

## How to Work for the United Nations or Other Inter-Governmental Organizations

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*Today's post on possible career routes into Inter-Governmental Organizations like the United Nations comes from **Sara Rakita, Associate Director of the Public Interest Law Center at New York University School of Law**. Sara has worked extensively on human rights and the rule of law, primarily in Africa. Before joining PILC in 2006, she served as a long-term consultant to the Ford Foundation, where she was responsible for piloting and setting up TrustAfrica, a new African grant-making foundation that is now based in Senegal. Sara spent five years as an Africa Researcher at Human Rights Watch, including two years as the organization's representative in Rwanda. Sara has also consulted for Amnesty International, Global Rights, USAID, and the Austrian development agency. Sara holds a J.D. from NYU, an M.I.A. from Columbia University, and a B.A. in international studies from The American University. She is fluent in French and has a working knowledge of Spanish and Russian.*

Lots of people would love to work for the United Nations or other Inter-Governmental Organizations (IGOs), but it's not always apparent how to get there. Indeed, there is no single path. In an effort to demystify a process that is not always transparent, this post will explain some of the main channels into IGOs.

As a baseline, it helps to have a background in international law, foreign language skills, and experience working and living abroad. But, even with all of this, this is still a VERY challenging sector to break into. Getting a job at IGOs or the UN takes a whole lot of networking, persistence, and creativity – with a measure of luck and being in the right place (and often knowing the right people) at the right time.

### Internships

Most agencies recruit interns – see <http://www.state.gov/p/io/empl/> for a list. These internships can provide great opportunities, skills, and connections you can use in future IGO/UN job searches. One rather important caveat: IGOs typically have a rule that interns cannot be hired as employees in the six months following completion of their internships. Still, internships can help position you to get a paid job later. Furthermore, the prohibition only applies to the specific agency; you are eligible to apply immediately at many other agencies – so if you intern, for example, at the International Criminal Court you could apply for jobs with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia which is also in The Hague. Interning is a great way to get your foot in the door, get to know an agency, prove yourself to potential employers, build your resume, and make contacts!

### Entry-Level Programs

Many UN agencies and IGOs have organized entry-level programs for “young” and “junior” professionals. These include programs for young lawyers and others for law-related positions that focus on development, human rights, refugee protection, etc.

- The best way to get hired by the UN Secretariat (the main UN Headquarters) is through the **Competitive Recruitment Exam**. People hired through this channel get permanent employment contracts. The exam is offered annually in certain fields for nationals of certain countries – but the nationalities and fields change each year. In recent years, Americans have occasionally been eligible to sit for the exam in Legal Affairs, Political Affairs, Human Rights, and Economic Affairs. The process was put on hold in 2009-2010 while the UN tried to clean up its roster of candidates, but is set to resume next winter. For details see <http://www.un.org/Depts/OHRM/examin/exam.htm>. Getting hired this way can take at least a year, so it’s not always the best option for your first job after law school but it is good to get the process started. Also note that some other agencies have separate examination programs; the UN High Commission for Refugees is at <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c497.html>.
- A number of governments also sponsor two-year **JPO Programs** for young professionals from their countries (or in some cases developing countries) to work with certain agencies; information about JPO programs is available from sponsoring governments is at [http://www.jposc.org/content/programme/other\\_programmes-en.html](http://www.jposc.org/content/programme/other_programmes-en.html). Opportunities for US citizens are limited, but can be found at <http://www.state.gov/g/prm/c25774.htm>.
- In addition, the UN sponsors a **UN Volunteer** (UNV) program that often hires young lawyers for positions with peacekeeping missions and other offices in developing countries. Don’t be fooled by the word volunteer – UNVs typically receive stipends and generous per diems. This program can be a great way to get experience and get a foot in the door. See <http://unv.org/> for more details.

A few points to keep in mind:

1. Entry level programs at IGOs are highly competitive and many require a minimum of two years prior experience. To boot, they often have age limits of 30-35.
2. Some agencies, like the World Bank, prefer students with LL.M.s.
3. Passports matter. It helps to be from a country that is “underrepresented” in that agency. Good news: the United States is currently underrepresented in the UN and, after years of resentment against Americans for not paying our dues, we are all paid up. But other nationalities may still get preference in some offices.
4. Networking is always helpful in getting these positions.
5. Application processes can be very lengthy – it can take up to a year, sometimes much longer, from the time of application to starting a job.

**Application Tip:** When applying, it is best to go through formal channels listed on the organization’s website *and* also to use personal channels (networking) to make sure they actually consider your application.

### **Full-Time Positions**

Many positions are listed on the main UN job site, <http://careers.un.org>, and at [http://www.unsystem.org/jobs/job\\_opportunities.htm](http://www.unsystem.org/jobs/job_opportunities.htm). The State Department publishes a bi-weekly list of international vacancy announcements <http://www.state.gov/p/io/empl/>.

But don’t stop there! Every agency from the African Development Bank to the International Criminal Court to the World Trade Organization has its own website and its own employment page (a good list of links can be found at <http://www.state.gov/p/io/empl/125507.htm>). Most of these organizations have

satellite offices based in other countries, some of which have region or country-specific websites – e.g. UNHCR mission in Sri Lanka or the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Bosnia, of which the US is a member – where they may post jobs that do not appear on the central websites. Not all positions are posted publicly and some may only be posted internally.

Confused? The UN job system used to be (aptly) named Galaxy – it often felt that applications went into a black hole. In my many years of doing international work, I can count on one hand the number of people I know who just applied for a position from the website without contacts and actually got the job, though they do exist. While the UN has made efforts to improve the process, perhaps this is another good time to mention that *networking* will usually be the best way to not only find out about job opportunities, but also to make sure that your application is looked at.

A word on job categories: professional positions at the UN are labeled with P: P-2 positions are considered entry level, though they really require at least 2 years experience, and with more experience you can progress to a P-3, P-4, etc.

### **Contract and Consulting Work**

Outside of these formal channels, IGOs often hire professionals on a fixed-term or short-term contract basis. They may become available when a staff person goes on maternity leave or on mission overseas. These jobs may also materialize if there is a big new project that an office needs help with. Postings may be labeled “Consultancies,” “Consultants,” “Short Term Contracts,” “Experts,” “Project Vacancies,” etc. Networking is the best way to find out about these opportunities, as contract and consultant positions are not always posted.

It can be stressful to take these short-term positions (believe me, I know), but if you really want to get there these can be your best option. Why is it worth it? You will start to make good contacts, giving your networking a huge boost. And you can often apply for other positions as an internal candidate once you are in. I have known many people who started on a short contract but are still there years later. The UN can be sort of like the Hotel California in that sense, once you check in you can never leave...

### **About that Networking**

So, as you have gathered, it really helps to have contacts on the inside! But how can you find these contacts? Internships of course are a great way. Also be sure to ask your international law professors who they know. Bar and other professional associations can also be helpful – International Law Weekend at the New York City Bar (held every year in October) or the American Society for International Law’s annual April meeting in Washington, DC are both excellent. You may also consider joining the UN Association of the USA.

In conclusion, the UN is not an easy nut to crack. But for those of you who are determined to get there, I hope this serves as a useful roadmap to a highly sought after destination. I don’t necessarily recommend that you focus a job search solely on IGOs, but it is definitely worth pursuing along with other options. Good luck!

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