

## SO, YOU WANT TO BE A DIPLOMAT?

Gareth Evans\*

There are a great many students who are enormously attracted by the idea of a diplomatic career. Or, if not in the foreign service as such, certainly a job that takes you out and about internationally and gets you engaged with international policy issues, be they to do with peace and security, aid and development, trade, or any one of the innumerable transnational policy issues — from climate change to people trafficking to managing health pandemics — which Kofi Annan once described as ‘problems without passports’. It is no surprise that so many young people should want to get into these jobs: they sound inherently fascinating, and they are.

So, how can you best prepare yourself for a foreign policy-related career? How can you maximise your chances of cracking it in what is always going to be a very competitive field? I find myself constantly being asked for advice on the basis of my own experience as someone who has been for several decades now, if never a professional diplomat, variously a foreign minister, an international NGO head, a member of several major international commissions, and a writer and lecturer on international relations topics.

The landscape is constantly changing, and there is an obvious risk of me losing touch, as time goes on, with how hiring decisions are being made now, as distinct from when I was making them myself or observing others doing so. But there do seem to be some timeless basics about what is needed to get into these jobs: they come down to relevant skills, relevant experience — and luck.

So, you want to be a diplomat?

## Skills

There are a broad range of skills, including formal academic qualifications, communication skills and other personal skills, you will need to have or develop.

**Academic qualifications.** You will certainly need to have a good university degree, or combination of degrees. It doesn't really matter enormously in what discipline — Arts, Economics, Science, Law, Engineering or whatever — provided it is serious and manifestly reasonably academically demanding: the important thing is that you enjoy what you are doing, and get good results. The range of issues that arise in contemporary international relations make all sorts of specific discipline skills quite practically relevant, but what hirers are primarily looking for is strong underlying intellectual capacity, and capability to grow and evolve in applying that capacity to new situations. Nor does it necessarily add much, at least with current Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) hiring practice, to have postgraduate qualifications if your undergraduate performance has been strong.

**General knowledge.** It is not at all necessary to formally study international relations to get an international relations-related job, but obviously it is important to be able to demonstrate to potential hirers that you are interested in the subject and know something about it (as evidenced, for example, by writing for a website like that of the Young Diplomats Society, [www.young-diplomat.com](http://www.young-diplomat.com)). How do you get to know something about a subject that you are not formally studying? The answer is simple — by reading, and reading, and reading. A good place to start is simply with a journal like *The Economist*, which is a very good way of keeping you up to date not only with geopolitical issues and events worldwide, but obviously economic ones, and scientific/technological and cultural ones as well. And, of course, there's *The Conversation*.

So, you want to be a diplomat?

Taking that point further, I can't overestimate the importance of you doing everything you can to broaden your *general knowledge* — having at least some sense of the great currents in history, literature, art, architecture and music, not only in the Western tradition, but in the other great civilisations. It doesn't have to be at quiz show champion level, but you should be able to at least hold your own at Trivial Pursuit. As a diplomat, and in many other international job contexts, you need to be able to sustain conversations with an endless variety of people with an endless range of backgrounds and interests, and hirers will be looking for some evidence of where you are starting from in terms of your capacity to engage and how you are likely to develop.

And how do you go about developing broad general historical and cultural knowledge? The answer again is that there is no quick-fix app that will do the job: there is just no substitute for wide reading. And short of all the thousands of relevant books themselves out there, a good place to start is just by tracking the *Weekend Australian Review*, or the *Australian Book Review*, or — ranging more widely — the *New York Review of Books* and *London Review of Books*.

**Foreign language.** Facility in at least one foreign language — or at the very least a demonstrated aptitude to learn quickly — is pretty much a prerequisite for any significant international relations job these days, certainly in the Australian foreign service, the UN system, or for field-based positions with aid agencies and major international NGOs like the International Crisis Group.

I am sad to say that my own skills in that respect were, and remain, rudimentary — I studied Latin for quite a few years as a student, and while I can to this day spot a subjunctive at 40 paces, that did not qualify me to communicate in any known living language. I can relate in this respect to the post-war UK Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, who used to say that the only job in the entire Foreign Office for which he was qualified was to be its ministerial head. But if you

So, you want to be a diplomat?

are not going to rely on a political pathway into an international career, you can't start early enough to acquire some foreign language competence.

It doesn't matter much whether the language you choose is French, Spanish, Indonesian, Chinese, Hindi, Arabic or anything else: just start learning something, if you haven't already, and try by doing so to demonstrate your aptitude to learn a lot more. There is also the further advantage that language-learning, by its very nature, gets you absorbed in and knowledgeable about another culture, and in that sense contributes greatly to your store of general knowledge.

**Written communication.** Few skills matter more for a would-be diplomat than the ability to write well and above all, accurately. I may be old-fashioned in this respect, but there is no bigger or immediate turn-off for me (and I suspect you will still find this for those culling applications in DFAT and every other major international organisation) in reading an application by anyone for anything that contains obvious grammatical errors, spelling and punctuation mistakes. That's also the case for typographical errors which, while not necessarily indicating an inability to write accurately, certainly demonstrate indefensible carelessness: never, ever, let an important piece of writing go forward without checking and checking again, for the simple slips we all make. It's extraordinary to me how many don't.

Writing lucidly, elegantly and interestingly is something else again: wonderful if you have that capacity, but something that seems to remain beyond many otherwise wholly competent international relations practitioners for the whole of their careers. If you think you might be in that category, a superb primer on helping you to avoid at least the worst forms of clunkiness, and get — if not elegance and wit — at least some real basic clarity into your expression, is George Orwell's famous essay, *Politics and the English Language*. Look it up!

So, you want to be a diplomat?

In the new electronic and social media age, it is true that many people are becoming more casual about formal written expression. But, if you are serious about a diplomatic or foreign policy career, where words and the capacity to use them persuasively will be your daily currency, you would be extremely unwise to think that the inherent brilliance of your ideas and instincts and knowledge base will shine through sloppy writing. They won't, and your applications will be the first into the bin.

In terms of developing your writing skills there is no better method than doing as much formal writing as you can, and of course if you can publish readable and interesting work on something like the Young Diplomats website, that is a good way of demonstrating both your interest and capacity to potential hirers.

**Oral communication.** Good oral communication and advocacy skills are not absolutely indispensable in foreign policy related jobs — not everything that needs to be done happens front of house. But they are obviously extremely helpful, and it is obviously sensible to try to develop them if you know they don't come naturally to you, not least because you are going to have to display at least some of them when it comes to job interviews.

One time-honoured way of developing those skills is through debating — of which I certainly did a great deal in my secondary school and university days — or, in the case of law students, mooting. Although debating is, I suspect, a bit less popular these days — maybe regarded as not quite at the coolest end of the extra-curricular activity spectrum — aspiring diplomats or NGO advocates should grab every possible chance to develop their debating and general public speaking skills.

**Social skills.** Oral communication skills are a subset of the larger category of social skills: the various things that make you a companionable and pleasant colleague and interlocutor, whether around an internal meeting table or negotiating table, or over meal, or — yes

— at cocktail parties. You don't have to be a brazen extrovert — most people in fact find that pretty wearing — but you do need to listen carefully to others, to be responsive to what they say, and where appropriate, to project some warmth in your social interactions. And while these days you don't necessarily need to know, at the outset of your career, how to navigate your way through complicated table settings of cutlery and wine glasses, it is rather important not to eat with your mouth open! So far as current DFAT hiring practice is concerned, the bottom line I am told is that 'We are looking for bright, adaptable young people with genuine curiosity and an even temperament'.

**Organizational skills.** There is one final skillset which, while not absolutely essential, is very much worth being able to demonstrate to potential hirers, if you can. That is the capacity to get things done organisationally — to have a good sense of process and the ability to get people working together to deliver particular outcomes, whether it's a conference or other event, or advocacy campaign, or whatever. In a great many practical roles — certainly in just about any embassy or field office — these skills are highly valued, and it's a real problem when they are lacking, particularly at the top. If you get a chance to develop these skills, in the context of the Young Diplomats Society or any other relevant context, grab it!

## Experience

That leads into the question of the kind of *experience* you need to have to be able to win an entry-level position in the foreign service or anywhere else. It is a troubling and frustrating issue for applicants, I well know, because while hirers are of course aware that everyone has to start somewhere, and nobody can acquire real job experience without having a real job, there is still a temptation to fill even very junior positions with those who have had some real-world experience in doing that kind of job somewhere else.

So, you want to be a diplomat?

So, how can you maximise your chances of overcoming this obstacle? You should think of the kinds of experience you need to acquire and which you should be realistically able to acquire even before you get your first paid job as being in two baskets: those which reinforce your claim to possessing the various core skills I have described above, and those which are more immediately and directly relevant to getting your foot inside a particular employment door.

**Reinforcing skill claims.** I have already mentioned the importance of engaging in activities like debating and event-organising and writing website journal articles, which will not only help you develop relevant skills, but be a way of demonstrating to others that you have them.

One of the most important things you can do to demonstrate your interest in international affairs and willingness to immerse yourself in other countries and cultures, is to take time off to *travel* to the extent that you can possibly afford it, by begging or borrowing if need be. I have written on many occasions about the huge impact my own student travel experiences had in multiple ways in the course of my subsequent career — like visiting Hiroshima on an Australian Union of Students (AUS) group trip to Japan, or the United States on a State Department sponsored trip (which turned me completely off the Vietnam war!), or backpacking through about 20 countries across Asia, Africa and the Middle East over many months while travelling to and from the United Kingdom on a scholarship.

Not everyone will have the chance to do all of this, but most of you can do at least some of it, and you should. Provided you get out and about, meeting lots of locals and getting some sense of how they live their lives — not just tending bar in Kuta or Phuket or some other tourist-saturated location — you will learn a lot about the world and yourself, which you should be able to communicate with enthusiasm to potential hirers.

So, you want to be a diplomat?

**Getting a foot in the door.** Getting an internship, or some other kind of relevant work experience in an international organisation or an on-the-ground local organisation in another country has become almost a *sine qua non* for the resumes of those job-hunting in international relations. It can be a frustrating experience trying to find these positions, even totally unpaid ones, because there are so many young people chasing them from so many countries: when I was heading the International Crisis Group, we had some 60–90 unpaid, 3-month to 6-month, internship positions available in our various headquarters, advocacy and field offices — but we had some 3,000–4,000 applications a year for them, from some of the best and brightest, best academically qualified students from many of the best universities in the world.

It is also the case that the quality of the internship or work experience you will have will vary enormously from organisation to organisation, sometimes giving you serious and exciting responsibilities, and in other cases only the most mundane tasks. But if you can get one of these sorts of positions in a serious organisation, grab it with both hands, and make the most of your time there. Not only will it help your resume if you do very well, winning the respect of senior colleagues, it will give you the inside running for any position that may become available in that organisation, simply because people will know you and the quality of your work. That was certainly the case at Crisis Group, where any entry-level position that opened up almost invariably went to someone who had impressed us as an intern.

**Referees?** One last point about demonstrating to potential hirers that you actually have the skills and experiences you claim. Some of this will speak for itself with the appropriate documentation, like formal academic qualifications, but for much of it you will have to rely on good references, and in this respect, it is important to choose your referees very carefully.

So, you want to be a diplomat?

Of course, it can be helpful to have well-known names that it is reasonable to believe that hirers will be aware of and respect. But don't fall into the trap of asking someone to act as a referee for you if that person does not know you and your work quite intimately, and you are not absolutely confident that his or her reference will be both substantive and strongly favourable — not only on paper, but if your referee responds to a request for telephone comment. Even in the unlikely event that some high-profile person who does not know you well agrees to add his or her name to your application, it is usually very obvious to a hirer that these references lack substance — and it can be quite counterproductive for you when such a referee has to say, if directly asked, 'Well I don't really know much about this person'.

## **Luck**

All that said, the unhappy reality is that having all the necessary core skills, and having acquired all the kinds of experiences I have mentioned, and having a lot of good references supporting you, will not necessarily get you the kind of job that you really want. The right skills and experience are necessary conditions for getting a foreign policy-related career started, but they may not be sufficient. It really does often come down to sheer *luck* — whether you happen to be in the right place at the right time, and whether you have managed to catch just the right eyes just when you needed to.

This can be very frustrating, and make you feel that life is very unfair when you know that your qualifications are at least as good as, or objectively better than, someone else who has had breaks that just have not come your way. I know quite a few young people who feel that way, and with good reason, and I really feel their pain.

But, recognising these realities, what you should *not* do is put all your career-ambition eggs in this one basket, such that you will be absolutely devastated and feel that life is not worth living if you don't get the kind of job that you most want. Always have a fall-back

So, you want to be a diplomat?

option, an alternative career path that makes good use of the skills you have, and with which you can come to be reasonably satisfied if you throw yourself into it.

A diplomatic career, or in some other international or foreign-policy related job, is in this respect very much like a political career. Many are called but few are chosen. You should do everything you can to position yourself to take advantage of an opportunity should it fall your way, but recognise that as often as not it won't, and as often as not that will have less to do with your qualities than sheer dumb bad luck. But that's just the way life is, and there is nothing much more that you can do except be philosophical about it, go on trying for as long as your stamina holds out, and when it does, gracefully accept that there are many other ways of having a totally fulfilling professional life.

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