

## TOP TIPS FOR A CAREER IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Careers in International Affairs are highly desired, and it is no secret that the competition is fierce. That is not to say it is not worthwhile to pursue this career path; if anything, this warning should motivate students and professionals alike to start thinking at the earliest possible stage about entering the world of global affairs. We would like to share some useful advice that we have been given from a diverse range of excellent speakers at the annual Career in International first and second editions in 2016 and 2017.

There are many essential attributes that a potential candidate should bring, and this list is not exhaustive; however, the following are the indispensable assets mentioned that a future International Affairs candidate should bring along.

## KNOW YOUR QUALITIES/SKILLS AND BE YOURSELF

A career in international affairs is not merely achieved through having the right skills and experience. Although important, you must first and foremost possess the right qualities. These include open-mindedness, as you will face a multitude of environments and cultures you are not used to; courage; a measured temperament; curiosity; humility and respect for others; diligence, and an ability to get on with anyone. International affairs can be highly unpredictable and difficult at times. However, if you are of this character type, a career in international affairs will be for you and it can be extremely rewarding.

Competition for a career in international affairs is tough and so the temptation to present yourself as the most desirable candidate exists, whether that be through writing your CV a certain way or making exaggerated claims about yourself. However, employers are looking for authenticity and it is visible when a candidate is trying too hard. They want to see your personality and what you can bring to their organisation. It is encouraged, therefore, that when applying for jobs and working in international affairs you should be yourself.

## LEARN LANGUAGES

The standard languages for international organisations are English and French. Although it is possible to gain work experience in some of these organisations with just English, also having French gives you a competitive edge. In addition, a language such as Spanish, Russian, Mandarin or Arabic is often desired.

If seeking a career in the diplomatic service, the language requirements depend on the country. Although language training is usually offered before a posting, find out from your foreign ministry what they expect of you and what languages they find desirable.

## MAINTAIN KNOWLEDGE OF CURRENT AFFAIRS

Having knowledge of what is going on in the world while you are trying to work in an environment that contributes to it is crucial. Whether you are a researcher in a specialist field, a diplomat on a posting or a generalist in an international organisation, you will be working within a context. Being informed of this context is not only needed in order to contribute in the best way possible but it is expected of you.

## BE A MAVERICK

As per Lembit Öpik's words: “To do what you may want to do, you don't have to be a maverick, but to be a world changer, you have to show independence of thought and action!” Hence, the most important thing is not to sit around and wait for a job. One has to be pro-active, take risks, do research on what organisations exist and what interests you, and, most importantly, get involved.

## BE SPECIFIC

Organisations are looking to hire you to carry out a specific job. Therefore, having a passion for international affairs is not enough. Knowing which area of work you want to undertake within an organisation is important. According to Donal Mulligan from the Talent Management and Analytics Group of the OECD, a common problem in internship applications is that they are too general.

Employers are looking for specific skills to fulfil the job they are advertising. The main work streams in international organisations are legislation and regulation, policy, operations and administration. Choose which area you would like to work in and gain experience relevant to this before making applications.

Also, cater your CV to the job description and the organisation’s values. The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office values are ‘future’, ‘engage’, ‘deliver’ and ‘international’.   Similarly, employers are looking for specific skills. Most notably, project management, risk management and negotiation are required to reach senior levels within organisations and embassies.

## TAKE OPPORTUNITIES

You cannot plan your whole career path. Unexpected opportunities will come your way and often taking them is the best answer. This is especially important in order to gain experience. Employers will look for more than just academic achievements. Often, to gain an internship or a graduate scheme you need to have relevant work experience to develop the required skills. This might be voluntary work for small organisations such as charities, think tanks and NGOs. Volunteering oversees is recommended to gain international experience.

## DEVELOP YOUR PEOPLE SKILLS

Being able to communicate with a range of people from different cultures, faiths and backgrounds is a key aspect of working in international affairs. You must know how to get along with people and how to communicate effectively. In particular, you must be truthful and engaging in your discussions and negotiations. This is how relationships are built.

## GET INVOLVED – SHOW INDEPENDENCE OF THOUGHT AND ACTION

A major mistake many students make is to focus exclusively on their grades and university career in such a way that they miss the opportunity to get involved. However, if you have a regular commitment outside university, you will be developing a range of skills over and above those you develop in your course work, and those skills are the ones that will distinguish you from other candidates. As Lembit Öpik, British politician and former Member of Parliament, says “you need three things: a vision (your telos or story), values, and commitment; without these, career in global politics is absolutely pointless”.

This also includes the fact that it is not enough to be 'generally interested in the subject matter'. There is no replacement for genuine, unbounded curiosity, and in many cases this might be more helpful in the long run than above-average grades in obtaining the job you desire

Another valuable piece of advice that was offered by Jonathan Paris, London-based political analyst, and which is linked to the former idea, is how very important it is to improve your writing skills and start publishing your ideas. Not only is it satisfying to see the results of your hard work going into print, but it also establishes you as a member of the research community.

Furthermore, it forces you to clarify your thoughts and to fit them in the current state of research in your field. Writing book reviews or blog posts could be a good way for those who are still in the early stage of their careers to get published.

## PLAN YOUR WORK EXPERIENCE A YEAR AHEAD- INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE IS CRUCIAL

If you are a first-time job seeker or a career switcher, then assistant positions or internships are a good place to start. They are more accessible than junior positions, but they still help you to get an understanding of a particular career field and raise your visibility in the community, not to mention the valuable contacts you get that might give you access to unadvertised job opportunities. International Organisations such as the European Union, the U.N., or multinational corporations all have annual internships available.

However, for these organisations, planning ahead is vital. Consider possible visa restrictions, travel arrangements, scholarship applications and more importantly, internship application deadlines. We were given information by Paul Kaye, E.U. representation in London, that application processes can take up to several months; it is thus recommended to start thinking about those internships at least a year ahead.

International experience is a critical supplement to any sort of educational background in entering the job market of International Affairs because it will broaden your international mindset and improve your fluency in a foreign language, says Nigel Watt, Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service. Recruiters in the international arena look at candidates’ proven language ability. Exotic language combinations can be a major asset in finding a job in this field. Studies abroad or volunteering experiences are the perfect opportunities to experience international relations at a personal level. For more information about volunteer options from the Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service, please find the link below.

## ALTERNATE EDUCATIONAL TRACKS ; PHD OR NOT TO PHD?

Another important point that Paul Kaye \*\* clarified is that degrees in International Relations or other related fields are not exclusive prerequisites to enter the sphere of International Affairs. There is no single educational path to international jobs, as his curriculum vitae shows. Before joining the E.U. he worked in a range of jobs, including translating and radio presenting. He then entered his position at the E.U. not through the conventional route, by joining the E.U. Fast Stream, but through an E.U. translator recruitment position. Hence, experience in non-related fields and non-related educational background can even be considered an asset if one is able to use it to his or her advantage.

A PhD is the conventional career path and an indispensable prerequisite to enter an International Relations career in Academia, but successful curricula vitae like Jonathan Paris’s show that is not the only way to be successful and respected in the field of International Affairs. It is not clear that a PhD is worth the extra effort unless one is highly interested in a specific research question. If not, the years and money spent on a doctoral dissertation could be spent more efficiently by gaining practical experience in or outside of your home country.

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