



Career Paths at the State Department and USAID

American Foreign Service Association
QDDR Career Paths Working Group

INTRODUCTION

The Department of State continues to hire highly qualified professionals for the Foreign Service. However, once hired, how well does the Department meet and manage employee expectations regarding careers and professional development?

Consider that:

- Employee expectations in the workforce continue to change, especially amongst Millennials, with respect to employee responsibility and opportunity, anticipated length and type of service, and quality of work/life.
- The Foreign Service's selling points of a unique, exciting, meaningful career overseas are eroding as the institution's predominance within the foreign affairs community declines, opportunities outside of the government rise, and the Department's use of technology lags.
- Employees are navigating a Service that has more than doubled in number in the last ten years, affecting promotion numbers and anticipated career paths.
- The United States has invested significantly in an employee's language and functional training and has an interest in retaining this asset.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The State Department is not the only employer for an American interested in public service in an international setting. To continue to build and sustain a professional Foreign Service to carry out the nation's diplomacy the Department should:

- Survey entry- and mid-level employees to determine what employee career expectations are and how well the Service is meeting and managing them.
- Examine recruiting practices and careers.state.gov to determine if new employees are entering with realistic expectations.
- Introduce a robust "exit interview" for all separating employees to identify their specific and institutional reasons for leaving.
- Continue analysis, development, and publication on projected and expected Foreign Service officer and specialist career paths.
- Strengthen and expand short-term and long-term detail and training professional development opportunities.

- Review Foreign Service dimensions and promotion precepts to strengthen the importance of technology and innovation.

Survey Employees' Career Expectations

In early 2013, the Director General of the Foreign Service surveyed posts asking how well new entry-level officers were meeting the needs and expectations of mid-level management (13 STATE 1153088). Interestingly, the survey failed to ask how well mid-level managers and the Department were meeting the expectations of new entry-level officers. The extraordinary personnel growth of the last decade has fundamentally changed the demographics of the Service. The growth is requiring not only that the new generation adapt to the practices and behavior of the old, but also that the Service itself accommodate the views and perspectives of the new demographic. The Department, HR/RMA in conjunction with HR/CDA, should survey employees at the 5- and 10-year marks to determine how well it is meeting and managing Foreign Service employee career expectations. The survey might also ask whether they initially joined with short or long term career intent and whether/why their intended career length may have changed since entering. The upcoming survey of mid-level management regarding entry-level specialists should also include the corollary question of entry-level specialists' views on mid-level management and the Department.

Examine Recruiting Practices

The Department's electronic outreach program for prospective employees, part of its ongoing "war for talent", has recruited a cohort of highly skilled employees. However, the information presented on the web site careers.state.gov may not always reflect the reality waiting for new hires. Does the website accurately convey Foreign Service culture, career expectations, and technological savvy? Do new prospective employees learn that they may be expected to complete two consular tours, waiting up to five years before they can work in their chosen career track? Videos on the website tend to highlight the experiences of long-term employees – many in senior leadership positions – and not those of Entry Level Officers. The Department's web site and hiring materials should be reviewed and revised based on the results of the aforementioned employee expectations survey.

Interview Separating Employees

Despite low Foreign Service attrition rates, the Department lacks a good understanding of why employees are resigning. Currently, there is no "exit interview" to capture this information for evaluation and year-on-year comparison. The Department's Career Development Officers should begin interviewing all employees separating before full retirement eligibility and compile statistics by career track, age, gender and family size. This data should be analyzed and widely distributed. The Department's resignation checklist focuses on the "how" rather than the "why" of an employee's resignation. There may be a disconnect between pre-employment sell and post-employment reality with regard to in-cone entry-level assignment opportunities,

employee level of responsibility, or spousal/partner employment. We may be losing some of our brightest, most innovative, or most new creative officers who feel unfulfilled by their work in the Department. For example, to what extent do institutional factors like resistance to change or generational differences compound these issues?

Develop and Publish Career Path Trajectories

The Department's two most recent hiring surges (D3.0 and DRI) expanded the Foreign Service by almost 50%. As these two cohorts rise through our up-or-out system promotion rates are beginning to slow and time-in-class, involuntary separations are anticipated to increase (14 STATE 4530). In five years, the first of the DRI generation will begin competing for entry into the Senior Foreign Service. The prevailing expectation that most officers will serve through the O1 ranks and that one in three would make it to the Senior Foreign Service may no longer hold. At the same time, not all new employees may be interested in a long-term career and some may even be interested in trading prospective upward mobility for financial security and/or professional stability. How do assumptions and projections change if we have hired a cohort that has no intention of remaining in the Foreign Service until retirement? Employees need more information regarding projected career trajectories in order to make informed life decisions. For instance, alongside the annual publication of Foreign Service promotion statistics, the Department should include a cohort analysis of past promotion rates and future promotions prospects. The mandatory leadership courses should also include a more detailed career paths briefing.

Enhance Detail and Training Opportunities

While the first QDDR and the Department's own Career Development Programs recognize the value of external professional development opportunities, they continue to be limited, with restricted eligibility. Long-term professional development opportunities are our best chance to inject new ideas and new connections into an inward-looking bureaucracy. They should be welcomed with open arms, not treated as lost years. The Department (HR/CDA and FSI) should review these programs and their administration and consider: 1) increasing programmatic links with the Foreign Service Institute and the relevant regional and functional bureaus; 2) introducing two-year professional development detail and training opportunities; and 3) expanding employee participation in third-party professional development programs. The Department should also consider designating some of the positions returning from Iraq and Afghanistan as "over-complement" to increase the Department's overall training capacity.

Recognize Value of Technology and Innovation

Our newest Foreign Service employees are often among our most technologically savvy, and are the most able to understand technological changes shaping the world. The Department's current levels of technological sophistication and innovation can prove shocking to those with private sector experience. Mobile technology has changed the fabric of American business over the last five years, but the Department has been slow to embrace and develop it. Some new employees wonder if the "Foreign Service Careers" mobile recruitment app may be the only department-created app they'll ever use. The insufficient IT apparatus constrains employee productivity and contributes to a culture in which technology and innovation are underappreciated. The Department should review the 13 Foreign Service dimensions, last updated in 1997, and its triennial promotion precepts to strengthen the importance of technology and innovation in its workforce.

INTRODUCTION

USAID's Development Leadership Initiative (DLI) brought on approximately 800 new FSOs through the end of 2013 in an attempt to rectify the effects of the hiring freeze of the 1990s. USAID continues to lose approximately 75-100 through attrition every year, and if it is to keep the gains it made with the DLI program – which ended in 2013 – continued attrition hiring and strong retention initiatives must take place. Those hired under the DLI make up approximately 60% of USAID FSOs and have very different expectations regarding careers and professional development than employees in years past. This era of a changing workforce in the US, and in our microcosm at USAID, is revealing that retention of talent is a persistent challenge. Preliminary information implies that today's new hires may not see a long-term future with the Agency. Work-life balance and transparency in the decisions affecting employees is paramount in today's workforce. USAID invests significantly in its new hires in language training alone.

USAID needs to protect its investment and enhance its capacity to use this talent. The necessary large increase in new hires has been a challenge to absorb and manage. Important aspects of what they want are to feel valued and be able to plan their career.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To continue to build and sustain a professional Foreign Service to execute the "Development" role in the three pillars that provide the foundation for promoting and protecting U.S. national security interests abroad (the 3Ds - Diplomacy, Development, and Defense) – as represented by State, USAID, and DoD, the following steps should be considered:

- Survey FSOs at all levels to determine how well USAID is meeting and managing employee career expectations. The new USAID HR management has expressed the value of data matrices. The results of such a survey would clearly illustrate where improvements need to be made to increase retention and morale. Reoccurring themes where focus may immediately be directed for improvement are:
 - Improved eligible family member (EFM) language training and employment opportunities both in the U.S. and abroad.
 - Enforce strict limitations on mid-level hiring. The practice of hiring mid-level FSOs is one issue of particular concern to many DLI hires brought on as junior officers, as the practice lessens promotion opportunities and conflicts with the entry-level hiring envisioned by the Foreign Service Act (FAA).
 - Strive for parity in benefits among the Foreign Service Agencies. It doesn't take long before the inconsistencies across the FS Agencies surfaces among new hires. Per SEC. 101.1 b. (5) of the FAA , effort at minimizing the impact of the hardships, disruptions, and other unusual conditions

- of service abroad upon the members of the Foreign Service, and mitigating the special impact of such conditions upon their families should be taken. The fact that USAID does less for its Officers than State in numerous areas sends a negative message. The lack of parity, however, seems mostly driven by a lack of resources and not the willingness of the Agency to accord parity. Efforts should be taken to begin with a few of the worst discrepancies to more closely align the Agency with the Department of State FS benefit package. A comparison chart is currently being comprised and may be used to develop action steps for prioritization and obtaining additional funding. In further support of this action, the FAA states that maximum compatibility among the personnel systems of the Foreign Service Agencies are to be developed.
- There is a lack of mentoring and insufficient value is given to Independent Development Plans. Although much talk is given to both, a formalized system tracking follow-through on both initiatives has yet to materialize.
 - Examine recruiting practices to determine if USAID is contributing to any unrealistic expectations and review and publish Foreign Service promotion statistics to increase transparency.
 - New FSOs who previously worked in development often express their frustration in going from hands-on development work to managing contractors that are doing the work. Addressing this current situation in some manner early on is recommended, with a long-term goal of continued above- attrition hiring of FSOs, thus building the necessary technical expertise to firmly establish USAID as the world’s premier development institution.
 - While constantly making efforts to improve, USAID should also ensure it is not creating unrealistic expectations regarding accommodating two career families, spousal employment and mobility.
 - USAID should be more realistic about expectations given to new employees. Presently, during new-entry training, new hires are led to believe that they will be fast-tracked for promotion and that their numerous ideas of change will be implemented. In reality, various regulations and the Agency’s culture greatly frustrate their expectations.
 - Introduce a robust “exit interview” for all separating employees to identify their specific and institutional reasons for leaving. USAID lacks a clear understanding of why employees are resigning. Currently, any “exit interview” is done informally and the information is not captured. There may be a disconnect between pre-employment sell and post-employment reality in regards to entry-level assignment opportunities, employee level of responsibility, or spousal/partner employment. A formal process for exit interviews should be established clearly describing where the responsibility lies to conduct the exit interview and statistics to be gathered. Special attention would focus on employees separating before full retirement eligibility. To what extent are institutional factors like resistance to change or generational differences at play?

- Continue analysis, development, and publication on projected and expected Foreign Service officer career paths as well as strengthen the Assignment and Performance Counselor (APC) role.
 - The Agency lacks employee tools for mapping career paths and options and old assumptions have been in flux with the recent mass hiring. USAID should develop and publish career path trajectories. Employees need more information regarding projected career trajectories in order to make informed life decisions. For instance, USAID should make public statistics on promotion rates and future promotions prospects, as the Department of State already does. Leadership courses should include a career paths briefing. The inadequacy of career planning tools as well as the uncertainty about the role of career counseling leaves a void that needs to be addressed.
- Strengthen and expand detail opportunities, Washington assignments and training/professional development, and ensure these rotations are recognized by promotion boards.
 - Conflicting feedback is often received regarding training, details and Washington assignments. Advice can be found encouraging a wide range of experience while simultaneously being warned that that time spent in any of these endeavors is not career enhancing. While few argue the value of training and time spent in the hub of our operations (Washington), they continue to be limited and considered lost years in terms of promotion. These opportunities to enhance understanding and skill should be welcomed, expanded and recognized as career enhancing. USAID needs to review the current situation and consider: how to foster a culture of continuous learning; what are appropriate institutions for long-term training, what cross-training will be done with and through which other agencies? Increasing programmatic links with the Foreign Service Institute (cost/training budget would have to be addressed so as to not be prohibitive to USAID) and the relevant regional and functional bureaus; introducing two-year professional development detail and training opportunities; and expanding employee participation in third-party professional development programs. In addition, the Agency needs to take steps in creating a culture that values FS rotations through Washington.