



FOREIGN SERVICE AND DIPLOMAT CAREERS

The Foreign Service represents the U.S. around the world. Members interact with local governments as emissaries of the United States, staff U.S. embassies and consulates, and provide resources for Americans traveling abroad. Over 60 percent of a foreign service officer's working hours are spent handling reports--assembling facts, writing, proofreading, and reading. "Reading is fundamental," wrote one member of the diplomatic corps, "and if your writing isn't up to snuff, you'll be selected out--fired, that is." Strong communication skills are a MUST for anyone thinking about entering the profession. Diplomats are posted to positions abroad for terms of two, three or four years with nine-month stateside stints every two to four years, but they can be recalled at the discretion of the State Department at any time.

The foreign service handles all problems of Americans abroad including: Negotiating with local governments for individual United States companies who wish to manufacture, produce, or do business abroad; providing information about the host country; and issuing replacements for lost documentation. Foreign consulates also issue visitation and residency visas to foreigners wishing to enter the United States. These tasks consume a minimum of 30 hours of the workweek; "my hourly wage in 1992 was \$3.45. I calculated it, adding in all the unpaid overtime I put in," said one diplomat. Since additional internal duties (including writing reports) and social functions (which are an important part of the job) can take up another 40 hours per week, those who are looking for a sinecure are ill-advised to enter the foreign service. Members who are most satisfied with their profession enjoy the responsibility: The ability to look at a host country from the inside, write a considered opinion of the state of that country, and have it seriously regarded by officials making decisions about international relations.

How to Become a Foreign Service Officer

To enter the foreign service, you must be an American citizen between the ages of 20 and 54, and have a bachelor's degree. Helpful college or graduate school courses include English, any foreign language, government, geography, international history, economics, public speaking and commerce. Applicants must pass the competitive foreign service exam, offered every December in most major urban centers and at consulates abroad. Those who pass take a secondary exam which includes a day-long assessment, a physical, a rigorous background exam and a final review of all the candidates strengths and weaknesses. Candidates are expected to be familiar with another language, but fluency can be acquired after posting.

Those who pass all the tests are given a ranking and put on a list of eligible candidates for future posting. As positions become available, candidates are offered suitable postings. Note that at most, a few hundred slots open up each year. While many start their tenure with a nine-month stint in Washington DC to learn the protocols of being a diplomat (termed the 'pregnancy period' by one of our respondents), others begin in the field and learn and are trained on the fly. Please be aware that if you are listed on the sheet of eligibles, and no position opens up for you within 18 months, you will have to begin the procedure again. All names are removed from the list at that point.

Careers Related to Foreign Service

Over half the foreign service officers find life-time careers in the foreign service, particularly with the understanding that retirement is mandatory at age 60 and one is eligible at age 50 after serving for twenty years. Those who leave use their unique perspective and their skills to work for other branches of the government, such as the department of defense, the CIA, the INS, the commerce department or teach at the university level.

Past And Future

The Constitution provided that a foreign service be developed, but one did not exist in practice in any reasonably funded form until the mid-1800s. Until 1924, the foreign service was the plumb of patronage and supportable only by those in the upper class. The wages were so scandalously low that no one else could afford to take a position. The Rogers Act in 1924 provided reasonable wages and democratized the process of entering the foreign service. The process has become even more egalitarian with current application methods.

The foreign service is and will continue to be a vital service of the United States. As with any government office, it is subject to budget whims, but as it is currently thinly staffed and highly competitive, future funding cuts should not come in this area. Expect competition for limited positions to remain high--strong preparation for the foreign service exam is your best ally.

Quality of Life

Two Years Out

Halfway through their probationary period, which lasts roughly four years, new diplomats are expected to have made significant headway in learning a foreign language. Many are called staff specialists; the majority of candidates for positions do not receive officer status upon hire. Duties include filing reports, assembling data, and providing any research or coordination under the direction of foreign service officers or ambassadors.

Five Years Out

Five year veterans have established themselves as officers, information specialists, or staff specialists. Each year, appointees receive ratings from their supervisors and are advanced in the profession through six grades of classification, with grade six being lowest. Around 30 percent of those who began in the foreign service have left, due to low ratings, lack of progress in language skills, or lack of opportunity in their area of expertise.

Ten Years Out

Those who have survived ten years in the diplomatic corps have been rotated back to Washington for at least two periods of "reeducation" in the American experience, have been consistently rated well by superiors, and have at least earned a classification of grade three. Those who aspire to "career minister" (a high-level foreign service office position) continue to accrue additional responsibilities and hours. A few who have shown great promise are sponsored to go to the Foreign Service Institute for high-level additional education--a true feather in the cap of the career diplomat. Those who are not advancing find their abroad status in jeopardy, and may be asked to return to back-office work in Washington. A few may become ambassadors, but this position is usually a political appointment.

Professional Profile

# of people in profession:	5,800
% male:	65
% female:	35
average hours per week:	70

Professionals Read

Foreign Policy
Foreign Affairs
International Reports

Books, Films and TV Shows Featuring the Profession

Clear and Present Danger
The Ugly American
The XYZ Affair
Protocol

Major Employers

United Nations	U.S. Department of State
One United Nations Plaza	2201 C Street, NW
New York, NY 10017	Washington, DC 20520
Tel: 212-963-1234	Tel: 203-875-7490
Contact: Employment Department	Fax: 202-647-7284
	Contact: Employment

You'll Have Contact With

Analysts

Government Officials

Tourists

Translators

Major Associations

Executive Council on Foreign Diplomacy

818 Connecticut Avenue, NW

12th Floor

Washington, DC 20006

Tel: 202-466-5199

Fax: 202-872-8696

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