



Season 2, Episode 8 – International Affairs & Diplomacy

M.J. Crawford, U.S. Foreign Service Officer, U.S. Department of State
Stacie Berdan, International Careers Expert (Podcast Host)

[Music]

Stacie Berdan:

Welcome to the Global Careers Podcast sponsored by GW-CIBER! THE source for inspiring stories from seasoned professionals who have embraced a global role and reaped the benefits. We offer practical advice and insider tips across a broad swath of industries and fields around the world. Whether or not you've considered moving abroad or taking on an international role, globalization will impact your career. So join us for a lively discussion as we explore what an international career really means. My name is Stacie Nevadomski Berdan and I'll be your host! In Season 2 we find ourselves in a fast-changing world still affected by the pandemic where we must adapt to succeed. Come with us as we share with you how to craft your place in the new global work space. Today's guest has more than a decade of combined experience in international affairs and diplomacy. M.J. Crawford's career has taken her from her hometown of Flint, MI, to the frontlines of major global events. She is currently a Political Officer serving at the U.S. Mission in Pakistan. MJ has also served in diplomatic assignments in Moldova and Russia and completed temporary duty assignments in Afghanistan and Eastern Ukraine. Outside of diplomacy, MJ is an investor focused on generational wealth creation and a world traveler who aspires to visit every UN-recognized country in the world. She speaks Turkish, Russian, and Urdu. MJ was also a contributor to my book on study abroad published by IIE (Institute for International Education) several years ago. Welcome MJ, it is such a pleasure to be speaking with you today!

M.J. Crawford:

Hi, thank you for having me.

Stacie Berdan:

One of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there. Tell us about your current role as a Foreign Service officer and the path you took to get there.

M.J. Crawford:

Well, thank you Stacie. As you mentioned, I'm currently a Political Officer serving at our U.S. Embassy in Pakistan. I'll be speaking in my personal capacity. While I'm here, I'm covering internal politics and so my job is amazing. I go out and I talk with different contacts from political parties, government officials, civil society organizations, activists, religious leaders... I speak with all of these individuals trying to get a sense of the different political events in Pakistan, and I also am responsible for tracking any legislation that gets passed. How did I get here to the Foreign Service? Well, it's a program I definitely recommend your listeners look up themselves, but it's called the Charles B. Rangel scholarship. It's a competitive program designed to create a pipeline of diverse diplomats to ensure that our foreign service is representative of America. And through that program, that's how I entered the Foreign Service. I've always enjoyed writing and I love meeting different people from different countries and different backgrounds, and so that's why I chose the political track that I'm working in now.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great. And so, you were also a Boren Scholar years ago, right, and you studied in Turkey for a year. You speak Russian, Urdu, in addition to your native English. Tell us about that, why you chose Turkey, Turkish, and a little bit about languages, why they are important to careers.



M.J. Crawford:

Yeah, that's great. So, the Boren program really is a wonderful scholarship and fellowship program that offers the opportunity for students interested in learning critical languages to study them overseas. I came across the program while I was an undergrad in college, and at that time I decided to learn Turkish. I wanted to study a language that was not quite a Romance language, something different, something challenging, and I definitely got that with Turkish. In general, the Boren program was so incredible, and I think that it's wonderful that our government and universities provide the funding to support students who want to take the leap and learn a critical language and study abroad. I can say that for me learning a language has been a way for me to broaden my mind, better understand different cultures... Honestly, when you learn another language you are truly learning a different way of thinking almost, and there are so many nuances in different languages that I find so fascinating. So, with Turkish, and Russian, and Urdu... again, I learned Turkish in undergrad, but being in the Foreign Service that's where I learned Russian and Urdu for my assignments. I think that these languages are super rich with culture and have very interesting... have a lot of literature and history behind them. So I would definitely recommend any of these languages to anyone. In fact, having such a broad and wide spectrum of different languages that I've learned over the years, helps me for an assignment that I did, a temporary assignment that I did in Afghanistan. There was a shortage of people there able to help translate for the work that I was doing and so I was able to learn some phrases in Dari from my knowledge of Urdu and Turkish. There are some similar words across the three languages. But, basically I thought, you know, it helps me do my job more efficiently and, honestly, if I could have a super power it would be the ability to just speak any language on demand, because I learned that communicating across cultures without a language barrier is just so important, especially when you are trying to understand people's motivations and intentions. So, yeah, I think a lot of the cultural context can be lost due to the language barrier, but at least having some knowledge of the language – how sentences are constructed, how requests are made in that language, for example – can be extremely helpful.

Stacie Berdan:

I could see that. Especially in a diplomatic career and also in business, as well... business, nonprofit, education, and just people-to-people conversations, right. It really makes a difference understanding where somebody is coming from. That's great. For students interested in a career in diplomacy, what are the greatest opportunities and the challenges that you see today?

M.J. Crawford:

Oh, that's a tough question. Well, I think that societies around the world, from what I have observed, including our own in the United States, societies are always changing and societies are always evolving. They are changing in terms of policies, systems of governance, pandemics of course, supply chains, advances in technology, social movements... and I think that anyone entering the workforce today should be ready for these challenges. Yes, they are challenges, but they can also be opportunities. And, I think that many changes happening right now in global affairs can't always be foreseen, so you really have to learn how to constantly react and respond. And, every reaction and every response is going to be different depending on the situation. I do believe though that change offers a chance for opportunity, and so it offers a way for us to do things differently than before and the hope that perhaps things will be better than before. I think in the next few years, for example, advances in the military technology will be a very interesting topic as well as climate change, which I know is on many people's minds. I think climate change will really be the driving factor of migration flows and several other events that will be impacting our lives in a heavier way in a few years than maybe what we're seeing now.

Stacie Berdan:

What specific tips do you have for students how should they prepare for these – these are huge, monumental – shifts and changes that students listening on an American campus right now may not be prepared to adapt to?



M.J. Crawford:

Yeas, that's a great question. I think that anyone looking to enter either business or diplomacy tomorrow should try to seek a solid understanding of climate change specifically... kind of, what our policies have been, more importantly – prepare themselves for how to work with other countries, and other companies and governments to address this issue. I'm not trying to say that everyone has to devote their entire area of study or career to climate change, but everyone should definitely has an understanding of how climate change could impact their career or field, whether that's in diplomacy or they are working in the wine and agriculture industries, for example... I think that anyone in the workforce has already understood that with the pandemic that's going on nothing is ever guaranteed or certain, but there are skills that we can acquire and issues that we can learn about now to be as prepared as possible for whatever our future might bring.

Stacie Berdan:

Hm, well said, well said... What do you like most about your job, MJ?

M.J. Crawford:

That's another great question! Well, I really love the fact that I'm able to meet people... again, understand intentions, motivations, learn about, you know, the political system in a country, and build, again, build people-to-people ties. Learning and having language skills is important. But I think that... yeah, the ability to live overseas is just a huge blessing and travel is something that I really enjoy with this job as well. And just a chance to be able to provide a solid representation of our country overseas... It's just an incredible opportunity.

Stacie Berdan:

Yes, sounds like all of the wonderful things all wrapped up into one, right – travel, great communication, enhancing your language skills because you are using them all the time being immersed... that's fantastic! What are some of the critical skills – for our listeners, what are some of the critical skills necessary for new hires or people entering the diplomatic corps?

M.J. Crawford:

Well, you know, Stacie, when I was in university studying International Relations and social sciences there was always this emphasis on obtaining hard skills – economics, statistics, econometrics... And I'll say for myself I found those classes very interesting, and I'm glad I had an understanding of how those areas of study work. However, I realized that hard skills kind of become a little outdated pretty quickly. Technology, as we all know, is always evolving, always changing, and one program that I might have learned to use in college to analyze data probably won't be used ten years down the road. So, at this point my career really focused on enhancing the skills that I already have and enjoy, skills that are essentially, what I believe, part of who I am. A lot of people would refer to these are soft skills but I think they go a long way in diplomacy or business or when it comes to finding any job – working in the nonprofit sector, for example. And, when I say soft skills I mean the ability to speak and write well, the ability to connect with others, to network and remember people's names, and who people are and what they do. I believe that displaying a solid level of emotional intelligence is super necessary right now in business and diplomacy.

Stacie Berdan:

Those are great tips, great tips. And you are right, those the things that are not necessarily taught in school but are really necessary. Thanks for sharing those. Some of the trends that we see, kind of emerging in the workspace now, you mentioned global climate change, sustainability, diversity, and inclusion, remote work, an increased focus on wellness and mental health... these are just some of the trends that we're are seeing. Tell me what are you seeing, and maybe one you're experiencing, that you've observed – for our listeners to gain some insight?



M.J. Crawford:

Definitely. I think that, speaking as a millennial, I think that remote work and hybrid schedules that have kind of resulted as being part of the new norm from the pandemic are a huge game changer. I'm not sure that this is something that millennials and Gen Z will be willing to compromise on in the future. And you can already see many different companies allowing for more flexible schedules for their employees in order to stay competitive. I also think that wellness and mental health are hugely important. One thing I love about my job is that... yeah, I'm in a country, I work super hard (there can definitely be long hours involved), but the Foreign Service has been wonderful allowing employees to have pretty generous vacation time throughout the year. I have two younger brothers, one working at a private law firm and the other working at a private equity firm, and they work absolutely intense hours. And I just hope that in the future it would become more socially acceptable for employees in the US to take true vacation time. I mean, more than two weeks a year. In some parts of Europe they get six weeks out of the year on vacation. And for diversity and inclusion, that's a largely important topic. I think that a lot of the changes that we're seeing, not only in the private sector but even in the State Department, are very positive, they're a positive trend, and I think that within the international affairs career field there's a huge opportunity to involve people from different backgrounds, people from immigrant backgrounds, or different minorities within the United States to represent our country. Especially when we are overseas, because other countries do really take notice of that. And they comment on it and they respect it and it's ultimately just part of our American advantage.

Stacie Berdan:

Great, that's wonderful. So, MJ, you've pursued an international lifestyle from the get-go, right, but not everyone believes as passionately as you do, or even understands the value of a global mindset. Many students may be saying "You know it's not for me, I just want to hunker down here in the U.S. and maybe take a vacation now and then abroad" – what would you say to these listeners about why preparing for globalization matters and how to do it?

M.J. Crawford:

Definitely. Well, as I mentioned before, working on the soft skills, even if you are not working overseas is really important. Many of us still work with colleagues from a different country, for example, and I think that taking a respectful interest in where someone's colleagues are from and what their experiences have been is always very crucial and critical. And, again, I would just say take advantage of whatever vacation days you have and travel. Travel is really the only thing that makes us richer. And the experiences we have overseas, whether they are through work or education, really could help when we get back home, especially not just working within our companies but when it comes to educating our families on the people we've met, the conversations we've had overseas, and the perspectives that we've gained.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great advice, so true. And travel does open up the mind and the heart and being able to apply it makes a huge difference. So that's great advice. What advice do you wish you had been given at the beginning of your career?

M.J. Crawford:

Oh, there's a lot of advice. Well, namely, I would say to your listeners they should follow their intuition, and they should trust their instincts. And, even if it feels illogical, I think that there must be some reason that a certain career path or program or an area of studies is calling to someone. I personally wish I would've learned this lesson earlier. A lot of times, I remember looking for answers to what I wanted to do in the future, or who I wanted to become, I would be looking for these answers externally – I would ask other people, I would... yeah, look for these answers out there in the world. And, as much as advice from other people does help, ultimately I found that looking inwards and asking myself and analyzing my own strengths and passions, I found that more helpful to really deciding which path I wanted to take. And, ultimately I found out that by following my gut, my intuition and doing what I love has actually been the quickest way for me to get to where I want to be.



Stacie Berdan:

That's fascinating. Takes a lot of courage though, because sometimes people are like "why are you doing that", you know, 'why do you want to do that for', or do this instead... So it takes a lot of courage also, I think, especially if other people, whether they are friends, family, colleagues, professors are saying "ah, you'd be great at this", right. So it's good to hear. So, really, following your gut... awesome. This has been really wonderful having a conversation with you, MJ. You are so inspiring! I mean, I can't wait to hear more about what you're doing because I know you are at the beginning of your career. But before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to add, to make sure that our listeners hear?

M.J. Crawford:

Yeah, I just want to say to your listeners that they are already on the right path and that I hope that his conversation was really helpful, and I always am the biggest proponent of having a career that allows you to travel. And I really do enjoy the Foreign Service, it has been such an incredible opportunity and experience. And, that, if they are interested in taking the Foreign Service exam or becoming a diplomat, or whatever career path your listeners want for themselves – you know, never take 'No' for an answer. Perseverance only means that you are just one step closer to becoming the person you want to be and being where you want to be.

Stacie Berdan:

That's wonderful. Thank you so much MJ. It's been a real joy catching up with you and having you share your story with me and our listeners. Thanks, I really appreciate it.

M.J. Crawford:

Thank you, Stacie.

[Music]

Stacie Berdan:

You have been listening to the GW-CIBER Global Careers podcast. Join us again next time, and in the meantime – go global!