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Career Spotlight: FBI Agent

Interviewee

Mark White

Job Title: Special Agent

Years in Field: 10 years

How does someone get a job at the FBI?

What's required: you need to be age 23-37, have a bachelor's degree, maybe a post-grad degree; you need to have had some kind of career and excelled at it. You need 2 or 3 years of full-time employment, life experience. You must be extremely responsible; we are incredibly autonomous. Management skills: if you can supervise a bunch of other people you can certainly run yourself. Also language skills are useful: I speak Spanish fluently. We hire only a tiny percentage of applicants. The year I started, they hired 400 out of 58,000 applicants.

I became a police officer only to get into the FBI. I did law enforcement for 6 years, worked as a cop full time while I was still working on my bachelors' degree. To me it only made sense to get a criminal justice degree, but I don't think it matters what you have a degree in. A business degree would have been just as impressive, and more knowledge of the business world could be extremely advantageous. Languages are useful: Arabic, Urdu, Farsi. And computers, because cyber crime has become a major initiative. When I was at the FBI academy people came from all kinds of diverse backgrounds – police officers, federal agencies, military, a nurse, a teacher, a grocery store manager.

What do you most enjoy about being an FBI agent?

Two big things: first, I love the autonomy. Some days I'm driving in, an informant calls, somebody's loading up a car with a drug shipment, we call people. That night I'm in Boise, and realize I never even made it to the office, nobody called me. We're not micro-managed. There's an implicit trust that you weren't just out shopping. That's why they're meticulous about who they hire.

Second, every day, whatever I do is contributing toward making the world a better place, doing the right thing. I'm on the right path. It's not a sales job: I never have to lie to someone to make them buy something. Even on a slow day, when I'm just going to type reports, dictate interviews, meet an informant – all that paperwork is in service of what we do. I never have to do anything that's wrong, or against my moral code, because it's required by the job.

We do get paid better than most law enforcement, but if you go into law enforcement to make money you're going into the wrong line of work. People take pay cuts to work here. To some extent those people have to be enticed by some idea of service. Or they're high-strung people, who find the business world isn't an exciting playing field after a while. For most of those



people there's some calling, in principle, that causes them to come and serve. Call that idealism, patriotism, wanting to make the world a better place.

You've got to work hard. That's why judgment and discretion are important: you're so autonomous. We're in charge of ourselves. You better love this job, have a mission philosophy, not just be putting in hours. It can consume you.

What is most challenging about the job?

The nature of FBI investigations just in itself is challenging. Complex interstate or international investigations become very challenging because of scope and size. A police department or sheriff's office doesn't have the resources to coordinate that, even a simple business stealing cars in California, chopping in Phoenix, selling in New York. We have those resources. I've worked investigations that have spanned 22 cities.

The first year I worked in a terrorism unit but I wasn't thrilled with my assignment. Later I worked on bank robberies, extortion, kidnappings and I found I like working situations that have a definitive victim, somebody to save.

What do you wish you'd known before you joined the FBI?

I don't think I realized how my personal happiness would be dictated by my work assignment. The FBI can send me anywhere. I've worked in 32 states, 3 countries, and I found that I love travel and I could work and be happy anywhere, but not everybody is that way.

Being an FBI agent is the greatest job in the world. When I'm filling out vouchers I might say, "James Bond doesn't do this," but we have international travel, we're paid well to do interesting work that will make the world a better place. I'd never go back to doing anything else.