

Careers in the Canadian Foreign Service and US State Department

1. Job Description

Put simply, the job of a Foreign Service Officer is to defend and promote her country's interests abroad. Depending on the career track one chooses, the specific job description will include things like promoting foreign direct investment in and out of Canada or the United States, assisting in brokering peace agreements between disputing factions, and preparing memos for various Cabinet Ministers. The Canadian Foreign Service is divided into four career tracks: Trade Commissioners, Foreign Service Immigration Officers, Political/Economic Officers, and Management & Consular Affairs Officers. The US State Department is divided quite similarly into 5 tracks: Consular Affairs, Economic Affairs, Management Affairs, Political Affairs, and Public Diplomacy.

2. Job Qualifications and Pathway

Because each job in the Foreign Service is so different, there are not too many definite, formal, qualifications. A bachelor's degree is required, although it does not necessarily matter in what discipline. The education requirement has been lowered to a bachelor's from a master's degree. Also, since you will be representing your home country abroad, fluency in the official language(s) is a must. This will not be much of a hurdle for most Americans seeking employment with the US Department of State, but, for Canadians, some extra effort may be required. In the Canadian Foreign Service, proficiency in both English and French is requisite, although up to 52 weeks of language training will be provided after you are recruited. If, after those 52 weeks, you are not proficient in both languages, you will not be offered employment. Additional languages are not required, although they will improve your competitiveness in the selection process.

In addition to those formal requirements, there are also some informal requirements which are necessary for completing the job with competence. Among them are strong interpersonal and leadership skills, an interest in and knowledge of world affairs, and some sort of experience in a client service job.

Finally, there are certain eligibility requirements. Citizenship in the country you represent is required, and certain age restrictions requirements must be met. The US Department of State requires you must be between the ages of 20 and 59 on the day you submit your application and at least 21 but not yet 60 on the day you are appointed as a Foreign Service Officer.

There is really no clear route to a job in the Foreign Service that is better or more effective than any other. Some FS Officers have held previous corporate jobs overseas, and others have known since high school that they wanted some sort of a career in international relations. The one thing that many of them have in common, however, is that they simply saw an advertisement for the annual Foreign Service exams, wrote them; the rest was history. Apply

online at <http://jobs-emplois.gc.ca/psr-rp/index-eng.htm> (Canada) or www.careers.state.gov/officer/employment.html (USA).

3. Career Profiles

Greg Chubak

Greg is an Immigration Program Manager stationed in Kuala Lumpur.

1. Ups and Downs of the Job:

Like all jobs, life in the Foreign Service has its ups and downs. On the plus side, the work is challenging and interesting. Given that we in the immigration stream deal with people, there is no end to the vicissitudes. In the course of a day one may interview a refugee fleeing persecution and being able to offer the succor that Canada offers and later the same day prevent a human trafficker from boarding a flight with a young woman destined for the sex trade. On the negative side, there are challenges related to spousal employment issues that do not occur in Canada and, as you can imagine, it is hard to be so far away from your family and friends in Canada who you get to see but once a year.

2. Are there career risks to consider?

A career in the Foreign Service is a bit like a game of snakes and ladders – there are times that one slides backwards and needs to regain the spaces lost.

3. Is this a well-paying job?

When I started in 1991 the pay was extremely poor. However, in recent years the starting salary has risen to an acceptable level. However, one certainly does not join the foreign service for the money.

4. Does the job require much commitment and, if so, what sort of commitments?

A huge commitment. A move to Ottawa, learning a second official language, and a willingness to serve abroad (often in less than salubrious settings) for much of one's career.

5. Did you always have a clear career trajectory or did you arrive at your position in a roundabout way?

As roundabout as it gets and this is what makes it all the more interesting. Prior to joining the Foreign Service I was living in Bangkok working for a British bank and considering a job with the Economist or remaining with the bank. I wrote the exam along with 9,000 others and decided to take this job as it was an interesting next step.

Mark Eichhorst

Mark is currently the Assignments Manager for Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). He is responsible for overseeing the postings of CIC Foreign Service officers, both in Ottawa and abroad. He is also involved in recruitment and training of FS officers. Currently stationed in Ottawa, he plans to go abroad again in 2010.

1. Ups and downs of the job?

Constantly moving can be both, depending on your attitude. New challenges, new environments, opportunity to experience new cultures are certainly ups. Distance from family, difficulty for spouses to obtain meaningful work are major downs.

2. Are there career risks to consider?

We sometimes live and work in risky situations (wars, dangerous climates, etc.).

3. Is this a well-paying job?

Entry level is fine (starting around 55 thousand/year). After about 10 years the salary is very good. In addition, while overseas various allowances are paid. But the lack of a second income (for couples) pretty much cancels out the allowance benefit. Nobody will get rich as a civil servant, but good benefits and pension make up for that.

4. Does the job require much commitment and, if so, what sort of commitments?

If you mean having to work lots of overtime, I would say no. But there may be an event (earthquake, civil unrest, or a visit of our PM) that requires a lot of work! It is possible to have a good work-life balance.

5. Did you always have a clear career trajectory or did you arrive at your position in a roundabout way?

I had planned on being a teacher; after graduating from Providence [Bible College] I went to Brandon University and obtained my B.Ed. After coming in second in numerous job interviews, I started to realize that maybe teaching wasn't part of the plan. I saw a poster advertising the annual exam, wrote it, and here I am! So pretty roundabout.

Cindy Munro

Cindy works as a senior policy advisor in the Refugees Branch at Citizenship and Immigration Canada. The division she works in is called Horizontal Policy and International Protection. She has also served overseas as a visa officer and Immigration Program Manager.

1. Ups and downs of the job?

Ups: The opportunity to travel, especially to places that are off the beaten track, that I probably would never have heard of if I stayed in Canada; exposure to different cultures and perspective; gaining a greater appreciation for Canada after experiencing life in countries that are dangerous, corrupt, disaster-prone, over-populated, heavily polluted, etc; gaining a greater understanding of world issues, geography and geophysics through direct exposure (when you see a volcano erupt or visit an island in danger of sinking due to rising sea levels, it motivates you to learn about these phenomena in a way that simply can't be reproduced in the classroom in Canada); life generally seems more exciting overseas, as we are always being exposed to something new.

Downs: Spousal employment is the biggest challenge, in my view. Foreign Service Officers must be flexible, but spouses must be even more flexible, as they do not know what they will do as they arrive in each new country. We have reciprocal employment agreements with some countries, but they may still need local language skills or local experience to actually find a job.

2. Are there career risks to consider?

Yes. The risk varies depending on the country, and Foreign Service Officers receive "hardship pay" to compensate for these risks. Risks include security risks, health risks, and safety risks. In the seven years I have spent abroad so far, I have experienced bombings in Sri Lanka,

Indonesia, and Pakistan. I had two terrifying experiences on planes in Indonesia, I experienced earthquakes and floods in Indonesia, and was in the country for the 2004 tsunami (though I didn't experience it personally). I have lost count of how many cases of food poisoning I had. From these experiences I can tell you the risks are real, but I don't regret accepting any of these assignments.

3. Is this a well-paying job?

It depends on what you consider well-paying, and it depends on where you are posted. We are public servants, so the base salary is in the range of comparable categories of public servants in Canada. If you accept the high hardship posts, then the financial incentives are significant. On the other hand, if you take a posting that isn't considered a high hardship post, it can be difficult to save money to do all of the travelling you would like to fully appreciate the place you're posted.

4. Does the job require much commitment and, if so, what sort of commitments?

The thing about the Foreign Service is your job changes all the time. Some jobs require more commitment than others. There are some unique commitments required, usually for the work overseas:

- We are fully rotational. That means we sign a contract that says the department can send us where they want, when they want.

- While overseas, we represent Canada not just during office hours, but in

everything we do. We must carry ourselves accordingly. We have to be wary about choosing friends to make sure that person isn't looking for information/assistance/influence based on that relationship, rather than genuine friendship.

-While overseas, we must also be ready to act in emergencies, particularly when posted in a volatile country. The tsunami and the evacuations of Canadians in Lebanon are two recent examples that come to mind, where everyone works overtime, people on vacation get ordered to come back, and everything that isn't urgent gets put on hold.

5. Did you always have a clear career trajectory or did you arrive at your position in a roundabout way?

I knew from when I was a teenager that I wanted to work in international relations. I grew up in a boring suburb, but had the opportunity to do a one-month trip to Japan when I was 14 to stay with a family in my suburb's sister city. That sparked the travel bug. Then in high school my strongest subjects were languages. I knew I wanted to work for the UN or the Foreign Service, so went on the university to do a B.A. in political science and German, and then a masters in political science (at that time, you needed a masters degree to get into the Foreign Service). I wrote the Foreign Service exams and got through on my first try. I have absolutely loved this career so far!

Rachel Brûlé

Rachel is a new recruit in the Immigration Officer career track, still waiting for her first posting.

1. Ups and downs of the job?

I have not been overseas yet, which means that I can only speak about my life at headquarters. Ups: I work with amazing people who are patient, comprehensive and willing to help, the work is very interesting and there is always something to learn. Downs: Because I haven't completed my training, I am limited to some projects and also we are gone on training, so out of the office a lot.

2. Are there career risks to consider?

In Ottawa, there is very little risk. However, when you are overseas, there are risks related, not so much to the career, but more to the country in which you would be posted (violence, environmental, personal).

3. Is this a well-paying job?

Yes in Canada and some countries. However, when you are posted in some countries (England, France, Russia) you have to be more careful how you spend. As well, when the Canadian dollar is low, you may have to be more careful about how you would spend when living in the US. Of course, one's definition of a well-paying job depends on one's lifestyle.

4. Does the job require much commitment and, if so, what sort of commitments?

Our commitment is to Canadians and ensuring their safety.

5. Did you always have a clear career trajectory or did you arrive at your position in a roundabout way?

To be quite honest, I never even thought of becoming a diplomat. I had always thought that you had to have a degree in political science to be in the Foreign

Service. Yet, after graduating from university, I received the Foreign Service job poster by email from my university. I noticed that I had all the competencies they were looking for and decided to apply; 12 months later I received the call letting me know I was in.

Michel Dupuis

Michel is the Deputy Program Manager at the Immigration section in Damascus, and also what they call their Operations Manager. He has 12 immigration officers working under him and roughly 40 local staff. He assigns responsibilities to officers, reviews the composition of teams every year, heads up all staffing actions, and provides guidance on many issues related to processing applications.

1. Ups and downs of the job?

Up: The possibility to occupy different jobs, in Canada and abroad, while working for the same employer; fairly good training opportunities; be at the center of international events (Kosovo, war in Bosnia, significant meetings, Mandela being freed, etc.); in immigration in particular, the ability to make decisions and change the lives of people for the better.

Downs: Living abroad can also mean separation from family and friends; quality of life abroad is uneven (lack of security and safety, health, pollution, etc.); we do not always have much control over our various assignments.

2. Are there career risks to consider?

See above. One must be prepared to have to live abroad, and spending too much time abroad can have a serious effect on promotions. Spousal employment is a significant issue as the accompanying spouse may have to leave their job in Canada.

3. Is this a well-paying job?

Yes, but only since 2005.

4. Does the job require much commitment and, if so, what sort of commitments?

We must be able to put aside our own opinions and at times implement policies with which we do not agree and defend them in front of staff and external partners. We also need to defend Canada's position on a whole range of issues; this can mean participating in negotiations that can be difficult – numerous meetings, this can take a toll on your personal life.

5. Did you always have a clear career trajectory or did you arrive at your position in a roundabout way?

I started at DFAIT in 1989 and after one posting as a political officer I decided I wanted to change to Immigration, which I did in 1992. My path was quite clear since the beginning and I was able to orient my career more or less the way I wished.

4. *Helpful Links*

-US State Department:

www.state.gov

-Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT)

www.international.gc.ca

-The Professional Association of Foreign Service Offices

www.pafso-apase.com

-A Day in the life of a Foreign Service Officer (The Princeton Review)

<http://www.princetonreview.com/Careers.aspx?page=1&cid=53&uidbadge=%07>

-Canadian Foreign Service Institute

www.international.gc.ca/ifait-iaeci/index.aspx

-Foreign Service Community Association

www.fsca-acse.org

-Canadian International Council

www.igloo.org/canadianinternational