

## 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 domestic policy, 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

The types of positions available vary considerably between organizations and are 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 employ 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. Manages a range of program support functions, including communications and publication work.

**Research Assistant** – Provides research support to fellows and senior associates, drafts documents, manages database records, handles correspondence, and provides general administrative support.

**Research Associate** – Develops and implements research plans, prepares funding proposals, analyzes data, and synthesizes, publishes, and presents findings to various audiences.

## QUALIFICATIONS TO ENTER THE FIELD

- + Higher education, at the MA or PhD level
- + 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
- + Many positions require solid quantitative skills and knowledge of statistical packages

Advancement into senior positions usually requires education at the PhD level and/or extensive specialized expertise, so it is common to see those in junior level positions leaving after two or three 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.

## Sample Group of Employers

- The American Council for Capital Formation - [accf.org](http://accf.org)
- Brookings Institution - [brookings.edu](http://brookings.edu)
- Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs - [cceia.org/index.html](http://cceia.org/index.html)
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace - [carnegieendowment.org](http://carnegieendowment.org)
- The Carter Center - [cartercenter.org](http://cartercenter.org)
- Center for Strategic and International Studies - [csis.org](http://csis.org)
- Committee for Economic Development - [ced.org](http://ced.org)
- Council on Foreign Relations - [cfr.org](http://cfr.org)
- East-West Center - [eastwestcenter.org](http://eastwestcenter.org)
- Economic Policy Institute - [epi.org](http://epi.org)
- Foundation for National Progress – [motherjones.com](http://motherjones.com)
- The Heritage Foundation - [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)
- Hoover Institute, Stanford University – [hoover.org](http://hoover.org)
- Institute for Food and Development Policy (Food First) - [foodfirst.org](http://foodfirst.org)
- Institute for International Economics - [iie.com](http://iie.com)
- National Bureau of Asian Research - [nbr.org](http://nbr.org)
- National Center of Policy Analysis - [ncpa.org](http://ncpa.org)
- Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development - [nautilus.org](http://nautilus.org)
- RAND - [rand.org](http://rand.org)
- Woodrow Wilson International Center - [wilsoncenter.org](http://wilsoncenter.org)
- World Economic Forum - [weforum.org](http://weforum.org)
- Worldwatch Institute - [worldwatch.org](http://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 to provide objective policy-relevant knowledge. Responding to the world's changing political and economic situations and to 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*

- National Institute for Research Advancement's index of research organizations by country- [nira.or.jp/past/jice/index.html](http://nira.or.jp/past/jice/index.html)
- Index and description of a selection of think tanks on the Source Watch website- [sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Think\\_tanks](http://sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Think_tanks)

### *Publications*

- *A Capitol Idea: Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy*, Donald E. Abelson, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006.
- *Careers in International Affairs*, Maria Pinto Carland and Candance Faber (editors), Georgetown University Press, 2008.
- *Do Think Tanks Matter?: Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institute*, Donald E. Abelson, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009.
- *International Research Centers Directory*, Gale Publishing, 2006.
- *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and Politics of Expertise*, Andrew Rich, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- *Think Tanks Traditions: Policy Analysis Across Nations*, Diane Stone and Andrew Denham, Manchester University Press, 2004.
- *Research Centers Directory*, Gale Publishing, 2005.