are the must haves on the path to SES?

Outstanding performance and having made key contributions to the DoD are paramount to becoming an SES. Although not required, it is highly desirable to have a master's degree. It is also highly desirable to complete senior development education plus one or more strategic level development courses (Leadership in Democratic Society, National Security Management, etc.). Regarding assignments, having

had a leadership position at more than one base/ installation/ operating location and MAJCOM/CoCOM headquarters and OSD, Joint Staff, or HAF is highly desired to make SES. Finally, having fundamental competencies like interpersonal skills, oral and written communication, and integrity / honesty are favorable for making SES.

What are certain pathways to pivot through to obtain the SES level at MDA or other agencies in DoD?

There is not one specific pathway to becoming an SES. How someone meets the basic SES candidate qualification requirements can vary. It is important to be able to demonstrate the Executive Core Qualifications required to become an SES. Feedback from mentors is critical to gauging whether you are on the right path.

What is the most direct path to SES (i.e. War College, Senior Enterprise Talent Management and other development courses, etc.).

There is not one specific path to becoming an SES. How someone meets the basic SES candidate qualification requirements can vary. There are several developmental courses that will help meet the qualification requirements. Feedback from mentors is critical to gauging whether you are on the right path to becoming an SES.

How do I participate in a program that would support active development to SES, and what are those programs?

Apply for Civilian Development Education opportunities within your respective services/agencies when the annual nomination call is released. Programs that support active development to senior leadership includes the Defense Civilian Emerging Leader Program, Defense Senior Leader Development Program (DSLDP), Executive Leadership Development Program, Vanguard Senior Executive Leadership Program, and White House Leadership Development Program. For example, DSLDP specifically helps with developing ECQ's and preparing for interviews. Contact your immediate supervisor for more information on how and when to apply for these opportunities.

Is Air War College or other senior-level PME required to be competitive if you have accomplished Air Command and Staff College in residence?

Don't stop at Air Command and Staff College. If you are eligible to take Air War College, consider taking it through correspondence. Completing Air War College positioned me to be eligible for an additional PME opportunity like Eisenhower School. If you have the grade and the rank and are eligible to take the applicable PME then you should take it. It's better to have it and not need it rather than not have it and need it.