



# JOBS WITH THE UN AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

**By: Sara Rakita**  
Associate Director, Public Interest Law Center,  
NYU School of Law

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 (this rule was designed to prevent employers from using internships as an extended interview process). Still, I recommend pursuing internships, as they really 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. Plus, if you intern while still in law school, you can apply anywhere by the time you graduate. 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 HQ) 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. For details see <http://www.un.org/Depts/OHRM/examin/exam.htm>. Getting hired this way can take

a very long time, so it's not always an 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 see: [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. Law is a first degree in most countries and many foreign lawyers obtain an LL.M. before applying for jobs. So JD graduates are at a slight disadvantage in IGOs: with only one degree in law we don't get credit for having an advanced degree.
- 3) Passports matter. It helps to be from a country that is "underrepresented" in that agency. Good news: the US 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. And some good news for non-US citizens – you do not need a work visa to work for the UN in New York.
- 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. To cite one example: a former colleague found out she passed the UN exam a year after she sat for it. She had of course pursued other jobs in the meantime and, as luck would have it, had just started a great new job with a human rights organization. Rather than withdrawing from UN, she remained on the roster and laid low for 3 years. When she was ready to move on, she ultimately found a great UN position (and lived happily ever after – smile).

**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.

The State Department's UN Employment Information and Assistance Unit can sometimes help advocate for US citizens. If you are invited to interview or get an email that you are shortlisted, contact them at [EmploymentUN@state.gov](mailto:EmploymentUN@state.gov) or (202) 647-8270 to let them know.

### **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 Labor Organization 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, International Organization for Migration

Iraq Mission in Jordan, or the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Bosnia (NB: the US is a member of the OSCE) - 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. Conversely, jobs posted are not always really available – sometimes they have to post even if they have an internal candidate in mind.

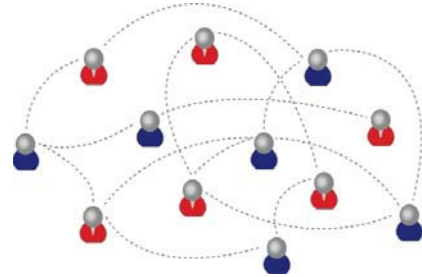
Confused? The UN job system used to be (aptly) named Galaxy – it often felt that applications went into a black hole. In my many years of doing international work, I can count on one hand the number of people I know who just applied for a position from the website without contacts and actually got the 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... find these contacts? Internships of course are a great way. Also be sure to ask your international law professors who they know. Publishing an article on a timely international law topic can be another great way to help build your reputation.



Bar and other professional associations are also helpful – International Law Weekend at the New York City Bar Association (held every year in October) or the American Society for International Law’s annual April meeting in Washington, DC are both excellent places to meet people. 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!