

*The Political Officer
in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade*

The political workplace

Until the mid-20th century, political work was performed mainly in two settings: at the “country desks” in foreign ministries with their expertise on countries and regions of the world, and at embassies located in national capitals. But as the international agenda became more complex and international transactions took new forms, foreign ministries created “functional” bureaux with expertise on global issues and established permanent missions at the headquarters of international organizations.

Work can vary a great deal between a functional bureau, a geographic bureau, a multilateral mission, and a bilateral mission. Workshops conducted in support of this study served to develop pictures of political officer activity in each of these four settings, and helped to draw attention to some important differences between them. (The findings from these workshops are covered in detail in Political Officer Study: Results of Workshops on Work Activities, Synerma, September 2000).

There are common features to the work of political officers in each of the four settings: collection and analysis of information, providing advice, coordinating national positions, building networks, lobbying, negotiating, and managing foreign policy operations. But the differences are distinctive:

- Each of the functional bureaux deals with a discrete set of issues, while geographic bureaux must be concerned about every issue with a potential bearing on Canada’s interests and objectives in a particular set of countries.
- At headquarters, networking tends to focus on Canadians (other government departments, business interests, NGOs etc.) and encounters no special obstacles. At missions, networking targets foreigners, must surmount cultural, linguistic and other obstacles, and can often be a sensitive business.
- In Ottawa, staff are at the centre of the policy-making process; abroad, staff are constantly challenged to provide advice which is timely and relevant to Ottawa’s needs.
- Within Canada, the public advocacy of Canadian foreign policy positions is accepted practice; conducted in other countries, it can be viewed as unwarranted interference.
- Among Canadians, negotiating styles are quite uniform; in the world at large, they can take byzantine forms.