

Going Global: Practicing Geography Internationally

A resource developed by the AAG's EDGE Project (www.aag.org/edge)

Why work internationally?

With the increasing interconnectedness of today's business climate and the emergence of new markets in developing countries around the globe, opportunities for geographers with interdisciplinary and integrative thinking and skills are numerous and expanding. As the job market is changing in North America, many young graduates, including geographers, are heading overseas to gain valuable work experience, expand their networks, and learn important life skills such as adapting to different cultural customs and learning new languages.

Types of international experiences

- **Study-abroad programs**

Study-abroad programs will not only help you gain overseas experience and immerse you in a new culture; they will also demonstrate to employers that you are adaptable, flexible, and open to new challenges -- all skills that are vital to succeeding in the workplace. Consult with your school's international programs or academic advising staff for information about specific programs, eligibility requirements, credits offered, costs, and other considerations.

- **Work-abroad programs**

Get the required working visa documents and teach English, work in a café, or secure seasonal employment in a new country. While these jobs might not reflect your ultimate career goals, the experience you gain from such short-term foreign work experiences is invaluable and can help build overseas contacts who will be helpful in the future.

- **Internships**

Internships are some of the best entry-level positions available to recent graduates. Look for opportunities through the websites of international organizations such as USAID, the World Bank, the United Nations, or major non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

- **Research assistantships**

Talk to your professors about the things that they are doing. They often have research grants and might need assistants for their work, which could take place overseas. In some cases, the research you conduct as part of your assistantship can also be applied towards your degree requirements.

- **Volunteering**

Hands-on experience is an excellent way to find out if you really want to work internationally. Volunteering overseas typically involves a temporary placement abroad with a definitive end date. Look into the Peace Corps, Cuso International, and the Canadian Crossroads International, three popular organizations that offer excellent volunteer opportunities for young people and professionals.

- **Personal travel**

Independent international travel can help you understand different places and people, think independently, expose yourself to new ideas (or challenge existing ones), and get a sense of whether an international lifestyle is for you.

Preparing for international work

1. Start looking for opportunities

Many international jobs are available in international development, private sector firms, and government foreign service. Geographers' training in locational analysis and GIS can help them to obtain jobs involving environmental assessment, monitoring, remediation, and preservation as well as climate change adaptation and mitigation, all of which are positions receiving increasing recognition at consulting firms and private companies. In addition, their knowledge of unique regions and cultures is a huge asset in an increasingly globalized world. Geographers also play critical roles in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts.

2. Assess and assert the value of your geography degree

Few job advertisements use the title of "geographer." Be creative in your search for positions, and be prepared to describe convincingly how your training can assist employers in real-world situations. Graduate work in a specialized field or with a particular regional focus can be a competitive advantage in a tough job market.

3. Don't underestimate your "soft skills"

Employers are not just looking for candidates with degrees. They are also looking for well-rounded, resourceful, and culturally aware people who can get the job done in a collaborative and efficient manner. Seek out experiences that will help you develop your "transferable skills" and be sure to highlight them on your resume and job applications.

4. Brush up on your foreign languages

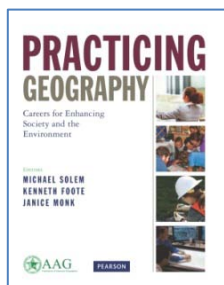
Language skills are highly valuable to international organizations. The ability to speak an international *lingua franca* such as Spanish, French, Mandarin Chinese, or Arabic is highly desirable in fields such as business and international development. In many cases bilingualism, or even multilingualism, is a job requirement. One of the best and fastest ways to learn a new language is to spend time in a country where it is spoken. In addition, spending time abroad will help you to cultivate a respect for the local culture and an openness to learning about the people and places among which you will be working.



The job feels a little like being a professor, but instead of changing classes every semester, you change countries every few years.

-- Reena Patel, Ph.D.
Foreign Service Officer
U.S. Department of State

While the benefits of working overseas are numerous, working internationally can have its drawbacks. Dealing with visa requirements and trying to adjust to a new and unfamiliar culture and language can be challenging. However, the best way to avoid such problems is by doing your research. Talk to other people who have traveled to your preferred country or region; read about the country you plan to visit and examine its lifestyle, rules and regulations; and most importantly, keep an open mind about the opportunities that can arise from being in a completely different part of the world.



Material adapted from: *Practicing Geography: Careers for Enhancing Society and the Environment*, eds. Michael Solem, Ken Foote, and Jan Monk. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2012.

- Chapter Eleven, "Going global: Practicing geography internationally" by Carrie Mitchell and Mélanie Robertson.

**For more tip sheets
in this series, visit
www.aag.org/careertips.**