

Helping others travel abroad: Careers in international preparation



People travel abroad for reasons as diverse as their destinations. Many travel to sightsee, some to work, and others to study. Some stay indefinitely.

Behind a number of these trips, there are workers who help travelers overcome the challenges of going to a different country—such as learning about local customs and finding safe accommodations. As travel has become more affordable and the world grows increasingly interconnected, demand has risen for these international preparation workers.

This article covers some career options in international preparation. The first section of the article describes some of the services international preparation workers provide and the occupations related to those services. The second section explains how to prepare for jobs in international preparation—and what to expect if you get one. Sources for more information are listed at the end of the article.

Jobs in international preparation

International preparation workers are employed by private organizations, the federal government, and individual or group travelers. The type of services these workers offer varies by client need. For example, they may provide less language training and a more detailed itinerary to a corporate traveler on a quick business trip than they would to someone moving abroad to retire.

International preparation workers provide services in three broad categories: culture, logistics, and health and safety. These workers help travelers before, during, and after a trip. Their services often run concurrently, and job duties may overlap.

Teaching culture

Understanding a country's culture can make travel easier and, for many people, more interesting. Short-term travelers usually do not need to learn more than the basics, but long-term travelers should understand the culture well.



International preparation workers who specialize in culture instruction help travelers minimize misunderstandings and missteps. These workers include culture trainers and instructional coordinators. (To learn more about the added importance of culture training in the military, see the box on page 31.)

Due to many factors—including language, history, and religion—people develop different attitudes, values, and beliefs that affect how they communicate and behave. For example, some cultures value timeliness, and some cultures communicate with body language more than others. “Culture trainers give people a vocabulary to explain these differences and how they came to be that way,” says Anne Copeland, who works as a culture trainer and directs a nonprofit research organization in Brookline, Massachusetts.

Culture trainers work directly with travelers. The length of training varies by organization, from a few days to a few months. Class size also varies, from one traveler to small groups. Culture trainers tailor their lesson plans to fit the needs of a particular traveler or group. For example, they may use a questionnaire to gauge how much the traveler knows about a culture.

Culture trainers also consider the traveler's destination. “I figure out what the challenges of traveling to a particular country might be,” says Copeland, “and ask someone

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Culture trainers help travelers understand another country's culture to minimize missteps.



who's lived there for advice and guidance to make the material more relevant.”

Classes usually begin with an overview of the destination country, including its history and geography. Culture trainers then explain the characteristics of the country's culture, such as its social hierarchy. These workers also will compare the destination country's culture to U.S. culture. In addition, culture trainers discuss how to manage cultural transition and any potential issues, such as culture shock and homesickness.

Culture trainers may develop their own curriculum or teach a standardized one developed by the organization for which they work. Organizations that use a standardized curriculum often turn to instructional coordinators to help develop it.

When designing a curriculum, culture trainers and instructional coordinators first research essential information about a country or region and then determine learning objectives to focus the material. Common sources for information include books, experts, and research papers.

Instructional coordinators also provide training for culture trainers. Coordinators may teach about how to prepare lesson plans, use effective teaching methods, and evaluate performance. Some instructional coordinators cover other topics, too, such as recordkeeping and leadership skills. “My goal is to introduce the staff to the tools they will need to do their jobs,” says Jennifer Albee, who trains overseas staff for the Peace Corps in Washington, D.C.

To teach, both culture trainers and instructional coordinators use adult learning techniques. These techniques encourage participation through interactive activities, such as case studies, simulations, and discussions.

In an effort to help people retain information, culture trainers and instructional coordinators try to establish connections between the material and how to use it. For example, Copeland might ask travelers to talk about a frustrating situation that has occurred in a multicultural setting, to discuss the cultural differences involved, and to find ways to improve communication. “It's crucial to make the material relevant to their lives and work,” Albee says.

Handling logistics

Every trip has logistical details, such as booking flights and finding places to stay. Some travelers have the time to take care of these issues themselves, but busier travelers and organizations often opt to hire help.

Logistics workers organize itineraries, coordinate travel, and plan orientation events. These workers have job titles such as operations managers, training specialists, and logistics coordinators.

The most time-consuming part of logistics work is scheduling. Some schedules may take as long as 6 months to complete. To schedule a trip, operations managers often coordinate with travelers, logistics workers, and other departments to find suitable dates and destinations.

“Scheduling is a huge logistical challenge,” says Zach Hickman, who oversees the language division at the Air Force Culture and Learning Center in Montgomery, Alabama.

“We have to work around people’s schedules, find programs abroad that fit their needs, and get approval from their supervisors.”

Many logistics departments are small and have limited budgets, which creates additional challenges. “There are about 950 participants in our language program, but only three of us,” Hickman says. To cope, operations managers in logistics departments often set up self-serve systems that allow travelers to do part of the work. For example, travelers may book their own flights or download the forms to apply for a visa or security clearance. Contractors may also help logistics departments with some duties.

Operations managers also may help the logistics department use its resources more efficiently. For example, to ensure that participants remain for the duration of their placements, operations managers may require culture training or testing of foreign language skills. “We are making a large investment in each of our participants,” says Hickman,



To help groups prepare for their trips, logistics departments often hold orientation events.

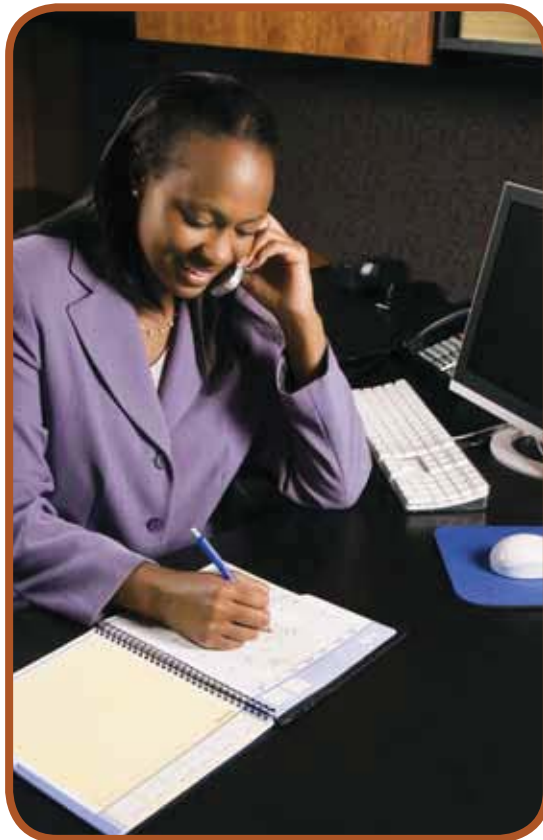
“so we have to make sure that they are viable assets and that we send them where they stand to gain the most.”

To help travelers prepare for their trips, logistics departments often hold orientation events. During these events, training specialists introduce travelers to their organization’s travel policies, discuss travel concerns, and handle administrative details.

Training specialists also encourage the group to get to know each other. “Orientation events are logistically valuable because we can bring people together to one place, deal with their required documentations and forms all at once, and send them out as a more cohesive group,” says Emily Harrington, who hosts orientation events for the Peace Corps.

When preparing for orientation, training specialists review the curriculum and concerns that travelers might have about a particular destination. Specialists also update the curriculum to reflect changes in the length of orientation events or in the organization’s policies.

Training specialists often handle scheduling and administrative tasks.



To ensure that there is someone available to host an event, training specialists also train other staff members. “Peace Corps hosts about 100 events with around 3,500 participants every year,” Harrington says. “I can’t do them all alone.”

Ensuring health and safety

Every country has health and safety concerns. Travelers who visit developed countries find health facilities and safety concerns that are similar to those in the United States. But people who travel to developing countries can face more serious health and safety risks, such as poor sanitation, lack of medicine, and unwanted attention.

When health and safety risks are great, travelers may need professional assistance. International preparation workers who specialize in health and safety provide a variety of services, including dispensing vaccines, conducting physical exams, and developing guidelines for workplace health and safety standards.

Among the international preparation workers in the health and safety field are managers, occupational health and safety instructors, travel physicians, and medical records technicians. This section describes the work of managers and instructors who focus on health and safety issues for travelers abroad.

At large organizations, health and safety managers plan, direct, and oversee the health and safety of travelers by designing emergency procedures and providing travel recommendations. “It’s important that our travelers know who to call in case something happens,” says William Bunn, who oversees health, safety, and security for an international manufacturing and marketing company based in Lisle, Illinois. “We have local emergency contacts, and I’m always on call.”

These managers design health and safety procedures that adapt to the needs of travelers and their destinations. “We have to consider all medical and safety issues—such as a disability—that might preclude a traveler from going to certain countries,” says Bunn.



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To establish procedures, health and safety managers use information from a variety of government sources, such as the U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the U.S. Department of State, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Most corporate health and safety managers also use a database that recommends—by city and country—health and safety precautions, medical facilities, and doctors. To ensure that recommendations stay accurate, health and safety managers update their procedures and audit worksites overseas each year.

Health and safety managers make certain that travelers follow health and safety recommendations before departing. These may include updating immunizations and submitting emergency contact information. These workers may also provide travelers with a guidebook and suggest instruction that travelers can take to learn ways to combat common health problems, such as jet lag and illness.

Health and safety managers also alert travelers to other recommendations and

requirements for arrival in their destination country. “We look at housing, transportation, and safety to brief travelers on best safety practices for that country,” Bunn says. “If there are transit issues, for example, we might require that they hire a driver or take public transportation.”

Health and safety managers travel frequently to keep up with changing regulations around the world and to inspect worksites and housing for safety. They also may need to travel abroad to lead an evacuation.

Some people travel to become employers or employees in another country. Occupational health and safety instructors train them and other workers to comply with regulations on safety, health, and the environment. These instructors develop training materials, hold workshops, and ensure that workers know how to do their jobs safely.

Health and safety instructors also promote cross-cultural understanding in multicultural workplaces. “Safety is all about people,” says Tomas Schwabe, who works as a bilingual instructor for OSHA in Salem, Oregon. “Most

Adult education teaching experience may be helpful in some of these careers, such as occupational safety and health instructors.



injuries occur because of unsafe behavior that results from lack of communication.”

These instructors usually give workshops and presentations to employers, usually at a training site. Occasionally, they may travel to a worksite to give customized evaluations of safety knowledge and procedures, help employees understand the health and safety regulations, and teach employers to communicate better about safety procedures. “The workshops empower employers and employees,” Schwabe says. “They recognize that they have the ability to reduce or eliminate hazards in the workplace.”

Exploring international preparation careers

There are some ways in which jobseekers can get ready for a career in international preparation. They can travel abroad or perform job duties similar to the work they want to do. For some positions, jobseekers can learn what education and other qualifications are required to do the work.

But a career in international preparation is not for everyone. Like jobs in almost any field, these jobs offer rewards along with challenges—sometimes at the same time. For example, many of these workers enjoy the occasional travel required, but the erratic work

hours can be frustrating. The key to planning for a job in international preparation is becoming informed about the advantages and disadvantages of the career options.

Education and qualifications

Jobs in international preparation are available for workers at nearly all education levels. Most of these workers have a bachelor’s degree, and a few workers in highly technical fields—such as travel physicians and academic experts—need a professional or doctoral degree. There are also opportunities for workers whose experience may substitute for education.

For example, experience with classroom management or adult education is helpful for training specialists and occupational safety and health instructors. In other fields, such as culture training, workers may have many educational options and come from different backgrounds, including business and language instruction.

Jobseekers in this field benefit from experience living or working abroad and speaking more than one language. For example, jobseekers applying for logistics work can use their personal travels as experience for the trip planning they would do for others. “In order to advise or train others, you must first experience what they do,” says Hickman.

(Continued on page 32)

Cultural awareness in the military

Members of the military deployed to other countries face unique cultural challenges. As representatives of the United States, not only do they need to show cultural awareness of another country, but they should convey a tone of respect to ease tensions, improve communication, and avoid missteps.

To prepare its members, the military emphasizes culture and language training. For example, the U.S. Air Force hands out field guides to introduce airmen to their destination's culture, offers language and culture classes, and brings in speakers familiar with working with local people. "We care a lot about understanding and bridging cultural differences, because it allows us to build positive relationships," says Paul Firman, a program developer at the Air Force Culture and Language Center in Montgomery, Alabama.

Cultural awareness is particularly important because it helps to avoid misunderstandings and to rectify misunderstandings that have developed into animosity. For example, Afghan culture doesn't share the U.S. concept of personal space. Community members may want to touch you or hold your hand while speaking. "The way in which you react sends a message," says Firman. "If you lean away, you are saying, 'I don't value you.' You might never know you insulted them, unless you understand their culture first."

Cultural awareness also improves negotiations and engenders good will—for the benefit of all parties. "By putting in the effort to learn about them," says Firman, "we can change their perception of us, become friends, and open up room for forgiveness and understanding."



U.S. Army photo by Brian Ferguson

(Continued from page 30)

Also, enthusiasm helps jobseekers stand out. “You have to passionately want this type of work,” Harrington says. “Preparation and enthusiasm can show interviewers that, even if you don’t fully meet the educational or experience requirements, you will do a great job.”

Rewards and challenges

The rewards and challenges of international preparation work vary with the job. But workers often share similar experiences because most travelers encounter similar issues with culture, logistics, and health and safety.

Many workers in international preparation careers find cross-cultural work interesting and exciting. “I never get tired of learning how other people see the world,” Copeland says. Bunn agrees: “Working globally around hundreds of perspectives is very intellectually stimulating.”

Some workers have the opportunity to travel and visit many cities, either abroad or domestically or both, at their employer’s expense. Training specialists travel to

different U.S. cities to host orientation events, for example, and health and safety managers travel abroad to inspect worksites. The opportunity to travel abroad also provides workers with a chance to practice their foreign language skills.

International preparation workers enjoy the diversity of their work. Many work in small offices or alone, which allows them to solve problems creatively, take on challenging tasks, and learn new skills.

And, although some workers teach the same material or deal with the same safety issues, they enjoy the variety of each traveler’s specific needs. “Even if the curriculum rarely changes, the audience always does,” says Albee. “You feed off each group’s energy, making every day unique.”

Other workers simply enjoy helping travelers get ready for their trips. Because most travelers are excited about their upcoming trips, they make cooperative students. “These people are here for a reason,” says Schwabe, “and they are very eager to learn.”

But work hours are a common source of frustration. Workers may need to put in long

The travel in many of these jobs is sometimes considered a perk, but its frequency can be challenging.





or odd hours, sometimes including weekends or holidays. “I’ve been in the office many times in the middle of the night to talk to someone in Asia because of time zone differences,” Hickman says.

Complications related to travel logistics are another common frustration. Workers may need to help a traveler visit more than one country during a trip or to coordinate itineraries for groups of travelers, each of whom might be visiting different countries.

Workers in international preparation must know each country’s entry requirements and laws well. For example, workers may need to keep up with changing health regulations in different countries or to help travelers secure a required visa or security clearance—a process that can take months.

Despite the challenges, international preparation workers are motivated by their accomplishments. Travelers can enjoy a vacation, immerse in a different culture, or learn a new language. “You know that your work makes a difference to these people,” says Hickman, “and it feels so good to help them finally fulfill their dreams.”

For more information

The *Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH)* has detailed information about many occupations related to international preparation. These profiles have information about each occupation’s job duties, employment, wages, usual qualifications, and more. The *OOH* is available online at www.bls.gov/ooh.

For more information about culture training, including tips on how to begin a career in international preparation, visit the Interchange Institute online at www.interchangeinstitute.org.

Learn more about the knowledge international preparation workers need by exploring topics relevant to international travel. For example, the Bureau of Consular Affairs, www.travel.state.gov, has up-to-date information about passports, visas, travel advisories, and tips for traveling, moving, and living abroad. And resources from the International Society of Travel Medicine, www.istm.org, include a global directory of clinics specializing in travel health and safety.

