

# Getting an Instructional Design Position in the Defense Industry

MaryAnn Lynchard  
*United Airlines Services Corporation*  
12424 Research Parkway, Suite 145  
Orlando, Florida 32826

Many instructional design positions can now be found in the defense industry. These include Department of Defense (DOD) civil service positions, and positions in companies which provide training services to DOD. Thirty years ago the majority of persons in military training were military personnel, retired military personnel, and civil servants in DOD organizations. However, as technology became more complex, military training began to require more in terms of planning and development than could be provided by personnel not skilled in the theory and practice of learning. Thus was born the requirement in the defense industry for persons trained in instructional design and development.

Obtaining an instructional design position in the defense industry has become highly desirable because this arena offers some of the highest salaries in the field, many opportunities for advancement, and opportunities for growing into related areas. Obtaining a position in this area, however, requires some special effort on your part. In this paper, I will cover some standard rules of thumb that apply to all job hunting, as well as some guidelines that apply directly to jobs in the defense industry.

Job hunting involves pre-interview preparation and post-interview follow-up. It requires feeling comfortable and confident during the interview in order to present your best self to the interviewer. In addition, it involves knowing as much as possible about the position and the agency. The suggestions that follow are organized around this framework.

## Pre-interview

Before you begin job hunting, take some time to survey the types of positions available in the field of instructional design, and select those in which you have interest. This information is available in the job listings in your department or university job placement office, in trade journals and from graduates of your department. In addition, the defense industry often has listings of companies that may have training positions, which can be obtained from job incumbents. Once you have surveyed the area and identified the companies and/or agencies for which you might like to work, prepare a resume and cover letter and send it to them. If you are interested in civil service, you must complete an SF (standard form) 171, and follow the current procedures for civil service job application.

## The Resume

The resume for a position in the defense industry should be tailored to that industry. You want to emphasize any experience in military training. Experience in the military or in areas considered subject matter in the defense industry should also be emphasized. Less relevant experience should be noted, but not detailed. A resume for the defense industry should be concise—two to four pages. Tailoring a resume is time-consuming, but it is necessary to communicate your appropriate experience to the employer. If you have a lot of experience, it may be difficult to restrict it to four pages, but a longer resume, or a vita, will probably not be read, and valuable experience will be overlooked. If you are applying for a civil service position, the job description will list four to six points of required experience. You

must respond to these points specifically, outlining your experience. These pages should be attached to the SF 171 where it says to add Supplemental Pages. Usually, no one will tell you to do this.

## The Cover Letter

The purpose of the cover letter is to form a bridge between your resume and the job description. The cover letter should be written point for point to match the job description. If the description you have is scant, try to obtain more information by calling the employer. It is not necessary to talk to the employer himself. In fact, talking to the secretary may be more fruitful. Or, you may talk to the personnel office, which usually has a good job description. An employee or another person in the industry may be able to supply some insights into the job. In any case, organize your letter around the job description and briefly summarize your experience and education relating to each point. This shows that you understand the job requirements and that you have the background and experience to perform this job. After reading the letter the employer has an "advance organizer" for reading your resume. As the employer reads the resume, he will concentrate on those areas primarily applicable to the job opening, as you have outlined. In other words, you are directing his review of your resume.

## The Phone Call

After the employer has reviewed your letter and resume, one of three things will occur—nothing, a no-thank-you letter, or an invitation for an interview. Usually the invitation will come as a

phone call. Be prepared for it. You have sent out applications; expect that someone will invite you for an interview. This means, when you receive the phone call, be professional—be prepared to say yes or no to the interview time offered, or to suggest an alternate time. It is best to take the time offered, if possible. Do not stumble around, or offer explanations as to why that time is not good. Say, "Yes, I can make it," or "That would be difficult for me, do you have another time available?" Realize that the employer is trying to schedule all of the interviewees, and that several interviewers may be involved in the process. The employer will usually realize that your time is also important, and will try to accommodate your schedule. Also, ask how long the interview will be, if this information is not provided. Some interviews take one or two hours; some take a day. Try to leave extra time after the interview in case it runs late. Although most organizations will try to be timely, anything can happen. You should not be the one to end the interview, especially if it's going well. The interviewer should end the interview.

have, and be able to describe the situations in which you performed this skill. Also be able to cite where you did this and for how long you did this. If you haven't performed a certain skill, say so. If you have had courses in the area, respond with, "I have education in front-end analysis, but I have not as yet applied this skill." What you have said here is that you have the skill; you have just not had the opportunity to use it. Be prepared to respond in a confident manner if the interviewer asks for a reference. Offer a name or a list of references if you haven't already provided one. Remember, you can take notes to the interview. It's all right to carry a small pad both as a reference and for taking notes during the interview.

Next, know the job area and what the company does. Do not go into an interview not knowing why you are there. Do some research. Again, calling the company's personnel department or the employer's secretary is best. Sometimes you can find data in trade journals or from local business organizations. It's always nice to tell an interviewer that you noticed that the company just won a

perience in subject matter areas or areas which are similar or related. Some companies want their training developers to be instructors also.

### Questions

Make a list of questions you want to ask about the job and the company. Put them in your notebook. Intelligent questions about the company are as important as intelligent answers. The interviewer will expect these questions and will usually ask you what you want to know. Not having questions indicates that you are just trying to get any job, and have not really considered working in the defense industry.

### Additional Materials

Bring a few examples of your work in case you are asked. Carry them in an attache case, not in your hand. Give the interviewer only the one(s) requested. If none are requested, take them home.

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### The Interview

A first impression is irrevocable. Be prompt, look good, and be professional. Get to the interview location early so that you have time to find the rest room and check your appearance. Go into the office and tell the secretary who you are and why you are there—"I am Bob Smith and I have a two-thirty appointment with George Taylor." If you have spoken to the secretary earlier and know her name, use it. Secretaries are generally wonderful people who can be your best allies. When the interviewer comes out and greets you, shake his hand firmly and speak clearly. Interpersonal relationships and communication are a part of the job in this industry. Once the interview begins, expect most of the following to be evaluation points during your interview.

### Professional Demeanor

In this business you will be expected to interact with the client who will

### Preparation

Before you go to the interview, prepare yourself. Know yourself—your strengths and weaknesses and your background. Review yourself in light of the job for which you are applying. When the interviewer says "Have you ever done front-end analysis?", be able to respond with a positive answer if you

big contract or an award. But it's nicer to know why you are there. If your background is in education and you are applying for a job with the defense industry, talk to someone who has a similar job (check graduates in the defense industry) and find out what these jobs require. Many companies want the employee to have subject matter expertise. Be able to cite your ex-

usually be military personnel. You may also interact with Department of Defense civil servants. The level of professionalism you show during the interview will be viewed as the behavior you will extend on the job. This does not mean be stiff and formal; it means be comfortable and friendly, but always professional.

## Knowledge

*The defense industry.* If you have done your homework, you are ready for this. For example, you may be asked if you have ever designed instruction that included training device specifications. It is all right to say no; it is not all right to say, "Training what?". It is especially important to know what this industry is about in order to decide if it is suitable for you. It is a technical business, requiring the instructional designer to gain knowledge about the operation and maintenance of vehicles and equipment which are often computerized and employ state-of-the-art technologies. This knowledge will only come on the job; however, knowledge of computers, simulation, video disc, computer-based instruction and similar technologies is important. You need not have had specific courses, but reading some of the trade journals, such as *Instruction Delivery Systems*, can make you conversant in these areas.

*Instructional Systems Development (ISD).* It is essential that you communicate your understanding of the theory and application of ISD. The military adheres to ISD models that are based on the *Interservice Procedures for Instructional Systems Development* (1975) developed by Dr. Robert K. Branson, et al, at Florida State University, for military applications. When interviewing, you must first discern if your interviewer is a fellow instructional designer. If so, you can speak more technically, using ISD jargon. However, if the interviewer is non-ISD, you must communicate your knowledge and abilities in layman's terms. The defense industry is more interested in your ability to apply ISD under varying circumstances than in your adherence to the perfect ISD model. In fact, if you are a purist, this may not be the business for you.

## Skills

*Oral communication.* As mentioned above, your ability to discern the experience level of your interviewer in ISD and then communicate on that level is extremely important. Much of the front end analysis in the defense industry is performed during interviews with military subject matter experts who have a variety of backgrounds and experiences. You must be able to communicate your interest and requirements to them in such a way as to ensure their understanding and cooperation. The only way for an interviewer to judge your oral communication skills is by your performance during the interview.

designer, you must discern the structure of a job and analyze it. Task analyses, flow charts, objectives hierarchies and course outlines are all logical structures requiring organization. Some of your work samples may be appropriate here also.

*Team performance.* In the defense industry you will often be required to work as a team member. Be able to cite any experience you have had working on teams and your responsibilities as a team member.

*Independent performance.* You may sometimes be expected to work with little or no direction. Show that you have the ability to take control of a situation and develop your own structures and

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Organize your cover letter around the job description and your education and experience so that the employer has an "advance organizer" for reading your resume.

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*Written communication.* The first examples of your written communication are your resume and cover letter. These are extremely important. If these are sloppy or grammatically incorrect, you will not be called for an interview. Samples of the work you have brought may be useful here. Be prepared to leave the samples with the interviewer unless it is something not copied, like a brochure or book. If the interviewer wants to look it over, ask if he can send it back to you.

*Organization.* The way you present your information to the interviewer will demonstrate your organizational skills. Again your preparation and notebook are useful here. Take a moment to think before answering a question. Recall that the basis of the instructional design process is logic. As an instructional

perform within them. Cite some examples of independent activity on your part.

## Experience

The interviewer will use your resume as a guide to the interview, and ask you specific questions regarding jobs you have performed. He will ask you to describe what you did during the curriculum development for the flight simulator at Hi-tech Inc. He will very often ask you what difficulties you encountered during a job. He is interested not in the problem as much as in what you did to overcome it and to complete the job on time and within budget. You will be asked about your experience in

the following areas.

*Instructional systems development.* It is important to have experience which demonstrates your application of the principles of ISD. If you are going to be looking for your first job after graduation, get some experience whether through a graduate assistantship, consulting, or developing some instruction on your own time.

*Technical/military training.* You will be asked if you have any experience in military training. If not, then bring up any experience you have in technical training areas. You will not, of course, be expected to have this experience if you are a recent graduate or applying for a low level ISD position. However, the interviewer will try to discern if you can handle technical subject matter. So if you have any technical experience in training or otherwise, bring it up. Computer skills are also very important. Many businesses now provide computer terminals at each work station. Finally, be sure to mention military experience, if any.

*Technology.* Be sure to detail any experience or education you have in computer-based instruction, simulation, video-disc or other high technology areas. These skills are essential in the military training/simulation industry.

*Proposal writing.* This is an area of the highest import in the defense industry, as this is how business is obtained. When a request for proposal in an area in which the company has been marketing is released, the necessary company personnel will be diverted from all other duties to write the proposal. Experience in proposal writing can be a significant plus in your interview. Many of the treatises on proposal writing are unpublished; however, *Positioning To Win—Planning and Executing the Superior Proposal* by J.M. Beveridge and E.J. Velton (1982), would be useful to review.

## Performance

During your interview you may be asked to demonstrate your skills in some practical way. You may be asked to perform a development task. In this case, you will usually be isolated and given a specific period of time. Take time to review the question and organize your response. Or, you may be given a scenario and asked how you would app-

ly the principles of instructional design to solve the problem. If you are not isolated to do this, you may want to ask some questions. But first, take some time to think and to organize your response. Or, you may be asked to respond to materials. For example, you may be given a list of objectives or some curriculum materials and asked for a brief evaluation. Here's where your skills at tact will become evident. You may ask about the materials, trying to discern if the interviewer thinks they are good or bad (or whether he wrote them himself). Review the materials and give an honest, but carefully-worded, review. Never make an overall statement of how good or bad they are. Instead, highlight specific areas that are, first, good, and then some that might stand improvement. This task also highlights for the interviewer your ability to evaluate, as well as to communicate in an honest but tactful manner—a skill you will employ often in this industry.

## Post-interview

If the interviewer has not indicated when you can expect to hear from him, ask. Then, immediately write a thank you letter to him. Reiterate the response time he has given. You can also say something about the job if you are really interested. Mention the match between the job and your skills and how you feel that this job is one in which you can excel. Then, wait two or three days after the indicated response time and call if you have not heard from the employer. Introduce yourself, mention the position, and ask if a decision has been made. If a decision has not yet been reached, ask if there is any further information you can provide. Ask when a decision is likely to be made. If you need to make a decision yourself, say so. Be prepared to state the date by which you must make your decision. If the employer is very interested in you, he will try to accommodate you.

## Conclusion

Getting the job you want requires a great deal of thought, time, energy, and some cost. The most important aspect of

getting any job, however, is belief in yourself. You must be confident in your abilities and believe that you can get the job that is best suited for you. It is your responsibility to convince the interviewer that you are the best candidate for the job. Support yourself with adequate preparation and excellent documentation. Then if you don't get the job, it will probably be because someone else was simply more qualified. However, by having made a good impression, the interviewer may very well pass on a reference about you to someone else looking for an employee. There is a great deal of communication among people in the defense industry, and the impression you make in an interview will often be communicated to other companies.

Good Luck!

## References

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