

FSO Career Overview

by Usha Pitts

Foreign Service Officer (FSO) is the title our country uses for its diplomats. This is a career with the federal government, working alongside civil servants to advance American interests abroad. Our headquarters is the U.S. State Department in Washington, though some FSOs spend their entire career abroad. The State Department is the lead agency representing the United States at more than 270 diplomatic posts around the world. It is divided into geographical and functional bureaus, each of which keeps in contact with U.S. Embassies (and U.S. Consulates), foreign governments, and international organizations around the world. We take the lead on America's foreign policy, and our top boss is the Secretary of State.

When you're abroad, the highest-ranking U.S. official in the country is the Ambassador (the head of the Embassy). There may be anywhere from 1 to 1000 people working at a U.S. Embassy or Consulate – both Americans and local staff.

FSOs usually change countries, jobs, and embassies every one to three years. They may work at "Main State" in Washington or abroad. The jobs may be similar from country to country, or they may be radically different. Much will depend on what career track you choose as your specialty (political, economic, management, public diplomacy, or consular).

I am a political officer, so most of my assignments have included gathering information, talking to people, and writing about the political or social situation in the country where I am assigned. Economic officers do similarly. Public Diplomacy officers handle the press, media, educational, and cultural side of things. Consular officers deal with the movement and protection of people, including American citizens. Management officers run the Embassy, including cars, housing, schools, and community.

The first four or five years of your career, you have less control over your assignments, and you will spend at least two years doing consular work (providing services to the public, including by interviewing people for visas to travel to the United States). Some people like consular work and choose to spend their whole career in this career track, whereas others are happy to get it done and move on to work in their chosen career track. For example, I did a year of consular work in Panama City (followed by a year of political work) and a year of consular work in Moscow (followed by a year of political work). All senior diplomats have to

understand the ins and outs of consular work, so even those of us who didn't take to it naturally find the experience invaluable later in our careers.

In addition to new FSOs, the State Department also hires Consular Fellows on short-term contracts to do consular work. Consular Fellows are temporary members of the Foreign Service hired for their language skills; many go on to become FSOs themselves.

In all cases, the State Department takes care of your housing, travel, moving costs, health emergencies, and education for your children. You may also get six months or more of paid language training before going out to post. For example, I got nine months of Russian training early in my career, and will soon embark on two years of Mandarin training. There are risks to living in other countries, but most of us feel the State Department does a good job of protecting us.

Most assignments outside of westernized countries are considered "hardship tours," and include an increase in pay to make up for the difficult conditions. For example, I got a significant pay increase during the two years I spent in Cuba, where living conditions were restrictive and difficult. In addition to hardship assignments, you may also accept a high-risk, one-year assignment in a war zone like Iraq and Afghanistan. Needless to say, you are amply rewarded to taking such assignments.

All in all, we are well paid and live rent free in high-end houses. FSOs don't get rich (we are public servants, after all) but we do enjoy good insurance and retirement benefits, and our kids go to good international schools. Though it didn't seem so at first, I now consider myself better off than many of my friends in the private sector.

You may get language training between assignments, which can be fun (or frustrating, depending on your language ability). You may also take a domestic assignment at the State Department in Washington, which a lot of people do if they or their spouse get sick of living abroad, or if they want to work inside the Washington "policy machine." For my part, I prefer the field.

The acceptance rate for getting into the Foreign Service is about 2-3%, but it changes from year to year depending on hiring decisions. Also, most people take the Foreign Service Officer Test more than once before they pass, and they're usually quite a bit older than people expect for an entry-level job – around 30-35. Most people need quite a bit of life experience to pass the FSOT, which starts with

a written exam followed by an essay portion (the Personal Narratives), and wraps up with an interview in Washington (the Oral Assessment). The process takes about nine months from start to finish.

Once they're in, most of them stay. Attrition is very low. I've been in for 20 years and have been abroad for nearly all of them, barring one year in Washington, one year in Newport, RI, and my current tour in New York City. It's a great career for those of us who love the excitement of living abroad, believe in promoting American values, and seek substantive work that can, at times, make a difference in people's lives.

Tips for to Prepare for a Career in the Foreign Service

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The first step in the process is to take the Foreign Service Officers Test, offered three times a year. Even if you don't think you're ready to take this test or embark on this career, take it anyway. It's free. You can register at careers.state.gov.

If you pass, great! And if you don't, well, now you know what to study for next time. Many of us need to review our high school history and study our maps, and most of us don't get in until we are in our late twenties or early thirties.

In the interim, there are habits you can develop and activities you can do to prepare for the written exam. In particular, I recommend you follow my recipe of READ-WRITE-DO. Please note that the below tips reflect my personal opinion, and should not be viewed as guidance from the State Department.

1. Read the paper every day, including at least one meaty editorial from *The Washington Post* or similar. You can substitute the editorial with an article from *The Economist* or *Foreign Affairs*. If you want a more conservative approach, stick with *The Weekly Standard* or *The National Review*.

Also get used to listening to shows like *The World, Morning Edition*, *Meet the Press*, *Nightly Business Report*, *BBC World News*, *Face the Nation*, *Washington Week*, *The PBS News Hour*, and *GPS with Fareed Zakaria*. All these shows are available on iTunes, YouTube or their own websites, so you can listen while exercising, commuting, or cooking dinner.

2. Write something (anything) at least once a week. Writing is like any other skill and it takes practice to get good and stay limber. Your piece for the week can be a letter, editorial, journal entry, or essay. Write to your congressional representative or your grandmother, but make it a thoughtful piece. Rewrite it twice so you can get used to editing your own work.

As an alternative, get a daily journal that forces you to sit down and compose three or four good sentences describing your day. After all, if you played your guitar for ten minutes a day, you'd get pretty good at it.

Also, if you don't know how to touch type, learn now. Typing allows you to compose and communicate your thoughts faster, thus improving your efficiency. There are many free, on-line programs.

3. Do activities every year that challenge you and build life experience – travel, volunteer, teach, work for a politician, join the Peace Corps, do a Fulbright, whatever. Many young people find they can't pass the FSOT because they just don't have enough life experience under their belt, so go out and get some. Here's a quote to live by throughout your twenties: "Life begins at the end of your comfort zone."

A quick note on advanced degrees: Getting an advanced degree isn't required to join the Foreign Service, but may help you build the knowledge and writing skills you will need to pass the test. In any case, furthering your education should not be seen as a substitute for challenging yourself in other ways. Resist the temptation to go straight from undergrad to graduate school – you are depriving yourself of valuable field experience.

Further to that point, make sure you get field experience outside of your ethnic or cultural background. A Latina who speaks Spanish has potential, but a Latina who speaks Spanish and Arabic and has traveled in the Middle East is setting herself up for an international career.

All these things take time, but they are cumulative! As the weeks pass, those incremental steps you take to improve yourself will start to build up. Believe me, your boss will notice. You may even find it increasingly difficult to hang out with people who are *not* well informed and *don't* care about what's going on in the world. Much like compound interest, the more you invest in yourself over time, the greater the reward. Working incrementally will leave you better prepared to succeed in the Foreign Service (or any international career).

And always remember... Netflix is your enemy!