

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES IN THINK TANKS AND RESEARCH INSTITUTES

Description of the Field

In Washington, DC and throughout the country, many think tanks and research organizations focus on foreign policy and international issues. These organizations are often supported by contracts from the government, foundations, private businesses, and endowments. Think tanks, in the most traditional sense, are seen as non-partisan organizations that employ interdisciplinary approaches to finding long-term solutions to policy-related issues.

Research organizations vary in perspective and focus: some may be viewed more as advocacy groups which promote a particular agenda, while others may resemble private sector consulting organizations or academic institutions. In addition to their research efforts, many research institutes produce major publications or organize professional conferences, lectures, and policy forums. Think tank scholars testify before Congressional committees, submit articles to major newspapers, and may serve on government task forces.

Career Paths and Entry Salaries

The type of positions available varies considerably between organizations and is very much dependent upon one's level of education. In addition to research-related positions, which usually require an MA or PhD and specialized expertise, many organizations utilize interns and individuals with BA and MA degrees for a range of administrative positions. Entry-level positions for individuals with MA degrees include:

Program Manager/Assistant – Coordinates and handles logistics for major program events, meetings, conferences, and international visits, and manages a range of program support functions, including communications and publication work. Starting salaries can range from high 20's to mid 30's, depending on the organization and level of responsibility.

Research Assistant – Provides research support to Fellows and Senior Associates, drafts documents, manages database records, handles correspondence and provides general administrative support. Salaries average in the high 20's to mid 30's, depending on the size and funding base of the institute.

Research Associate -- Develops and implements research plans, prepares funding proposals, analyzes data and synthesizes findings, publishes and presents findings to various audiences. Starting salaries can range from mid 30's to 40's, again depending on experience and the organization.

Advancement into senior positions usually requires education at the Ph.D. level and/or extensive specialized expertise, so it is common to see those in junior level positions leaving after 2-3 years to pursue higher education and professional opportunities in academia, government, private corporations, and consulting firms.

Demand

In response to changing world affairs, public interests, funding, and budgetary constraints, many foreign policy research organizations are re-examining their focus. Entry-level positions remain highly competitive and success in securing a post requires planning and persistence. Most think tanks and research institutes do have formal internship programs and many look first to current and former interns to fill new positions. Not only are interns in a position to hear about openings before they are advertised externally, but they also frequently have had prior occasion to demonstrate their specialized knowledge, skills, and dedication.

Qualifications Necessary to Enter the Field

Higher education, at a Masters and Ph.D. level, and experience in the field is generally required for substantive research positions. Strong communication skills, both written and oral, are essential. One must be able to write concise briefing reports as well as longer, academic works. Presentation skills are also important, as is comfort in

addressing an audience of experts. Competitive candidates will also be able to demonstrate proficiency in foreign languages and will have a solid command of word processing and spreadsheet applications and the Internet. Many positions require solid quantitative skills and knowledge of statistical packages.

Sample Group of Employers

- The American Council for Capital Formation <http://www.accf.org>
- Brookings Institution <http://www.brookings.edu>
- Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs <http://www.cceia.org>
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace <http://www.carnegieendowment.org>
- The Carter Center <http://www.cartercenter.org/default.asp?bFlash=True>
- Committee for Economic Development <http://www.ced.org>
- Council on Foreign Relations <http://www.cfr.org>
- Center for Strategic and International Studies <http://www.csis.org>
- East-West Center <http://www.eastwestcenter.org>
- Economic Policy Institute <http://www.epinet.org>
- Foundation for National Progress <http://www.mojones.com/index.html>
- The Heritage Foundation <http://www.heritage.org>
- Hoover Institute, Stanford University <http://www-hoover.stanford.edu>
- Institute for Food and Development Policy (Food First) <http://www.foodfirst.org>
- Institute for International Economics <http://www.iie.com>
- National Bureau of Asian Research <http://www.nbr.org>
- Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development <http://www.nautilus.org>
- RAND <http://www.rand.org>
- Woodrow Wilson International Center <http://www.WilsonCenter.org>
- World Economic Forum <http://www.weforum.org>
- Worldwatch Institute <http://www.worldwatch.org>

Future Challenges of the Profession

Some professionals in the field predict that the information explosion caused by the Internet is increasing the demand for expert analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of information. Others, however, express concern that limited funding sources may hinder think tanks in the fulfillment of their mission of providing objective policy-relevant knowledge. Responding to the changing world political/economic situation and the interests of the public, some think tanks have already broadened their range of expertise and diversified their focus.

Resources for Additional Information

Internet Resources

- Carnegie Endowment listing of selected think tanks and links to websites <http://www.ceip.org/files/news/library/libtanks.htm>
- National Institute for Research Advancement's index of research organizations by country <http://www.nira.go.jp/ice/nwdtt/index.html>
- Links to Research and Educational Institutes <http://www.cato.org/links/links.html>
- NIRA's World Directory of think tanks around the world <http://www.nira.go.jp/ice/nwdtt/>
- Source Watch index and description of a selection of think tanks http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Think_tanks-

Publications

Careers in International Affairs, Edited by Maria Pinto Carland and Lisa A. Gihring, Georgetown University Press, 2003.

International Research Centers Directory, Gale Publishing, 2006.

Research Centers Directory, Gale Publishing, 2005.