

Letters from Your Colleagues

DESTREAMING AND COUNTRY DESKS:

What Does it Mean for our Private Sector Customers?

DFAIT is affected by the do-more-with-less maelstrom that engulfed many governments of OECD countries and it is getting increasingly difficult to face that challenge. We have had for some years implemented and considered measures to achieve the goal. There are winners in this situation, as the do-more-with-less crusade is conquering ground for two ideas that have been kicking around for many years in the Department. These ideas would affect us and possibly our private sector clients.

The two options to do more-with-less are to eliminate the line dividing foreign service officer (FSO) streams and adopt the country desk concept in geographic divisions. Destreaming is appealing because it would increase the mobility of FSOs from one area of responsibilities to another and would provide more flexibility to DFAIT when allocating FSO resources. The appeal of the country desk concept is that a number of trade development divisions could be (and some have been) merged with their equivalent political relation divisions, thereby cutting human resources further.

Could destreaming and country desks represent a risk for our private sector customers, especially the SMEs? What protection or guarantee do our private sector customers have that some FSO positions in the new geographic divisions remain primarily dedicated to international business development. Is it possible that destreaming and country desks would influence FSOs to devote more time to satisfying internal bureaucracy and less to satisfy private sector customers? Is there a risk that the business development skills and knowledge of the "former-TCs-new-FSOs" would suffer from career time devoted to political/economic work?

Recent departmental training initiatives like the MI/I and Services Exporter courses are indicative that the work of TCs is getting more specialized. At the same time, we seem to be closer than ever to blending the TCS and the Political/Economic Officers together

and bringing them a step closer to being the ultimate generalists. Is this a case of two solitudes?

There is even talk now about moving the country desk concept into posts (i.e. merging political/economic sections and commercial sections). In fact, at least in some posts, this merging would just make official an ad hoc situation that has been prevailing for some time; The TCS abroad often have to cross lines of responsibilities to support other programs. The opposite is not necessarily true; political/economic officers seldom perform work related to international business development except during important trade missions led by Canadian ministers in which all FSOs are involved anyway. If trade and political/economic sections are merged in posts, heads of post would gain much flexibility in focusing their FSO resources on issues they value.

The conclusion to draw is simple: if international business development positions for FSOs are not protected, when the workload of geographic divisions or posts is drowning them, the internal needs will always take precedence over the needs of our private sector customers. In these moments, who will be left to meet the Canadian company representative at the door? To date, the only response I have heard from supporters of destreaming and the country desk concept is that such situations could in theory happen but they would be rare. No doubt that Canadian exporters would like to believe that.

One of the latest efforts to preserve the interest of our private sector customers in DFAIT was the creation of IBOC which has the mission to source Canadian products, services and technologies to respond to sourcing enquiries from abroad. Two other good ideas are taking shape with the creation of the advocacy unit and the MI/I unit. However, clarification of the thinking of DFAIT on destreaming and country desk to help dispel the concerns expressed in this article would be most welcome and would certainly reassure Canadian exporters.

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