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Working Overseas as a Librarian for the United States or Non-governmental Organizations

Joan Petit

In my last article for LIScareer.com, I wrote about working overseas as a librarian in a private school or university <http://liscareer.com/petit_overseas_academic.htm>. In this article, I focus on international jobs with the US Federal Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the United Nations. Please note that this is not an exhaustive summary of opportunities available abroad for Americans, but I do hope it will get you started.

The United States federal government employs many librarians who work overseas, including with the State Department and military. The best way to find these jobs is to search USAJOBS <<http://www.usajobs.gov/>> for the word "librarian." The transparency required of the federal government means you can often find job information, including salary ranges, beyond what is listed in the job description.

The United States Department of State hires librarians, called Information Resource Officers (IROs), to work at American embassies in large cities like Cairo, Nairobi, New Delhi, and Mexico City; they also rotate through Washington, DC. IROs manage embassy libraries and are responsible for smaller libraries in regional embassies. Working in an embassy can require extensive travel and frequent reassignment to new posts. The State Department generally hires IROs in batches; the position was posted most recently in January 2009. I know several people who applied, and most were rejected immediately. Those who made the first several rounds are still in the application process a year later, and if they are assigned overseas, will go first to DC for training for several months. Successful candidates may not arrive at their first embassy post until two years or more after application. It's a long and competitive process and the job may not be open again for several years.

Some librarians also apply to work for the State Department as Foreign Service Officers <<http://careers.state.gov/officer/index.html>> (FSOs). While you will not be working as a librarian, your graduate degree and training may be an advantage.

Working for the State Department, whether as an IRO or FSO, requires frequent international moves, sometimes to places you may not choose or like. Both routes require testing and interviews in DC or another international post (sometimes at your own travel expense) as well as security and medical clearances. These jobs become a lifestyle as much as a career. The pay and benefits are good to excellent (IROs are on a higher pay scale). Typically your spouse/partner and children go with you, and the government provides you with housing and international private schooling for your kids. It's important to remember that as a State Department employee, you represent the US federal government, regardless of your personal feelings about the President or Secretary of State.

Another option may be to work overseas for the US Military, which maintains libraries on military bases all over the world. These libraries function like small public libraries: they serve the servicemen and women and their families, including spouses and children. Their holdings will reflect this diversity. Some small libraries have no professional libraries on staff, while others have only one MLS-trained librarian, who is expected to perform a variety of technical and public services. Typically these positions come with expatriate benefits like housing or a housing allowance, and the salary is comfortable given the location and benefits.

The military also runs K-12 schools overseas, for soldiers' children, and these schools employ librarians. The job is similar to working as a school librarian in the United States and may require a teaching certification. These schools are coordinated by the Department of Defense Education Activity <<http://www.dodea.edu/home/>>, and you can find job descriptions and hiring information on their website.

NGOs

The United Nations needs librarians too, in New York City and around the world. Americans benefit from their knowledge of English, one of the working languages of the United Nations, but another language can help, both in getting and having the job. The UN job site <<http://unjobs.org/>> is the best resource for finding employment with the United Nations.

Other large NGOs, like the International Red Cross and Doctors without Borders, may also hire librarians to work overseas. You likely will need more than an MLS in hand to be competitive: NGOs may be looking for people with international or development experience or with specific skills in libraries or languages. The best way to find these jobs is to visit the organizations' websites.

Temporary Work

Other opportunities may be short-term. Some libraries in developing countries may be looking for experienced librarians to volunteer for a short period of time, possibly to serve in a rotating position or to help set up a library. You can expect to incur some of your own expenses in such a situation. Some of these jobs and opportunities may be posted to the IFLA job list <<http://www.ifla.org/en/mailling-lists>>.

Some librarians find work overseas during sabbaticals. A librarian may directly contact the overseas library to see if they are interested in a term-limited volunteer.

Other librarians have done job exchanges with partner librarians overseas. Lisjobs.com maintains a helpful list of organizations of job exchange programs <<http://www.lisjobs.com/jobseekers/non-us.asp>> for librarians.

Another option for academic librarians may be found through the Fulbright Program, which facilitates the placement of American academics overseas in short-term positions of a few weeks to one year; they also support the placement of international academics in the US for similar periods of time. Though we typically think of Fulbright scholars as teaching and research faculty, there are some opportunities for librarians. Visit the website for the Fulbright Program <<http://www.iie.org/fulbright/>> for more information.

Of course, not every librarian working overseas is affiliated with a school, NGO, or government. Some librarians may find work as librarians for corporations, for example with a large, multinational corporation or oil company. The paths to overseas work are as varied as the people in them.

Regardless of the job, it may not be easy to find a position overseas, and, if you do, it can be a challenge to live away from your home country. But you never know when opportunities might arise if you leave yourself open to them. And, as I mentioned in my first article, I never met anyone overseas who wish they had traveled less and stayed home more.

About the Author

Joan Petit is the Humanities and Social Sciences Librarian at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. She spent two years in Cairo, Egypt while working for the American University in Cairo. She appreciates the help of Casey Grimmer at the American University in Cairo and Rose Jackson at Portland State University with this article.

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