



**FOREIGN COMMERCIAL SERVICE OFFICER
INFORMATION PACKAGE**

A Global Perspective / A Global Career



Dear Prospective Applicant:

Thank you for your interest in the Commercial Service. Our agency employs United States citizens in a number of capacities. This information packet was prepared to assist U. S. citizens interested in becoming Career Candidate Foreign Service Commercial Officers to find information about the Commercial Service and Foreign Service careers. This information packet is in no way exhaustive, and the information contained herein is subject to change without notice.

The Commercial Service offers an outstanding platform for personal and professional growth. As members of the United States' diplomatic corps, Commercial Service Officers commonly have access to persons and places that are beyond the reach of most of their peers. A career as a Commercial Service Officer also provides outstanding opportunities to learn new languages and travel internationally. A Commercial Service Officer career, however, is not for everyone. The demands on one's person and family should not be underestimated. Commercial Officers spend the majority of their careers overseas, far from home and often in challenging environments. Spouses and other accompanying dependents may find their careers disrupted. Therefore, the decision to become a Commercial Officer is one that should involve all of the members of your household.

We hope that we have piqued your interest. We encourage you to become familiar with our agency. For more information and updates on our latest developments, visit our website, www.trade.gov/cs/. Your application is most certainly welcome.



The Commercial Service

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The United States and Foreign Commercial Service (USFCS) is one of four official Foreign Affairs Agencies under the Foreign Service Act of 1980. The other three official Foreign Affairs Agencies include the United States Department of State, the United States Agency for International Development, and the Foreign Agricultural Service. Each agency specializes in one or more functional areas of Foreign Affairs. The Commercial Service, as we are more commonly known, is responsible for ***Commercial Affairs***. The Commercial Service falls under the purview of the International Trade Administration (ITA) of the U.S. Department of Commerce and is responsible for:

- Promoting exports of United States goods and services, especially for small- and medium-sized businesses.
- Protecting United States commercial interests.

The mission of ITA is to promote and strengthen the international trade and investment position of the United States. The Commercial Service is one of four programmatic units within the International Trade Administration. The Commercial Service works very closely with our colleagues in Market Access and Compliance (MAC) and Manufacturing and Services (MAS), and also provides support to Import Administration (IA), when needed. Following are their functions:

- Market Access and Compliance (MAC) - responsible for country and regional analysis of United States export markets. MAC looks for market entry impediments caused by foreign governments and uses every possible tool to achieve equal treatment for U.S. companies and workers.
- Manufacturing and Services (MAS) - undertakes industry trade analysis, shapes U.S. trade policy, participates in trade negotiations, organizes trade capacity building programs, and evaluates the impact of domestic and international economic and regulatory policies on U.S. manufacturers and service industries.
- Import Administration (IA) - investigates antidumping and countervailing duty claims.

Commercial Officers (COs) are officers of the United States Government, appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate to represent the Government of the United States to foreign sovereign states. Commercial Officers help United States businesses decide when and whether to begin to export; develop export strategies; and locate export financing and business partners, such as agents, distributors, and joint venture partners. Commercial Officers articulate, develop and refine United States commercial policy; coordinate trade missions attended by corporate and government

executives that expand United States export market share overseas; and cultivate personal and professional contacts to be used in influencing foreign trade regimes to benefit and defend United States commercial interests. Whether serving *overseas or domestically*, Commercial Officer assignments present the opportunity to use insights gained from personal and professional experience to make a difference in the world.

Serving a substantial portion of their careers at overseas diplomatic missions (usually in embassies, consulates or trade centers), Commercial Officers enjoy access to places and people beyond the experience of most United States Government employees. As an accredited United States diplomat, the Officer is an official representative of the United States by the accrediting country(ies), and carries the privileges and responsibilities associated with that representation at all times. While the demands on Officers' personal time are great, they are often offset by the opportunity to learn new languages, travel to diverse locations, live in new cultures, and expand professional competencies through first-hand experience in foreign markets.

The following information has been prepared to help you decide whether a Commercial Officer career is *the right choice for you*. Please take the time to familiarize yourself with the challenges, obligations and responsibilities that exist in the Commercial Service. In the end, we hope you will agree that a career in the Commercial Service is well worth your time and energy.





Qualification Requirements

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Generally, all applicants must meet the following criteria:

1. Have three years of specialized experience. Specialized experience is described as experience performing the following duties:

- ❑ Assisting with the production of regional and/or international market analyses that are accepted as accurate and authoritative, and that form the basis of business-related decisions.
- ❑ Assisting with the development or implementation of an international trade and marketing strategy for a U.S. product or service, which includes identifying target markets, analyzing the potential of these new markets for U.S. exports, developing a business plan to successfully establish business operations, and promoting the product or service to the market.
- ❑ Assisting in the planning and implementation of trade promotion activities such as trade events.
- ❑ Actively participating in meetings with foreign governments or other organizations to influence the outcome of business activities between U.S. companies and foreign markets.
- ❑ Contributing to the analysis of commercial issues requiring trade, economic, or business knowledge of one or more geographic or political regions.

OR

2. Possess a MA or MS Degree or other graduate degree and two years of specialized experience as described above.

3. Applicant must also:

- ❑ Be a U.S. citizen.
- ❑ Be between the ages of 21 and 59 – The Foreign Service has a mandatory retirement age of 65. To retire under a Foreign Service retirement system, one must have at least five years of service credit under the system.
- ❑ Be available for a worldwide assignment and be willing to relocate approximately every 3-4 years.



How do I apply?

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1. Complete the online application.

Applicants must pass the initial online application screening process before receiving an invitation for the one-day Assessment. A link to the application is placed on the employment page of the www.trade.gov/cs website approximately three to four months prior to the Assessment. Please note that you cannot access the vacancy announcement until it is officially posted on the website. The Commercial Service offers the Assessment Center exam on average once every two years.

2. What is an Assessment Center?

In general, the term "Assessment Center" refers to the process for administering a series of exercises to determine if applicants have the skills and abilities to serve successfully as a Commercial Officer. The Commercial Service Assessment Center is a day-long examination process that allows prospective Foreign Service Officers to demonstrate their oral and written communication skills, negotiating ability, and management and administrative abilities. The Commercial Service assumes that candidates have an understanding of export promotion programs, including the roles of public and private sector agencies and organizations, and the dynamics and techniques of export promotion for purposes of the assessment.

The exam consists of a number of exercises that may include any or all of the following: hypothetical exercises, writing exercises, in-box tests, leaderless group exercises and an interview. The Foreign Service Act of 1980 stipulates that entry to the Foreign Service will occur through an "impartial and rigorous examination." The Commercial Service Assessment Center is designed to serve this purpose.

3. I applied and passed the Pre-Screen Exam...what's next?

All applications are reviewed, rated, and the top candidates that meet the education and/or experience requirements are invited to attend the Commercial Service Assessment. The highest-ranking candidates who pass the Assessment are placed on a list called the Rank Order Register.

At this stage in the application process, candidates have the option of providing proof of proficiency in one language. Although language ability is not a requirement for entry into the Foreign Commercial Service, candidates who opt to take a foreign language test will receive additional points when the Rank Order Register is finalized. Information regarding language testing is distributed to candidates on the day of the Assessment.

The Commercial Service confers conditional offers of employment from the Rank Order Register, from the highest scorer to the lowest. The Register is valid for a maximum of

twenty-four months from the date certified by the Director General (the highest ranking official in the Commercial Service). The candidates who do not receive a conditional offer before the Rank Order Register expires may reapply for the next Assessment exam.



Commercial Service Assessment Exam

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The Commercial Service Assessment is the vehicle used to recruit candidates into the Foreign Commercial Service. Candidates who pass the initial online application screening process are invited to participate in the Commercial Service Assessment. This phase of the application process includes one day of testing in the Washington, DC area at the candidate's expense.

Performance Dimensions:

The Assessment is designed to test for competencies, which demonstrate whether candidates possess specific skills needed to successfully perform the job of a Commercial Officer. The skills tested in this Assessment were determined after conducting a thorough job analysis. Specifically, these skills and their definitions are:

Written and Oral Communication Skills

- **Reading:** Skill in understanding and using written information that may be presented in a variety of formats, such as text, tables, lists, figures, and diagrams; selecting reading strategies appropriate to the purpose, such as skimming for highlights, reading for details, reading for meaning, and critical analysis.
- **Writing:** Skill in expressing ideas and information in written form clearly, succinctly, accurately, and in an organized manner; using English language conventions of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and sentence and paragraph structure; tailoring written communication to the intended purpose and audience.
 - Knowledge of correct grammar, organization, diction, spelling, and punctuation required for written reports and for editing the written work of others in order to produce high quality reports.
- **Speaking:** Skill in expressing ideas and facts orally in a clear and understandable manner that sustains listener attention and interest, tailoring oral communication to the intended purpose and audience.
- **Listening:** Skill in attending to, receiving, and correctly interpreting verbal communications and directions through cues such as the content and context of the message and the tone, gestures, and facial expressions of the speaker.

Problem Solving and Decision Making Skills

- **Gathering and analyzing information:** Skill in obtaining facts, information, or data relevant to a particular problem, question, or issue through observation of events or situations, discussion with others, research, or retrieval from written or electronic sources; organizing, integrating, analyzing, and evaluating information.
- **Analyzing and solving problems:** Skill in anticipating or identifying problems and their causes; developing and analyzing potential solutions or improvements using rational and logical processes or innovative and creative approaches when needed.
- **Calculating budget and other numbers:** Skill in applying mathematics and budgetary concepts to office and program budgets.

- Making decisions and judgments: Skill in making decisions that takes into consideration relevant facts and information, potential risks and benefits, and short- and long-term consequences or alternatives.
- Organizing and planning: Skill in organizing and structuring work for effective performance and goal attainment; setting and balancing priorities; anticipating obstacles; formulating plans consistent with available human, financial, and physical resources; modifying plans or adjusting priorities given changing goals or conditions.

Skills in Achieving Results

- Customer service: Skill in improving processes/products/services, seeking feedback, and responding in a timely manner in order to better address customer needs; understanding and using suitable styles of communication (e.g., formal versus informal, concise versus detailed, written versus oral) to fit the audience and purpose.
- Salesmanship: Skill in generating enthusiasm in others for products and services and being comfortable asking others for things in order to broaden customer and service base.
- Interpreting authority relationships: Skill in understanding the effective range and use of one's own authority in order to achieve results within a bureaucratic and/or political context.
- Furthering diversity: Skill in understanding and applying the principles of fair treatment and equal opportunity in contributing to the Department's goals and objectives.
- Objectivity: Skill in identifying and separating personal bias from facts and citing pros and cons frankly and fully in order to allow clients to make well-reasoned and accurate decisions.

Skill in Working With and Leading Others

- Adaptability: Skill in changing one's own behavior or work methods to adjust to other people or to changing situations or work demands; being receptive to new information, ideas, or strategies to achieve goals.
- Working in teams: Skill in working cooperatively and collaboratively with others to achieve goals by sharing or integrating ideas, knowledge, skills, information, support, resources, responsibility, and recognition.
- Leading others: Skill in motivating, inspiring, and influencing others toward effective individual or teamwork performance, goal attainments, and personal learning and development by serving as a mentor, coach, and role model and by providing feedback and recognition or rewards.
- Building consensus / Negotiation / Persuasion: Skill in building consensus among individuals or groups by facilitating agreements that involve sharing or exchanging resources or resolving differences in such a way as to promote mutual goals and interests; by persuading others to change their point of view or behavior without losing their future support; and by resolving conflicts, confrontations, and disagreements while maintaining productive working relationships.

- **Professionalism:** Skill in maintaining self-confidence, determination, and enthusiasm despite setbacks or emotionally tense situations in order to solve problems or challenges.

Cultural Skills

- **Using social skills:** Skill in interacting with others in ways that are friendly, courteous, and tactful and that demonstrate respect for individual and cultural differences and for the attitudes and feelings of others.
- **Cultural sensitivity:** Skill in understanding the values and customs of other cultures in order to interact effectively (e.g., build rapport, maintain and manage relationships) with foreign businesses and governments.
- **Language:** Skill in using precise language and conveying nuances of meaning in order to interact with foreign and domestic governments and businesses, CS officers and locally-hired staff.

Personal and Professional Growth Skills

Self and career development: Skill in identifying own work and career interests, strengths, and limitations; pursuing education, training, feedback, or other opportunities for learning and development; managing, directing, and monitoring one's own learning and development.

Oral Assessment:

As this Assessment tests for skills and abilities, rather than knowledge, there is little to do to prepare except to review the skills you will be measured on, get a good's night rest, and relax. The test has been prepared for candidates who all have a minimum of three years working experience (or a master's degree and two years experience) specific to international trade, business, government, or related areas, and candidates will be expected to generally draw from this experience. Candidates may wish to familiarize themselves with the mission of the Commercial Service by reviewing our web page at <http://www.trade.gov/cs>.

The Assessment will consist of five exercises. The five exercises are:

--Structured Interview: This is done through two distinct interviews. The Hypothetical Interview presents candidates with job related situations similar to those they would likely encounter in the CS and asks them to describe how they would resolve the problem presented. The Past Behavior Interview asks candidates to describe how they performed in specific situations in their experience that are similar to situations they could expect to encounter in the CS.

--Group Exercise: This exercise is a leaderless group discussion in which candidates work in a group of up to six candidates to solve a realistic work-related problem. Each candidate prepares and gives a brief presentation on their assigned role to their peers, and then the entire group debates the various positions and comes to a decision.

--Advocacy Exercise: The candidates play the role of Commercial Officers (CS) advocating on behalf of a U.S. company. They prepare and give a brief presentation, respond to questions on their presentation, and then compose a memo that summarizes the presentation and offers suggestions for next steps.

--In-box Exercise: In this exercise, you will receive a packet of papers (messages, to-do items, etc.) indicative of what is found on the desk of a Commercial Officer. This packet contains various items requiring your action. You will be given a brief background on the nature of the situations related to these items and you will need to respond to them in a variety of ways as per the instructions given. Additionally, you will need to identify the three most urgent items in the packet.

--Editing Exercise: This exercise requires candidates to perform the common Commercial Officer task of editing reports created by host country employees for whom English is not their native language.



Foreign Service Officer

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Commercial Officers serving overseas provide in-country leadership for United States export promotion programs, designed in partnership with other agencies and organizations, to capitalize on existing market potential and create new opportunities. Commercial Officers advocate and intercede with local governments and trade organizations on behalf of United States companies, and develop and utilize an extensive network of host country contacts at the local, regional, and national levels. The Commercial Section at a United States diplomatic mission hosts Congressional, state and local government delegations, as directed by the Ambassador, and coordinates trade delegations led by senior Administration officials. Commercial Officers lead the implementation of Trade Promotion Coordinating Committee country/regional initiatives, support policy negotiations, resolve trade complaints, and implement comprehensive country export promotion programs.

There are approximately 230 Commercial Officers serving in over 75 countries usually in locations with the most promising market potential for United States goods and services. Over the course of a 20-year career, the typical Officer can expect to serve in at least five overseas assignments. Officers must also serve a two-year assignment at one of the 109 U.S. Export Assistance Centers throughout the country.

The Senior Commercial Officer (SCO) oversees the Commercial Section of an overseas diplomatic mission, including a staff of Commercial Officers; local citizen staff, called Locally Engaged Staff (LES); and any United States or third-country national local hires. Commercial Sections may range in size from one or two Officers with only a few LES's, to large posts with 10 or 12 Officers and 40 or more LES's. A Commercial Officer is responsible for export promotion/marketing, in addition to the administrative management of the operation (budget, personnel, and planning).

Generally, the SCO reports directly to the Ambassador and is part of the Ambassador's Country Team. Under the general direction of the Ambassador, the SCO and the Commercial Section of the Mission focus on commercial and trade issues. The SCO is the Ambassador's principal advisor on commercial issues and typically takes the lead in formulating the post's Strategic Commercial Plan. The staff of the Commercial Section works closely with staff from other agencies at the Mission on issues that cut across agency lines (e.g. the Department of State, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Defense).

... and Other Duties as Assigned

In addition to the duties performed during normal office hours, Commercial Officers serving overseas have **representational responsibilities** that must be fulfilled during the evenings or on the weekends. These responsibilities may include hosting social events at

home or attending receptions several times per week in an effort to build professional ties with local officials and business representatives.

The Commercial Officer, like all other Officers at the Mission, must also take his or her turn serving as *Duty Officer*. The Duty Officer is on call evenings, weekends and holidays, for a week at a time, to handle emergencies. Examples of emergencies include receiving a call from the lawyer of a jailed United States national at 2:00 a.m. demanding immediate assistance from the Embassy, or checking incoming cables on New Year's Day to determine if any urgent issues should be brought to the Ambassador's attention. Officers at a smaller post usually serve as Duty Officer more often.

During emergencies, the Ambassador has the authority to deploy staff as he or she sees fit, regardless of the Department to which the staff member belongs. Consequently, a Commercial Officer might find him or herself running the Embassy's motor pool or serving as a Site Officer, organizing and managing logistics for meetings during a Presidential visit. If the host country is undergoing a period of civil disturbance, a Commercial Officer may assist in evacuating United States nationals from the area.



Promoting Diversity

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The Commercial Service recognizes the value of a diverse workforce and actively seeks to promote diversity. Our diversity is part of what makes us unique, as individuals and as a nation. Aspects of our diversity contribute to our personal identities and allow us to approach problems from different perspectives. Promoting diversity means creating a workplace that is inclusive and permits our organization to benefit from new ideas and innovations.

In the belief that diversity is one of our national assets, the Commercial Service has been both proactive and innovative in its recruitment, employment and programmatic efforts. It is our goal as an organization to ensure that the Commercial Service represents the many faces of the United States in all of its endeavors.



Assignments and Tours of Duty

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The Assignments Panel is a body comprised of members from within the International Trade Administration that determines all Commercial Officer assignments. Decisions of the Assignments Panel take account such factors as transfer eligibility; personal rank; language proficiency; requirements pertaining to hardship and domestic tours; requirements for substantial overseas service; and the expressed interest of the employee, including considerations of career and professional development. Career (tenured) and Career Candidate (tenure-track) Commercial Officers formally express their preferences in the form of a “bid list”. However, the needs of the Service come first, and the Commercial Service reserves the right to direct-assign an Officer to a position.

All Rank Order Register Candidates are direct assigned to positions for their first tour of duty. The Rank Order Register is a list of persons who have passed the Commercial Service Assessment, but have not yet been hired as Career Candidate Commercial Service Officers. Rank Order Register Candidates must receive and accept an assignment, pass security and medical clearances, and successfully complete a drug screen to be sworn-in and officially converted to the status of Career Candidate.

Rank Order Register Candidates cannot bid. To determine a Rank Order Register Candidate’s assignment, the Assignments Officer reviews position and staffing requirements, and solicits information from candidates pertaining to regional preferences and language abilities. Based on the information provided by candidates, the Assignments Officer attempts to find suitable matches, and makes recommendations to the Assignments Panel. All candidates for assignment must be worldwide available, regardless of their personal preferences. Rank Order Register Candidates who decline their assignment will not receive further consideration by the Assignments Panel.

(Candidates who decline their assignment are welcome to re-apply to sit for future administrations of the Commercial Service Assessment and attempt to qualify for inclusion on a new Rank Order Register.)

The *standard tour of duty* for each post is set by the Director General, and varies from four years for non-hardship posts, to one to three years for posts in “hardship” locations. Regardless of the standard tour of duty for a post, all first-tour Commercial Officers are assigned two-year tours of duty. *New Career Candidate Commercial Officers are expected to begin a tour of duty at a Export Assistance Center within the United States sometime during their first seven years of service.* Officers may bid to extend their tour of duty in one-year increments; however, the maximum continuous stay at a foreign post is five years.



Advancement as a Foreign Service Officer

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Advancement as a Commercial Service Officer is entirely dependent upon an Officer’s skills and aspirations.

Career Candidate Foreign Service Officers are appointed on a limited appointment not to exceed five years. Conversion to career status is based on the recommendation of the Commissioning and Tenure Board. This Board convenes annually to review the performance evaluations of career candidates to determine their professional competency, potential for advancement in the Foreign Service and whether they should be recommended for career status.

Commissioning is the act of appointment by the President (with confirmation by the Senate) of a career-candidate as a Foreign Service Officer based on a recommendation of the Commissioning and Tenure Board, approved and forwarded by the Secretary. Tenure is the act of granting permanent career status to an employee. Failure to be converted to Career status by the expiration of the fifth year of continuous service as a Career Candidate will result in separation from the Service.

Once converted to Career status (“tenured”), the *“up or out”* nature of the Service requires Foreign Service Officers to continually demonstrate superior performance or risk being separated from the Service. The intent of the “up or out” system is to ensure the progressive advancement of highly skilled and talented employees through the ranks of the organization, and retain the expertise and experience of our most capable officers.

Commercial Officers are eligible to enter the ranks of the Senior Foreign Service and serve as Ambassadors.



A New Lifestyle

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... Housing

When a Commercial Officer arrives at an overseas post, he or she will be met by a “sponsor”, who introduces the Officer to Mission personnel and provides assistance with shopping, schools, household help, etc. for the first few weeks of the assignment.

Commercial Officers serving overseas are provided United States Government-owned or leased quarters, or are given a living quarters allowance which generally covers rent and utilities at a given duty station. Some quarters are unfurnished, except for major appliances, such as stoves, refrigerators, freezers, washer machines and dryers. Travel orders, therefore, usually allow for a full shipment of household effects (up to 18,000 lbs.). Effects not shipped may be stored at United States Government expense. The total weight of shipped and stored effects may not exceed 18,000 lbs. At some duty stations, basic furniture is provided. In this case, a limited shipment of household effects is authorized (7,200 lbs.). The United States Government does not provide housing, nor does it defray the cost of housing, for Commercial Officers serving within the United States or its territories.

Housing varies by post. In some developed countries, it is of high quality, though it can be small by United States standards. In less developed countries, quarters are usually very comfortable by local standards, but may not equal United States standards.

... Privately Owned Vehicles (POV)

Privately owned vehicles that meet local import and licensing requirements may be included in an Officer’s authorized shipment. Vehicles that do not meet local standards may still be imported (depending on the post to which an Officer is assigned); however, their use in country may require the owner to make significant alterations to the vehicle to comply with local standards.

Officers may make arrangements to ship newly purchased vehicles that meet local standards directly to post from the manufacturer; or vehicles may be purchased on the local market. A market for vehicles often exists within the diplomatic community among Officers who are leaving post and those who have recently arrived. There are significant restrictions that vary by country pertaining to the sale by diplomats of vehicles outside the diplomatic community.

... Allowances and Differentials

A cost of living allowance is provided when the cost of living differential between a post and Washington, DC is significant. Post differential is a fixed percentage of an Officer’s base salary, ranging from five to twenty-five percent that is intended to compensate

Officers for service in locations with difficult living conditions. Only a few of the CS posts have danger pay, another allowance that compensates Officers for service in locations that present significant security risks. Education allowances will be discussed, below, under “Schools and Education Allowances”. One or more of the above allowances may apply depending upon the duty station where an Officer is assigned.

... Accompanying Dependents

Legal dependents planning to accompany an Officer to post must pass a physical examination and obtain a “medical clearance”. In rare cases, dependents may not be allowed to accompany the Officer because of dangerous conditions at post, or for reasons related to the results of the medical clearance conducted on the dependent in question. In cases where a dependent cannot or does not wish to accompany the Officer to post, a *separate maintenance allowance* may be available.

Many training and orientation resources are available to Officers’ legal dependents through the United States Department of State Overseas Briefing Center (OBC) (<http://www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc/c6954.htm>) and Family Liaison Office (FLO) (<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/>). Please check the FLO website for information related to family support services, family member employment, and community liaison services.

... Employment Opportunities for Spouses and Accompanying Dependents

The United States has Bilateral Work Agreements or de facto reciprocal work arrangements with some of the countries staffed by Commercial Officers. Bilateral Work Agreements may enable dependents of United States Government employees assigned to official duties at United States diplomatic missions to seek employment on the local labor market. In the case of de facto reciprocal work arrangements, dependents may apply through specified channels for a permit to work in the local economy.

United States diplomatic missions usually make an effort to hire the dependents of Officers stationed there to fill primarily administrative or consular positions at post; however, vacancies are usually limited in number. It is important to note that it is often difficult for the spouses of Commercial Officers to find gainful employment on the local labor market in most foreign countries. Commercial Officers and their dependents may make use of the resources of the United States Department of State Overseas Briefing Center and the Family Liaison Office to learn more about overseas employment opportunities for spouses and accompanying dependents.

... Schools and Education Allowances

While Officers serve overseas, the full cost of tuition at a United States Government-sponsored school at post is provided for all dependents from Kindergarten through Grade 12. If there are no United States Government-sponsored schools at an Officer’s post of assignment, the Commercial Service offers an *education allowance* to defray the cost of

tuition, room and board, and periodic transportation between post and the nearest locality where an adequate school is available.

United States Government-sponsored schools include those founded by United States companies, church organizations, and individual proprietors. Most are nonprofit, nondenominational, independent schools, established on a cooperative basis by United States citizens residing in foreign communities. These schools receive assistance and support from the United States Government under a program administered by the Office of Overseas Schools at the United States Department of State. The purpose of this assistance is to help schools provide adequate educational opportunities for the dependents of United States Government employees and to demonstrate to foreign nationals the philosophy and methods of American education. Many of these “accredited” schools are open to nationals of all countries and their teaching staffs although most are predominantly American.

These schools range from tiny schools with only a few elementary school pupils to large schools of over 1,000 students, providing education through high school. Instructional programs provide a core curriculum that prepares students to enter schools, colleges and universities in the United States. The language of instruction is English, supplemented at most schools with instruction in the local language. The content of the curriculum is American, but may vary, depending on the proportion of United States nationals in the student population. The curricula tend to be largely academic and the quality of instruction ranges from good to excellent at most schools. Further information about overseas educational opportunities can be found at <http://www.state.gov/m/a/os/>.



Employee Benefits for Commercial Officers

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The Commercial Service offers a competitive employee benefits package for Commercial Officers. Covered benefits include the following.

... Retirement

Commercial Service employees, appointed as Career (tenure) or Career Candidate (tenure-track) Commercial Officers, are subject to the Foreign Service Retirement and Disability System (FSRDS) or the Foreign Service Pension System (FSPS), depending on the individual's Federal employment history. There is a mandatory retirement age of 65 under the Foreign Service retirement systems. (The minimum retirement age is 50 with 20 years of creditable service, five years of which must have been covered by a Foreign Service retirement system.)

... Leave

Sick leave is accrued at a rate of four hours per pay period for a total of thirteen days per year by all Commercial Officers, regardless of the number of years of service.

Annual leave is earned at a rate of four, six, or eight hours per pay period, depending on the length of service.

- 4 hours per pay period or 13 days per leave year for less than 3 years of Federal service
- 6 hours per pay period or 20 days per leave year after 3 years of federal service but less than 15 years
- 8 hours per pay period or 26 days per leave year after 15 years of federal service

In addition to annual leave, **home leave** is accumulated at a rate of fifteen working days for each year of overseas service. A minimum of eighteen months of continuous service abroad is required for home leave eligibility, and Officers must take home leave after three years of continuous service overseas. Under home leave, the United States Government pays roundtrip travel expenses for the employee and eligible dependents to the employee's designated home leave address in the United States.

... Other Benefits

Thrift Savings Plan (equivalent to 401(k) with Government matching)

Foreign Service Officers may participate in this long-term savings, retirement, and investment program for federal employees. Additional information is available at www.tsp.gov.

Health Insurance

Foreign Service Officers are eligible to participate in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program. A wide selection of Federal Employees Health Benefits Plans is available, with costs shared by the Government. Employees are eligible to enroll in a wide variety of health insurance plans, including fee-for-service plans, and health maintenance organizations. The employee's portion is paid through payroll deductions. Additional information is available at <http://www.opm.gov/insure/health/>.

Life Insurance

Foreign Service Officers are eligible to participate in the Federal Employees Group Life Insurance (FEGLI) Plan. This plan offers low rates that are made through payroll deductions. The U.S. Government pays one-third of the cost for this insurance. This plan is voluntary and is intended as a form of immediate group term life insurance. The Office of Federal Employees' Group Life Insurance (OFEGLI), which is a private entity that has a contract with the Federal Government, processes and pays claims under the FEGLI Program. Additional information is available at <http://www.opm.gov/insure/life/>

Family Medical Leave

The Family Medical leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 provides Federal employees with up to 12 workweeks of unpaid, job-protected leave for the following reasons:

- Birth of a child
- Adoption of a child
- Serious illness of an employee
- Care of a seriously ill child, spouse or parent

Ten Paid Holidays Per Year

- New Year's Day
- Martin Luther King's Birthday
- President's Day
- Memorial Day
- Independence Day
- Labor Day
- Columbus Day
- Veteran's Day
- Thanksgiving Day
- Christmas Day

NOTE: The U.S. Government also observes some local holidays celebrated at overseas posts of assignment.



Pay Schedule

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The Commercial Service recruits at the FS-04 entry level. This Foreign Service pay grade is roughly equivalent to the civil service grade of GS-12. The Commercial Service bases a candidate's entry grade on the number of years of qualifying experience and a Masters or equivalent graduate degree.

Generally, pay is set at the first step of the grade. At the time the final offer is made, the candidate's current salary is examined to determine if he or she will lose money by joining the Commercial Service. Every attempt is made to match the candidate's current salary or for former Federal civilian service employees the highest previous rate. Additional step(s) within the entry grade up to the 14th step may be approved when current annual earnings exceed the 1st step and the candidate provides appropriate salary documentation to support the higher step.



Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

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Q. Are you a part of the Department of State?

- A. No, the Commercial Service is a branch of the International Trade Administration within the United States Department of Commerce. There are three other branches of the International Trade Administration:
- Market Access and Compliance (MAC) is responsible for country and regional analysis of United States export markets. MAC looks for exporting problems caused by foreign governments and uses every possible tool to achieve equal treatment for U.S. companies and workers.
 - Manufacturing and Services (MAS) undertakes industry trade analysis, shapes U.S. trade policy, participates in trade negotiations, organizes trade capacity building programs, and evaluates the impact of domestic and international economic and regulatory policies on U.S. manufacturers and service industries.
 - Import Administration (IA) investigates antidumping and countervailing duty claims and supports the Office of the United States Trade Representative.

While independent from the Department of State, the U.S. Commercial Service works very closely with State.

Q. What is a Limited non-career candidate?

- A. Limited Non-career Foreign Service Officers ("Limiteds") are hired as Commercial Officers for specific duty stations and tours of duty based on specialized skill or experience that they possess. Limited Non-career Foreign Service Officers' first tours of duty are limited to two years. There is no promise, implicit or explicit, of onward assignment or other further employment with the Commercial Service at the termination of the initial two-year tour of duty, any extension(s), or subsequent Limited Non-career appointment(s). Limiteds cannot serve with the Commercial Service more than five consecutive years.

Q. How does age affect your ability to become a Career Candidate Commercial Service Officer (tenure-track)?

- A. The Foreign Service Act of 1980 requires that Career and Career Candidate Foreign Service Officers be retired at the end of the month during which the officer reaches the age of 65. To retire under a Foreign Service Retirement System, one must have vested at least five years of service in the System. To ensure full retirement benefits to our Career and Career Candidate Officer Corps, the Commercial Service deems all persons over the age of 59 ineligible for appointment as Career Candidate Commercial Officers.

Q. What if I do not possess the minimum required directly relevant, professional experience?

A. You will be rated ineligible to participate in the Commercial Service Assessment.

Q. How do health or medical conditions affect your ability to become a Career Candidate Commercial Service Officer (tenure-track)?

A. All applicants and their accompanying dependents are required to submit to a medical examination in order to obtain medical clearance as a Commercial Officer. Applicants are also required to pass a drug screen.

The purpose of the examination is to determine whether the applicant and his or her accompanying dependents are free of medical conditions, which require specialized evaluation and/or medical care, or which would be aggravated by environmental factors at certain overseas locations.

On a case-by-case basis, the Commercial Service may grant an administrative waiver of pre-employment medical standards. The well-being of the applicant and accompanying dependents, cost to the United States Government, and the best interests of the Service are taken into account when determining whether to grant an administrative waiver. If granted, the applicant and/or accompanying dependent(s) receives a limited medical clearance for overseas assignment. Under no circumstance will the drug screen be waived, nor will an applicant who has failed a drug screen be hired.

Q. From the date of my acceptance of the conditional offer of employment, how long does it take to complete my clearances?

A. The clearance process can take six or more months to complete, depending upon the candidate's and family member's background and travel history.

Q. What happens if I decline my conditional offer of employment as a Career Candidate Commercial Officer (tenure-track)?

A. Rank Order Register Candidates who decline their conditional offers of employment are removed from further consideration off the relevant Rank Order Register. A candidate may defer an offer of employment for professional or personal reasons, but the candidate would then be moved to the bottom of the Register. To receive further consideration, candidates who decline their conditional offers of employment are required to pass the next administered Commercial Service Assessment and await their turn on the resulting Rank Order Register.

Q. How do I become a Career Foreign Service Officer (FSO)?

- A. The Commercial Service Assessment Center is the first step in becoming a Foreign Service Officer. The Commercial Service Assessment is a competitive, daylong examination that consists of a number of exercises. Exercises may include any or all of the following: Situational Interviews, Advocacy exercises, Editing exercises, In-box exercises and Leaderless Group Exercises.

Those who pass the Assessment are placed on a list called the Rank Order Register. Conditional offers of employment are made from the Rank Order Register, from the highest scorer to the lowest scorer on the list. The register is valid for a maximum of 24 months from the date certified by the Director General, U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service.

Q. Do you hire foreign nationals?

- A. In a country, the Commercial Service hires local individuals to work in the Commercial Section.

Q. Do you hire Interns?

- A. The Overseas Work-Study Internship Program is developed in accordance with the authority of Section 301 of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (5 U.S.C. §3111), Chapter 7 of the Federal Personnel Manual, and Department of Commerce specific guidelines on voluntary and uncompensated service implemented in DAO 202-311.

The purpose of the program is to provide college or university juniors, seniors, and graduate students of Economics, Business Administration and related fields with "hands-on" experience working in the Commercial Section of a U.S. Embassy. The program is uncompensated and designed to encourage students to consider careers in the commercial field. Internships in the Work-Study Program are considered to be adjunct to an applicant's education. Students must be currently enrolled and taking at least one-half of a full-time academic workload. They must also plan to continue their education immediately upon termination of their internship.

Interns typically serve for one semester or quarter during their academic year, or for a minimum of 10 weeks during the summer. U.S. citizenship and good academic standing are required, along with the successful completion of a security assurance check. For additional information, review the application instructions on the employment page of the www.trade.gov/cs website.

