

track in recent years. Hiring is based on the needs of the Service for officers in each category at any given time, and successful applicants are put on the register only for their selected career track—so selection can be a tricky exercise. While choosing a track that is less popular or has more current openings may seem to offer an advantage in terms of getting in, the numbers are always shifting. Moreover, candidates should not select a track in which they do not actually want to work. Though it can be done, switching tracks once you are in the system is not easy and is not a recommended strategy. See the box on this page for a detailed discussion of choosing a career track, and visit the State careers Web site for more information on each track.

WHICH CAREER TRACK IS RIGHT FOR ME?

By Kelly Adams-Smith

When registering to take the Foreign Service Officer Test, applicants are asked to make the first big decision of their Foreign Service careers—the choice of a career track. While all Foreign Service officers are technically termed “generalists,” the choice of functional specialization will determine what type of work a Foreign Service officer will do for most of his or her career.

The five generalist career tracks, or “cones” as they were once officially and still commonly called, are Consular, Economic, Management, Political, and Public Diplomacy. Each career track is unique, with its own advantages and drawbacks. Talking with Foreign Service officers, you’ll probably find there are some strong views and stereotypes about each of the cones, with everyone thinking his or her cone is “the best.” To find out which track is right for you, potential FSOs should do their research, not just on paper, but preferably through conversations with officers currently working in each career track of interest.

When doing this research, it is important to keep an open mind. No matter what anyone tells you, no career track is a guaranteed ticket to the top. No one cone promises unconditional happiness or accelerated promotion. No cone is better or worse than any other. The trick is to decide which one is right for you, your personality, and your background. And it may not be the one you first thought you’d choose.

Consular Track

Consular officers are our face to the world. They are often the first and only American a foreign citizen will ever meet at an embassy. They may also be the only diplomat an American ever meets when traveling overseas. Being the face of America to the world and the face of the Foreign Service to the traveling American public is a privilege and responsibility. Deciding who does and does not get a visa, consular officers are also on the front lines promoting

U.S. business interests, tourism, and educational exchanges, while protecting American borders from those who seek to break U.S. immigration laws and perhaps do us harm.

Consular officers help Americans in distress. When a fellow citizen has been arrested, hospitalized, or has fallen victim to crime overseas, the consular officer is there to help, working with local authorities, calming nerves, and helping to make decisions. If a natural disaster, major accident, or civil unrest forces an evacuation from a foreign country, it is the consular officer who takes charge. Consular officers also perform notary services for fellow Americans, issue reports of birth and death abroad, and replace lost or stolen passports. They are witnesses to the happiest and saddest occasions in the lives of our fellow citizens overseas. They see the joy of the American parent who has just received an immigrant visa for the baby he has adopted. They may be the first to deliver the news that a loved one has died overseas.

Given these responsibilities, a consular officer is part attorney and part counselor. The work can be adrenaline-charged and stressful. Successful consular officers have good crisis management, foreign-language, and people skills. Of all our colleagues, it is often the consular officers who have the best Foreign Service stories.

Diplomats generally spend the first two to four years of their career doing consular work because the need is so great. A rite of passage for FSOs, the consular tour provides a common bonding experience. Many officers love the work so much that they never leave it.

Economic Track

Economic officers are at the forefront of the trends shaping our world and America's place in it. They identify the world's next economic trouble spots, as well as important opportunities overseas for U.S. companies. Their contacts include everyone from local government officials and business leaders to central bankers and representatives of the big international financial institutions. Economic officers must be comfortable conversing with all of them.

Like political officers, economic officers have fewer supervisory responsibilities early in their careers than consular and management FSOs. Instead, they focus on building subject-matter expertise in areas such as energy security and trade policy. They write congressionally mandated reports on a wide range of issues, from evaluating a country's level of intellectual property rights protection to reviewing investment disputes and market access concerns. They deliver economically focused messages from Washington to the host government and try to persuade local interlocutors to support U.S. policy positions.

Actually, "economic officer" is somewhat of a misnomer, for the issues handled in this career track go far beyond economics. These officers are

responsible for all matters related to the environment, science, technology, health, and labor. They work closely with U.S. diplomats from the Foreign Commercial Service and the Foreign Agricultural Service, handling those issues fully at smaller posts where these departments may not be represented. Economic officers level the playing field for U.S. companies, promote U.S. exports abroad, and work closely with local American Chambers of Commerce.

Economic officers also advise the ambassador on all matters in their portfolio, often writing speeches on economic matters for embassy leadership or delivering them in person. They serve as control officers for high-level U.S. government visitors, devising agendas and arranging site visits to local ports or factories. As they rise through the ranks, economic officers may become lead U.S. negotiators for economically focused bilateral or multilateral treaties and agreements.

While the work in this career track requires a certain familiarity with economic, trade, and business principles, even the best economic officers spend very little time crunching numbers. While many enter with some background in economic and business affairs, the State Department also offers first-class training opportunities to those economic officers wanting or needing a skills upgrade. The best economic officers combine this technical expertise with analytical minds and excellent writing and people skills.

Management Track

Management officers run our embassies. Similar to managers in multinational firms, State Department management officers handle all of an embassy's human resources, budget and finance, real estate and property matters, in a multicultural, multilingual environment.

It is not necessary to come into the Foreign Service with previous management, human resources, or budget experience in order to be a successful management officer. What the State Department's extensive training program does not teach, the management officer learns on the job. More important, however, than technical skills is a management officer's ability to lead. The management cone is about supervising, mentoring, advising, and deciding.

Our managers often head large sections very early in their careers, directing the work of sometimes hundreds of local-hire staff. Some have been on the job for years. Others are new hires, completely unfamiliar with the embassy environment and American work culture. Some do not speak English well, so the management officer has to communicate with them using a language just learned. The officer needs to find ways to relate to all of these employees, finding different ways to motivate them.

The management officer's goal is to provide the best possible service to his or her colleagues—to ensure they have what they need to carry out the

embassy's mission. Management officers oversee the technical staff providing our communications systems, direct the work of staff responsible for improving family member morale, and chair countless committees—from those ensuring mission resources are being utilized fairly among various U.S. government offices represented at the embassy, to those assigning housing to incoming officers and those giving awards to employees.

Being privy to just about everything that is going on in a mission, the management officer is one of the ambassador's closest advisers, keeping the executive office informed on everything from morale issues to the embassy's obligations under U.S. and local laws.

In contrast to officers in some of the other career tracks, where the impact of a particular policy or program can take years or decades to materialize, management officers can point to tangible accomplishments every day. If you like to get things done, are comfortable making decisions, have good people skills and like being in charge, the management track may be right for you.

Political Track

Political work is what many think of when they think of diplomatic work. A political officer makes and maintains contacts in the national and local governments and keeps in close touch with political parties, think-tanks, nongovernmental organizations, activists, and journalists. He or she delivers official messages, called *démarches*, from the U.S. government to the local government and reports the response to those messages. A political officer will use the insight gained from local contacts and experiences to report on a variety of issues that may be of interest to Washington—from which party may win the next election to which indigenous group may be seeking greater political sway in the capital.

But good political officers do not just report on what they see or experience; their job is to analyze, advise, and influence. Political officers do not just deliver our message to the host government, but use their skills of persuasion to motivate a government to take a certain action or support a certain policy. A successful political officer analyzes trends and, using excellent writing skills, makes recommendations to Washington on opportunities to advance U.S. policy objectives in the country or region.

While colleagues in other career tracks often get significant management experience early on, political officers typically supervise fewer people early in their careers. Instead, they become subject-matter experts in areas such as human rights, trafficking in persons, fighting corruption, and electoral politics. They accompany the ambassador and other high-level officials to meetings, taking notes and reporting conversations. They serve as control officers for visiting U.S. officials and congressional delegations, designing their agendas, accompanying them to meetings, and managing logistics. They research and

write numerous congressionally mandated reports on everything from human rights and religious freedom to narcotics trafficking and counterterrorism.

Political officers advise the ambassador and deputy chief of mission—the embassy’s “front office”—on whom to meet and what to say. They must have excellent interpersonal skills and enjoy using foreign languages. The best political officers have a natural ability to earn the trust of their interlocutors. They are at ease in a variety of environments, from exchanging business cards at receptions and giving speeches at conferences to investigating conditions in refugee camps. They are patient, knowing that the results of their work may not be evident for years. The ability to write well is crucial. If this describes you, then political work may be the right choice.

Public Diplomacy Track

Public diplomacy (PD) officers are our public relations professionals. They shape and deliver our message to the world; handle our interaction with U.S. and foreign media; explain our history, culture, and the value of our diversity to foreign audiences; and promote educational and cultural exchange. This career track involves tremendous contact work: meeting with and developing close ties to foreign journalists, government officials, educators, nongovernmental organizations, think-tanks, and those in the arts.

Public diplomacy work also requires close interaction with colleagues and knowledge of all the issues they handle—from political policies and economic programs to a controversial consular case or a complex legal issue being handled by the management section. The PD officer must keep on top of it all in order to explain it, if necessary, to the press and public.

PD officers usually get management experience early on. They are responsible for programmatic budgets and often supervise significant numbers of local staff. Information officers, or those PD officers in charge of press affairs, work closely with journalists, acting as a source of information, and promoting free speech and transparency. Cultural affairs officers, or those PD officers handling cultural and educational exchanges and programs, may spend their day chairing the local Fulbright Exchange Commission, managing grants to local arts groups, nongovernmental organizations, or think-tanks, or selecting noted American jazz musicians or hip-hop dancers for U.S.-sponsored local tours.

Public diplomacy officers advise the ambassador and other embassy leaders on what to say publicly and when to say it. They track local public opinion, and travel often to speak and provide U.S.-themed programming to regions far from the capital. They must have excellent foreign-language and public speaking skills. They should enjoy the spotlight and have grace under pressure. The most successful PD officers also have a passion for U.S. history and culture and enjoy explaining and sharing these with the world.

What If I Choose the “Wrong” Cone?

It does occasionally happen that a Foreign Service candidate will choose a career track only to find, after being in the Service for several years, that he or she is much more suited to another track. The good news is that it is possible to change. The process isn't quick or easy, and therefore shouldn't be undertaken lightly; but it can sometimes be done after you have completed several tours in another cone.

Switching tracks may not be necessary, however. You will have plenty of opportunities to work outside of your career track, and many Washington-based jobs are not defined by track, but are “multifunctional.” Remember that to be a well-rounded officer, you should seek opportunities to work outside of your chosen career track from time to time. Being multifunctional gives you breadth of experience and knowledge that can help at promotion time. It also makes an already exciting career all the more interesting.

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LANGUAGE ABILITY SELF-ASSESSMENT. The registration form also asks candidates to list their foreign languages and assess their own competence in speaking/listening and reading/writing on the State Department's scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the level of a college-educated native speaker, 3 being general professional proficiency and 2 being minimal professional proficiency. Speaking/listening and reading/writing skills are rated separately, so a score of 2/2 represents minimal professional proficiency in Speaking/Reading. Reading proficiency is not tested prior to entry into the Foreign Service; but speaking ability is tested at different points of the application process, depending on the language.

The State Department divides languages into three groups: world languages (e.g., French, Spanish, German), Critical Needs Languages (CNL), and Super Critical Needs Languages (SCNL). The two latter categories change periodically depending on the needs of the Service. In 2011, the Critical Needs Languages were: Arabic (forms other than Modern Standard, Egyptian, and Iraqi), Azerbaijani, Bengali, Chinese [Cantonese], Kazakh, Korean, Kurdish, Kyrgyz, Nepali, Pashto, Punjabi, Russian, Tajik, Turkish, Turkmen, and Uzbek. In 2011, the Super Critical Needs Languages were: Arabic (Modern Standard, Egyptian, and Iraqi), Mandarin Chinese, Dari, Farsi, Hindi, and Urdu. Refer to the State Department careers Web site for more information and to check for any changes.

Any candidate who claims a working-level speaking ability (2/0 or higher) in one of the SCNLs will be instructed to take a telephone test given by instructors