

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

Core functions are usually considered to include the following:

1. *Collecting and analyzing information on developments which could affect Canadian interests.* At headquarters, information is of an "all-source" character, i.e. drawn not only from publicly available sources, but also from privileged sources such as Canadian missions abroad, foreign governments, and intelligence agencies. Managing such a breadth of information, some of which needs special handling, and synthesizing the findings requires analytical skill of a high order. At missions, information has to be distilled from local media (often in foreign languages), from sources inside local government, and from contacts which have been cultivated in the local community.
2. *Providing policy and operational advice to Canadian decision-makers.* DFAIT is a "policy" department whose main function is to advise government on managing international issues and the international dimensions of domestic issues. Political officers, therefore, have to be versed in global affairs, in domestic affairs, and in how they intersect -- and they have to be ready with both strategic and tactical advice when required. More often than not, international events provide little lead-time and the advice has to be proffered in circumstances of crisis when timeliness and accuracy compete.
3. *Coordinating national positions.* In the age of globalization, national positions almost always have to take account of both domestic and international factors. At headquarters, the task of officers is to synthesize information and views from many sources, craft policy options which reflect broad national interests, forge consensus around particular positions, and adjust policy to reflect changing circumstances. At missions, the task is to ensure that agreed national policy informs the activities of all government operations abroad, to provide feedback on its application, and to propose alternative courses as conditions change.
4. *Building networks in Canada and abroad.* At headquarters, the global agenda requires officers to develop relationships with other government departments who share in the horizontal management of issues, and with business interests, NGOs and NGIs who influence policy-making and whose support is often required for the implementation of policy. At missions, officers rely on networks to gather information on the interests and intentions of foreign governments, to develop insight into their decision-making processes and how to influence them, and to establish personal connections with those who make or influence policy. Networking abroad can be painstaking work. Language, culture, and suspicion of foreigners all present obstacles, and the rotation of staff regularly interrupts the process.