



The inside scoop on government jobs

EVER WONDERED WHAT WORKING AS A GRADUATE FOR A GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT INVOLVES? TWO RECENT GRADS SHARE THE LOWDOWN.

Most federal and state government departments have graduate programs open to law students. These programs equip graduates with a solid skill-set and a diverse range of learning experiences outside the well-trodden top-tier path.

YLJ Editorial Committee member, Mihilini Fernando, sits down with a 2013 graduate at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Kim Northwood, and a 2012 graduate at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), Jeremy Noye, to discuss why students should consider graduate jobs in the public sector, and not just because of the perks of flextime.

What are the benefits of working in government?

JN: Working for government gives your work a broader perspective than pursuing the narrower interests of a client. Departments such as PM&C pursue the

public interest – to improve government administration, policy and services for all Australians. This is a highly rewarding aspect of the job.

The public service also requires you to have strong democratic values. You will be expected to support the government of the day, regardless of your own political views and opinions. Your work has to be relevant to what the government wants and can achieve in its political environment.

There is also a strong intellectual element to working for government. You will be expected to write frank and fearless advice that is concise, rigorously argued and based on objective evidence.

The work is often fast-paced and driven by multiple urgent priorities. While you will be expected to work hard when the job demands it, you can receive time off in lieu, called flextime, for overtime worked. Work-life balance is more than rhetoric in government.

What does the application process involve and do you have any tips for applicants?

KN: The application process for most government graduate positions is long and comprises several stages. For DFAT, there was a written answer component, as well as cognitive testing and a panel interview.

Prepare for all stages of the interview process – your answers must be well informed and analytical. I attended regular talks at the Australian Institute for International Affairs during the year that I was applying.

JN: Get help from any friends and family who might work in the public service already to answer the selection criteria. Draw widely from your life experiences and use practical examples. At PM&C experienced senior advisers run the interviews. Expect to be grilled on how you

would manage different situations, what you think are the most important strategic challenges for the government, and to be asked to give practical examples of your skills and achievements.

Don't be deterred by the application process. Keep in mind that many people get an offer only on their second or third attempt. There are always more applicants than positions available; a rejection is never personal.

What does the graduate program involve?

KN: The DFAT graduate program consists of five rotations over two years. I've rotated through the Afghanistan, nuclear security and trade law sections. After our first rotation, we undertook training for two months, where we studied economics, international law, the art of negotiation, human rights and modern diplomacy. The training included an incredible week of travel to the Northern Territory to meet with business and industry.

JN: Graduates at PM&C work directly in small teams to provide strategic policy advice to our executive and the government. Similar to private-sector graduate

positions, you will rotate through at least two different areas of government policy within the department. PM&C covers the whole gamut of government, so you could be working on anything from educational policy to foreign policy. Graduates also benefit from a graduate development program, which will send you to a range of courses during the year.

What is the most interesting thing you've done so far?

KN: There have been many. I accompanied an Afghan Deputy Minister for a week as she met with non-government organisations and Members of Parliament in Melbourne and Canberra and attended a conference on women's rights in Adelaide. Other highlights have included a trip to Hobart for a G20 working group.

Given my interest in nuclear issues, I was also able to visit the reactor at Lucas Heights in Sydney during my nuclear security rotation. This included going into the reactor hall and peering into the core (wearing all the nuclear protective gear of course).

JN: As a graduate in 2012, I was involved on the operational side of a community

cabinet meeting in Parramatta. Ministers met with locals to discuss their issues and took questions in a town hall style meeting. It was an opportunity for locals to directly hold their government to account, and was quite an emotional experience for some of them.

Other graduates have been liaison officers at the Commonwealth heads of government meetings, helped with royal visits, and gone on site visits with industry or government, among other interesting things.

Many options

There are many ways to use your law degree, with some graduates finding government a great place to hone their skills. If you enjoy the political side of law-making, or are interested in policy and working for the public interest, a graduate position in a government department might be worth considering as an alternative to legal practice.

You can find more information about government graduate opportunities on individual department websites or at <http://tinyurl.com/mpfsfg9>. ■

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