



## Monthly Meeting: July 2019

Aaron: Hi, this is Aaron. How you doing?

Jack: Good, Aaron. How are you doing?

Aaron: Good. It might just be the two of us here.

Jack: It might be. Where are you at?

Aaron: D.C. actually.

Jack: Ah, sweet. I used to live in D.C.

Aaron: I've lived here for the better part of almost 30 years now.

Jack: Oh, wow.

Aaron: Yeah. I am considering the foreign service as a second career.

Jack: So, are you in D.C. proper or outside of D.C.?

Aaron: Oh, yeah. No, I'm in D.C. proper. I've only lived in D.C. I've lived in three of four quadrants since I moved here in '91 to come to college.

Jack: Okay.

Aaron: So.

Jack: Yeah. I used to live in Bloomingdale.

Aaron: Got it. Yeah. I'm now in Navy Yard.

Jack: Okay.

Aaron: Which is not a neighborhood anybody would've lived in when I first came here.

Jack: Yeah.

Aaron: Or even ten years ago or 15 years ago, I guess. I've lived there for seven years now, so ten years ago is a bit of an exaggeration.

Jack: Okay.

Aaron: Certainly 15 years ago.

Jack: All right, cool. So, how can I help you?

Aaron: I don't know. I mean, I was just sort of thinking about listening in. I didn't know how these calls worked. How many people generally were on, how they go. I'll tell you, like I said, I'm planning on taking the test in October, signing up, doing this as a second career. It has obviously been a really long time since... I'm a lawyer. I've been practicing law for almost 20 years. So, it's been a really long time since I've actually done any sort of formal studying for things like economics or any of that kind of stuff.

Aaron: So, I've actually taken some practice tests and done pretty well. I took the State Department one and you know the one that's actually on the website. And amusingly enough I was given 99% chance of passing for both the sort of whatever the section is called about the job knowledge, the job knowledge section and the English usage section. And somehow I bombed the situational judgment section, which is amusing since I've been practicing law for 20 years. And you'd think that one would have developed reasonable judgment in that time.

Jack: Right.

Aaron: So. And part of it is I think the questions are kind of stupid because it's... I mean, and obviously when taking a test you should never analyze the questions too deeply. I mean, obviously you need to answer the questions. But it's like, I'm not sure I would do any of those things. So, determining which one of those is the best is not... anyway.

Aaron: So, beyond your blog post, which I actually did find to be helpful, do you have any suggestions as far as situational judgment? Or like on the app, for example, I've taken some of the tests on the app and things like U.S. government, given the fact that I'm a lawyer, I'm scoring 90% correct. But some things like say economics or... I don't know what else.

Jack: Like geography, international relations?

Aaron: Those I tend to do pretty well at. World history and geography is... U.S. government, U.S. society and culture, the high eighties low nineties percentage. World history and geography not quite as good but decent. But things like economics and management not quite as... I'm not scoring quite as well on.

Jack: Yeah.

Aaron: So, that said, some of those economics questions seem, at least on the app, seem as if you have to have a friggin PhD in economics to-

Jack: No. I got to tell you, I've gone through those app questions as well a few years ago. I don't know if they've updated it or not. But in the times I've taken the test, the app questions are so much harder than what I've found on the actual exam. Because you're right, like it seems like you need a doctorate degree.

Aaron: Yeah.

Jack: I mean, like when it comes to economics, I'd really just stick to the broader things. Look at micro, look at macro, and look at what like the main components of each are. What is supply and demand? How does monetary policy really work, things like that.

Aaron: Got it. So, essentially like Cliff Notes of micro and macro economics, basically.

Jack: Exactly. Cliff Notes and the Dummies books, I think, are one of the best resources available for people.

Aaron: Got it. Got it. That's helpful. Would you say the same for something like management?

Jack: Yeah. I'd say the same for management. But, again, I mean I think for the majority of questions those should be fine. But, in my experience, and one of the things that I also try to do with this is really make sure to maintain the nondisclosure agreement.

Aaron: Yeah. No, understood.

Jack: So, broad, general. But one of the things is that you'll always find like the general stuff. So, like for economics you got supply and demand that you should just generally know. But they always sprinkle in some questions are a little bit harder that they just try to see where you are at. Because, even though what they're trying to do right now is just find general officers so you should just have general knowledge, if there's anything that can help you advance just a little bit, that's where you'll shine, just like the random knowledge that you might know.

Jack: So, it's interesting that when it comes to the online state department tests and they say 99%, one thing to keep in mind is like I do suggest still just like reviewing. Because you might've scored 99% well on those questions. Those aren't the same questions that you're going to get on the test.

Aaron: Oh, agreed. And-

Jack: Yeah. So, it's like you did good on that one, but it doesn't necessarily mean you'll do good on others.

Aaron: Understood.

Jack: I've heard from people who have really well on them and then bombed the actual test.

Aaron: No. I mean, I'm a relatively well read person. And so, it's not like... I actually read years ago Guns, Germs, and Steel, right?

Jack: Yeah.

Aaron: So, some of the books that are on the State Department suggested reading list I already was familiar with or had read. And so, I'm reading a lot of the less textbooky type stuff, right? I mean, I'm not reading a microeconomics textbook, for example. But the Stephen Ambrose foreign service or foreign policy book, whose name I can't remember at the moment, I read that, Ghost Wars. I mean, so basically, I mean, I'm essentially studying sort of, with a small S, if you want to think of it like that, between now and the October test. I'm not, oh, I know this stuff.

Aaron: The other thing that I'm finding reasonably helpful, and I don't know if you've ever thought of this or have recommended this to anybody, but there's an app called Brainscape

that has AP exam questions or questions to help study for the AP exam. And so, there's AP European history, AP U.S. government, AP world history, so all sorts of things that you would expect to be on the test, probably even in greater detail than what I'm seeing as some of the questions that I've seen in various forums for the test. So, anyway, there's like a small monthly fee. I mean, I think I signed up to pay ten dollars a month and I can cancel it anytime. So, just pay until October and then cancel and see if I pass the test.

Jack: What's it called?

Aaron: It's called Brainscape is the name of the app.

Jack: Brainscape. Okay.

Aaron: Yeah. I mean, you should check it out because it seems like-

Jack: I will.

Aaron: I mean, so basically like, so AP U.S. government for example, like there are about 15 flashcard decks. It's essentially flash cards, right? And then, I do a random mix to study. And then, it asks questions. So, it shows a picture of Andrew Jackson. When was this person president? And so, that's probably more information than you... I don't know that you need to know the exact dates of his presidency.

Jack: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aaron: And so, those are maybe slightly less useful than some of the other questions. But I have found, in the legislative process what is a referendum? I mean, that's a reasonable question that might be on the... and so, they're not multiple choice. And so, then it describes a referendum enables voters to directly cast ballots on proposed laws. And then, often there's a little bit of additional information. During the progressive era reformers championed the referendum as a means of enhancing the role of voters in their government.

Jack: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aaron: That kind of general U.S. government and history knowledge seems like it would be useful. It seems like the kind of questions that I see on the various practice tests around, including yours and the one done by the State Department itself.

Jack: Right. No. That sounds like a really good resource. I'm going to go check it out. The other one that I suggest to you, and it's a free resource, is Khan Academy. They have a lot of AP questions on there as well.

Aaron: Yeah. Actually, strangely enough, my daughter uses that to study. I have a high school student daughter and she uses that study math too, so.

Jack: Yeah. I mean, when it comes down to it, because if you think about it, like the minimum employment requirements for the State Department, really you don't need a college degree. You just have to have the high school diploma. Everything else is just experience. So, if you think about it at that and that's the level that they're looking at, that's why you can really just like have general knowledge of many of the different like seven topic areas. And you should be able to do well.

Aaron: Yeah. Understood. Understood. Now I'm curious, so beyond having taken the practice test, the State Department practice test, and I think a couple of their publications, the State Department's publications have explanations for a handful of those situational judgment questions.

Jack: Okay.

Aaron: And again, your blog, which that's sort of step-by-step. Don't go around your boss. Don't throw your colleagues under the bus sort of thing. I mean, all of those make sense. But I am not seeing online, for example, a lot of resources on the situational judgment stuff like there are on the general knowledge or even the English usage sections of the test. Is it just because they're so new?

Jack: Yeah. I think it's a combination of, one that it's so new. It's only been around for less than two years now. It came out in late 2017. And two, because it's very gray. So, if you look at some of the questions, and I know it's in the practice test too, they'll give you four or five options and two of them are pretty similar to one another. It's just one might be one direction, like taking it a little bit further than the other. And you just have to figure out which one to go. And that's just hard to try to explain or describe to people when it comes to studying, or at least that's my feeling for it.

Jack: So, that's why I don't think there's a lot of resources out there. There are some situational questions that are not related to the foreign service that I was able to find where I think it is for like business managers and especially those who are dealing with customer service. I found situational additional questions for that. Like lady X doesn't want to pay for the shoes because she thought the discount was going to apply and it didn't. What do you do and here's five options. They help, but it's not like the office environment and you're dealing with someone trying to get their visa. It's slightly different.

Jack: But just in looking at all the information, that's why I put that blog post together just to try to come up with some kind of concise way to help people pass the situational judgment. And like you said, it really is listen to the boss, don't go around them, don't be a pain in the butt, and really be active. One of the things that I think is really key is don't punt. And just,

if you're given an initiative, go do it. If you have a question about something, don't pass it on to someone else. Go figure it out yourself. And have an action plan before you bring a situation to a supervisor. I think if you keep to those main principles, you should be fine.

Aaron: That makes sense. That makes sense. I guess, and maybe this is on the blog and I just haven't looked at some of the older posts, but what's your background?

Jack: Yeah, sure. So, my background is I have an MA in political science. And ever since then, I've been doing basically education. Currently do education policy for the state of Washington. And that's my education background.

Jack: I used to be a dependent of a foreign service officer. So, I know the lifestyle of growing up overseas and what it entails and some of the expectations when it comes to actually being an officer. But really like the blog started because it was my journey of trying to pass this test and just finding out that there's a large community out there of people who really don't know what's going on. So, it's just like trying to navigate through that and write it up. And hopefully helping others in trying to pass the test. Because it's not only the test, it's also the narratives, then there's the orals, and everything else, so.

Aaron: Understood. Are you still trying to pass the test? I mean, are you still pursuing a career?

Jack: Yeah. I'm still trying to pursue it. So, one thing to always keep in mind, and for you, I'm sure you know, being that this is going to be a second career for you, so this should always be plan B. Live your life. Don't just try to focus on this. But, for me, I got to the orals last year. And I didn't pass the orals. So, now I'm doing it all over again. I passed the test a month ago. And I'm submitting PNs tomorrow. Actually, they're due tomorrow. I'll submit them tonight. But personal narratives are due right now.

Aaron: Got it. NRC now... let me ask you a question about that. So, knowing that you got through the personal narrative stage last time, do you essentially resubmit the same personal narratives? Or are you completely redoing those?

Jack: I'm resubmitting the same ones, but I've gone through and edited them again just try to improve clarity, improve grammar, and the structure as well. So, one of the things that I did last year, and I did it again this year, is I set up a group of people to do reviews of each other's narratives. And it's always good because then you find out where things are lacking clarity from other people because they'll say, oh, this doesn't quite make sense or what do you mean by this? So, those little incremental changes really help out. And I found that that really assisted last year. And other people that were part of it really... there was a good number of people that passed. So, I'm hoping the same thing will work this time around.

Aaron: Yeah. Let me ask you-

Jack: We're essentially estimating the same things, just trying to make it a lot stronger. They worked last year. I'm hoping they'll work again this year. But I do know it's no guarantee that you'll be able to move forward with the same PNs. I've read online of people who did that and it just didn't work out for them. You have different review every year.

Aaron: Got it. That makes sense. One last question. I actually have a conference call coming up in ten minutes. So, everything I've read online and whatever basically says, don't try to game the system as far as your area of interest, your cone. Don't try to game the system by picking a cone, one that you think you have a better chance of getting admitted to. Which I understand that completely. If you think you'd hate... like for example, there's no chance that I would want to do management, zero chance. So, even if that were the one that is like the least popular one and the best chance of getting into, never would submit that. But, if I have a handful of cones or two or three that are of the interest and sort of equally of interest, do you have any insight or thoughts as to what the cones that really are the easiest to get into?

Jack: It's all hearsay. I'll tell you that right upfront of what I've heard other people say. But before I do that, what kind of lawyer are you?

Aaron: I do a lot of regulatory work working with State Attorneys General. So, I do legal work like investigations and that sort of thing, but I also do lobbying work.

Jack: Okay. And do you like it. I mean, you've been doing it for 30 years, it sounds like, so.

Aaron: 20, not quite 30.

Jack: Okay.

Aaron: It pays the bills. How about that?

Jack: Okay.

Aaron: Let's just put it this way. If I loved it, then I probably wouldn't be looking for a second career.

Jack: Understood. The reason I asked that is because I do know that many lawyers go into consular because it's very rules-based and you do like criminal investigations as well with it. So, that's why I was thinking, oh, maybe you'd be interested in the consular side. I don't know if that's one of the three equal ones that you have.

Aaron: It actually... I mean, basically all of them but management are all ones that I think that would interest me. I actually have a good friend who actually left on Monday for



maybe his fourth tour. He also has a second career. He used to run an architectural agency. And then, he joined the State Department a number of years ago and he just left, stationed to Cyprus.

Jack: Okay.

Aaron: And he's an economics officer, so.

Jack: All right.

Aaron: But-

Jack: I mean, yeah, if you're looking for one that most people do not go to, then it is to consular section. People don't want to deal with visas. Everyone has to do it their first tour because, I mean, I think generally they just don't have enough people that want to be in the line and deal with visas all day. So, that's why they force all the newbies to do it. It's a rite of passage, let's say. And because of that, I'd say there's greater opportunity of getting hired, if you have the right score, of course, through the consular. But they will be able to read it in your personal narratives and they will be able to tell when they're interviewing you if you have a genuine interest in it or not.

Aaron: Understood.

Jack: So, that's why they always suggest, choose something that you're actually interested in because it will show.

Aaron: Well, I get that. That makes sense. And your right. As a lawyer, doing that sort of thing would be interesting. And just the general sort of, like I said, my friend told stories about how he actually found the consular when he had that position to be incredibly fulfilling, despite the fact that he was the economics cone because assisting U.S. people in distress abroad was something that he really enjoyed. So, anyway. All right. Well, I think... I'm sorry that only you and I joined the call, but I guess it allowed me to monopolize your time.

Jack: Hey, no problem.

Aaron: So, yeah. Good luck tomorrow. So, now I know that there are relatively set time frames for taking the actual test, then when you find out whether you pass, and then how much time you have to submit your PNs. But then, from there, is there a set timeframe? Or could it literally be months before you found out whether you advance again based on your PNs?

Jack: Yeah. I think it's going to be two to two and a half months before I find out. So, I'm trying to recall from last year and I think it was around... it was right after labor day. So, I think the first week of September is when I'll find out.

Aaron: So, did you all took the test in whatever it was June of last year as well? And then, you took it again in June of this year?

Jack: Yep. Yep. Year over. Once you take the test, you have to wait 11 months before you can take the next one.

Aaron: Yep. That I knew. That I knew. I think I had one... oh, one last question. And this is, again, so much of what you see online is anecdotal that it's hard to parse what is correct and what isn't. I have trouble telling... it seems like each phase is discreet. Once you're past that phase, you don't have to worry about it. But then, other people or other things I've read essentially say, well yes but you were evaluated and placed on the register based on kind of your total performance.

Jack: Yeah.

Aaron: So, I mean you could knock it out of the park on the test, do well enough on each of the other phases to kind of pass, as it were, and proceed to the next phase. But you still might have a relatively low place on the register.

Jack: Yeah.

Aaron: Is that essentially correct?

Jack: Yes and no. So, everything before the orals will add up together. So, you need a good score to pass the test obviously or a good score on the multiple choice to get to the essay. And then, that scored. So, that's one part. Then you're invited to do the PNs. And then, your application, your scores, and your narratives are looked at as a whole. So, that is you as an entire applicant. And then, you are given a score.

Jack: And then, you're put into your cohort. So, let's say you go with management, I know you don't want that one, but let's just say you're going with management and you're given a score. Then they choose, let's say maybe the top 20% in that to move forward to the orals. Then everything from then on is new. They don't look at your application, and your scores, or your narratives anymore. They just look at what you do in the oral. And the oral is made up of three different parts. Whatever your score you get at the end of that is the score that will place you, if you pass on the register. You need at least a 5.25 and then you're put on the register.

Jack: Now, once you're on the register, if you have veterans points or if you know a language, you can boost your score, but for the most part, whatever you get at the end of orals is the score that you'll have on the register.

Aaron: Got it. And actually, so that brings up another question that I guess I was not completely clear on, or the way you described it was not the way I understood it. So, when you actually take the online test, Pearson View or whatever, you could score poorly enough right then that you don't even get the chance to do the essay?

Jack: No. You have to do the essay, but-

Aaron: Okay. All right. Yeah.

Jack: Yeah.

Aaron: Okay. So, they only grade it if you do well enough on the written test, but you don't know one way or the other whether you did well enough on the written test, you just do... okay. That makes sense.

Jack: I mean, when you get your score, if you passed or not, they'll tell you. Like they'll say, your score wasn't high enough. We didn't bother with the essay.

Aaron: Understood.

Jack: Yeah.

Aaron: Understood. Yeah.

Jack: But that's like three weeks after you take the test you, find out.

Aaron: Got it. Got it. All right. I appreciate your time. Maybe it'll be on the August call, if there is one. And we'll see. And good luck. I hope that your personal narratives get you through.

Jack: Yeah. Thanks. Cheers and good luck on the test.