

Another pressing issue for geographics is the tremendous rate of turnover. Given the need for rotationality, turnover has always been a fact of life for our department. However, during the last few years, turnover issues have grown in importance. It is not uncommon for geographic divisions to have more than half of their staff change on an annual basis. High levels of turnover can undermine corporate memory, with new staff members constantly facing a steep learning curve and scrambling to grapple with on-going issues. The high rate of turnover also puts the geographics at a disadvantage vis-à-vis our missions abroad where officers are assigned for two to four years. As well, in order to cope with the need to be constantly replenishing geographic divisions' personnel, Directors invest an inordinate amount of their time in cobbling together short-term solutions, usually centred on short, casual contracts. These are band-aid solutions to a systemic problem.

Visits Madness:

More Ministers, senior officials and parliamentarians are travelling than ever before. The volume of visits seems to have increased exponentially, and the geographics are invariably tasked with the preparatory work. To some extent this reflects a growing interest in international affairs across government circles. This growth in travel also reflects an ever-expanding agenda of international meetings and negotiations which merit senior political or bureaucratic representation. Because of planning process deadlines, visits, much like crises, tend to trump other work priorities and resource demands.

Visits, with the need for micro-management of logistics and briefing requirements, are labour intensive. There has been substantial progress through the use of e-booklets and other attempts to stream-line the briefing process, but preparation of briefings remains time-consuming. The nuts and bolts of visits planning work also tends to be allocated to the country desk officer. Visits planning, like much the Department does, is a curious mixture of highs (preparation of speeches and presentations by Ministers) and lows (answering an endless flow of niggling emails and phone calls about logistical minutiae - "delegates will now assemble in the hotel lobby at 7:15 rather than 7:10", or "THE VISIT TO THE TUNA CANNERY IS OFF!").

There is no doubt that planning and coordinating logistics is a useful discipline for foreign service officers, and a skill perhaps best refined early in a career, but for most officers in geographics the preparation of visits is seldom a personally rewarding experience. In general, the desk officers seldom get to actually participate in the trip, and usually do not experience the positive outcomes of the visit which are more visible at post.

On a positive note, the Asia-Pacific branch has recently come out with an innovative visits policy that is an important attempt to rationalize the selection and management processes for visits. Some of the main elements of this process include attempts to gauge the relevance of the visit to branch priorities, and the development of service standards for different levels of visits.