



Episode 4 – International Affairs

Julie Chung, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Western Hemisphere - USTR
Ms. Stacie Berdan, International Careers Expert (Podcast Host)

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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 about what it's like to work globally. If you love adventure and thrive on taking risks and operating outside your comfort zone, join us as we explore the ins and outs of pursuing an international career! My name is Stacie Nevadomski Berdan, and I'll be your host! Our First Season dives into what it's like **Working Globally Through the Pandemic** – and the outlook for global careers in a post-COVID-19 world.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed just how fragile the international system is, upending the global economy and dramatically affecting international relations. Alliances, institutions, and cooperation on various fronts continue to evolve as each country handles the pandemic in its own way. And although no one could entirely prepare for the global disruption that the pandemic has caused, it's apparent that some of the top skills that foreign service officers have honed over the years have helped them more easily deal with such global instability.

Julie Chung is a career member of the Senior Foreign Service. As Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs at the U.S. State Department, she is responsible for the management and oversight of the Bureau's 52 overseas U.S. diplomatic missions, 18,000 overseas and domestic staff, and a \$300 million budget.

Many of those diplomats on the ground returned to their home bases because of COVID-19, creating a tele workforce almost overnight, in a profession that is, by its very nature, an in-person job. Julie shares how this and other changes caused by the pandemic challenged yet also surprised her. Having worked across Asia, in the Middle East and Latin America, Julie describes a job that she is passionate about and why. What trends are critical for the future global workforce? How can students further their global mindset now? Have a listen as Julie takes us into the world of international relations and explains how the unpredictable nature of global issues and global relations creates a future of opportunities for intellectually curious job seekers. Welcome, Julie, it's a pleasure to have you with us to talk about a career in the foreign service, and in particular about working globally through the pandemic.

Julie Chung:

Thanks for having me, Stacie.

Stacie Berdan:

One of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there. To go beyond the titles – listeners can find your bio on the GW-CIBER website – and so I'd like to begin by asking you to share with us: What is it that you do, what is it that a foreign service officer does?

Julie Chung:

Well, it depends. I can tell you what I do on a daily basis. When you talk about diplomacy and foreign service officers, overall, of course, we promote US values, we advance US policy interests, but the way we do that is really different depending on what position and which posting in the world we're at. So that could be through programs,



development assistance, aid, through speeches, through government interactions – a wide way for us to engage with civil society, NGOs, and governments, so it's very diverse, each job is very different. So right now, as the Principle Deputy Secretary at the Western Hemisphere Bureau – that's a mouthful – PDAS, which is hard to explain to the real world and I say it's kind of like the COO of a company. So, I'm the deputy of the Bureau that covers all of our domestic operations as well as postings in the western hemisphere – that's Latin America, the Caribbean, Mexico, and Canada. So, on the day to day, I make sure that the trains are running, the personnel, all the operations, the budget... I oversee our diversity initiatives, and also on several policy initiatives making sure all of our offices and staff are well coordinated.

Stacie Berdan:

That is a great overview of the foreign service for all of us, thank you, I learned a lot. And it seems that you have a very big job with a great deal of responsibility, having moved up the ranks over more than two decades. Tell me about the most interesting aspect of your job. I'm sure there's so much. But is there anything that you particularly like, and may be something that you don't like?

Julie Chung:

Yeah, I love that this is a job that always makes you learn and grow. I've been the in the foreign service for 24 years and every day I'm learning something new. So, it's not like another profession, where you've gotten to a certain level then you got it, you know everything. Because of the nature of our jobs where every three or four years we're transferring to a different embassy, a consulate or an office back here in Washington or elsewhere, we're always challenged and opening our horizons to new things and new jobs. I've gone from everything from organizing cultural performances in Vietnam to negotiating on nuclear issues with North Korea. So, every job is unique, so I love the diversity of that and the fact that it intellectually challenges me, so I'm never bored, there's never a dull moment in the foreign service or in diplomacy. And I do love the people aspect of it, and that's just the connecting with audiences whoever they are – foreign audiences, domestic audiences – and really conveying your passions, your policies, your ideas, and also listening and getting that feedback back. And so that person-to-person interaction, I think, is really the core of what we do as diplomats. Now the hard thing about this career I've been in 24 years, as I said, is the moving. Every couple year you got to move up and pack up all your things, and move your dog, your child, your husband. There's a lot of that involved and after the 7th move or so, you really get tired of it. And you have to create your networks again, your friendships again, that's easier now in this age of social media and Facebook and such, but it's still hard to move every couple of years.

Stacie Berdan:

So, on the one hand, it's great, right – a new location – fresh, interesting and intellectually stimulating, where you can meet new people and connect. I love it, that sounds wonderful. But the packing, the picking up and moving every 3-4 years sounds absolutely daunting to me! Tell me, what inspired you to pursue not only a global career, but one as a civil servant?

Julie Chung:

Well, you know my family is a family of immigrants, I was born in Korea, in Seoul, Korea, we immigrated when I was five-years old. So, as I was growing up and the older I got, I thought of what I wanted to do... First, I wanted to be a lawyer or a journalist, and then I thought what is it that I can really contribute to this country that has been so great for me, for my family as an immigrant. And what can I do to really contribute and give back to society? And I looked at the foreign service as an opportunity, as not a way to just earn a paycheck but to serve my country. And that was very appealing when I first heard about the foreign service.



Stacie Berdan:

And clearly you are very good at it. Julie, you are so impressive, you've worked in so many countries and across so many numerous cultures. And you speak so many languages! Are there key traits that you believe are essential to working successfully on an international scale?

Julie Chung:

Sure, and I think these skills are really cross-cutting in any career, but, I think, especially essential to the foreign service and diplomacy. First of all, is communications... Number one, absolutely. The way we communicate our ideas, our policies to the media, to foreign audiences, to each other within the interagency (so, to my colleagues)... Sometimes we say that the Department of Defense is like Mars and State is like Venus. So, we have to be able to translate, you know, what our goals and objectives and how we get there, both to within our own government system as well as to foreign cultures, and foreign governments, and foreign publics. So, communications is very important. Second, as I related to before, is the interpersonal relationships, really – knowing your audience, knowing who you're talking to, being empathetic of where they're coming from, what their viewpoints are, really listening and being able to relate. I found that very critical, especially when you're in a hostile environment. You know, when I was working in Cambodia for instance, we had very tense relationships sometimes between the Cambodian government and the US government – over human relations, and human rights and democracy issues. But at the same time being able to convey these issues with respect but with firmness, and then to relay our stories and messages to the public, to the youth, where 65% are under the age of 30... And so, really telling that story well with interpersonal skills was critical. And then, finally, persuasion and negotiation – that is what we do as diplomats, we try to persuade others that we can get to a win-win situation, it doesn't have to be a win-lose; and how whatever we're advocating for is really something that we should all get on board together – whether it's advocating for human rights in Venezuela and creating a framework for a democratic transition there that is not just an issue of interest to the US but for the region and the hemisphere, for security and long-term stability.

Stacie Berdan:

I agree with you. I agree that the skills you've mentioned are important across any career, especially now as we find ourselves in the middle of a pandemic. How has the foreign service been affected by COVID-19?

Julie Chung:

Well, initially when we really thought about how COVID-19 was hitting us, we had global authorized departures. So many of our staffs and their families around the world had the option to return to the US. And that was based on varying degrees of health and medical issues and the level of health and medical abilities and facilities in those countries. So, the fact that we had so many come back, people come back, had left a reduced staffing footprint back at posts around the world. And even though people tried to continue some of these duties by telework, it made a difference. As I said earlier, it really is the person-to-person contact and the connections that we make. And so, when you have a third of your embassy or half of the embassy depart, that's a challenge. And so, I've got to admit that we weren't prepared for such a global pandemic to hit us simultaneously. And so, moving, adjusting to that, and changing into telework protocols and dealing with how the staff that are remaining in embassies and consulates continued to function at maximum levels, under a lot of stress – that was really challenging.

Stacie Berdan:

Wow, that is a massive challenge! And the adaptation necessary to continue to fulfill the diplomatic mission around the world sounds so difficult. It must have been so hard on the people, the staff who live and work around the world to pick up and move and have things change so quickly. Has anything come out of these recent changes that has surprised you?



Julie Chung:

Yes, it's forced us to think about these issues of compassion, resilience – things, to be honest, we didn't really talk about on a regular basis before the pandemic. But we've had regular webinars, and discussion groups, and articles that we're now circulating and talking about, that because of the pandemic kind of rethinking or resetting our priorities, and how we are more productive workers because we talk care of ourselves first. You know what they say about putting on your air mask first before putting on the air mask for your child in an airplane – that's true, we really do have to that self-care first.

Stacie Berdan:

Oh, that's really good to hear, so heartening! Heartfelt humanity back in the picture! You know, COVID-19 has changed so much in our lives, and students have been affected quite a bit as well. Do you have some advice for them, for students? How can they keep developing their global mindset in the current environment?

Julie Chung:

Well, that's the irony... I think we can do more now than before because of the virtual world we live in. Before, it was hard to have a staff meeting that involves all our embassies abroad for instance. We'd limit that because we thought "Oh, but the connections wouldn't be great", but now we are experts at Webex and MS Teams, and we regularly have meetings with 100 people or 200 people now. It has actually become more inclusive in terms of connecting our colleagues from abroad and here at State. So, I would urge students to also look at, in terms of... I know, it's not the same as being in person, but the ability to sign on to virtual lectures and conferences, whether it's in Geneva or Mumbai, we can do that because we are all used to this new virtual environment. And now museums and countries, and tourism companies are doing virtual trips and virtual lectures, and think tanks are continuing to do their events & webinars virtually as well. So, I think for the current time doing whatever we can virtually, and exploring, continuing to explore and make those connections virtually will be important and critical because of the state we are in.

Stacie Berdan:

So true, so true. So many opportunities, but we have to search for them, we have to look for them, to determine which organizations, what webinars, what topic – but it's hard, after spending so many hours online for class, right. But it's important that you point out we must take the time now to prepare ourselves for the future, when we have a little bit of extra time. So, what other opportunities or obstacles do you think students will encounter if they decide to pursue a global career in the coming few years?

Julie Chung:

Well, I think the opportunities are great in any kind of global career, because of the unpredictable nature of global issues and global relations. We don't know when the next hostility or the next issue will come up – again, there is such an unknown beyond what we can predict... That, actually, I see as an opportunity, because that will challenge us to constantly evolve and think about addressing new challenges, new relationships, new alliances, new malign influences. We have worked very hard this past year and a half, especially at the State Department, on countering malign influence from the Chinese Communist party or Russia, but there may be new malign influences that grow in the next year or two. So, I think for students should think about two steps ahead. What are the challenges now, but what are the growing challenges – do we have to start thinking more about artificial intelligence, and bitcoins, and other areas where we couldn't have imagined 5 or 6 years ago? So, I think there are many areas that we will need to have more expertise in, and the students that are in school now can really delve into deeper technical areas, where I didn't have an opportunity to when I was in graduate school.



Stacie Berdan:

Yes, so much has changed, which again, means opportunity, as you point out. What trends do you see emerging as a focal point for students considering an international career?

Julie Chung:

Well, I think it's a given that IT, technology, cyber issues, cyber security, 5G – that is a critical area for the future. And again, as a social science major and political science and int'l affairs, that's not something that many of my peers or I really focused on when we went to grad school. And so, more of the technical fields, again – AI, the internet of things, we're finding that we don't have enough of those with that kind of specific technical and technology expertise to be able to do the policy work. And similarly, because of the pandemic – global health and infectious diseases – that's not only for the CDC to be able to have that expertise, but it would be great within the State Department to build up that expertise as well.

Stacie Berdan:

Great insight and so important – cyber security, AI – these are things to think about not only for the foreign service, but also all types of companies and organizations. You're offering such wonderful, practical advice. Is there some advice you wish you had been given earlier in your career?

Julie Chung:

I think I would tell my younger self not to be too hard on myself, and to be really more open and flexible. I was so just focused on – you know, growing up in a Korean American immigrant home you had to bring home all As, everything had to be to perfection. So, a lot of pressure on myself, that I put on myself more than others put on me. So, I think I would tell my younger self to chill out a little bit, that it's ok to have some missteps and mistakes, and it still turns out you may not get promoted on the very first turn – that's ok, your life is not going to be over. You may not get that exact job at the exact embassy that you wanted at that time – that's ok. That some of these disappointments are just a part of your natural growth and your professional growth as well, and to really be more open to that.

Stacie Berdan:

So, tell me, do you think your younger self would have listened to you?!

Julie Chung:

Nope! Haha, took me about 20 years to learn that lesson! Hahaha...

Stacie Berdan:

I love your honesty! How about the best piece of advice you've been given by somebody else?

Julie Chung:

Yeah, one of my great mentors told me: “You came to play, not sit on the bench”. And that really has struck me, because, again, when I was a junior officer and even mid-level, I was a little shy, a little uncertain. I would say I had an imposter syndrome – I didn't know whether I belonged or whether I really deserved that position, whether I knew what I was talking about, so I was hesitant to speak up in a crowded room, in a conference room. So, when she told me “You came to play, you didn't come to just sit on that bench”, and to be bold sometimes, and, you know, what you may say may not be the smartest thing, but to offer your expertise, offer your ideas. I think that is really important for the youth and the young diplomats and students to think about. Don't be so shy, don't hold yourself back.



Stacie Berdan:

So, most people think that the global lifestyle is exotic and exciting and wonderful. And for many of us – yes, it is. And, as you pointed out, there’s some... there’s some difficult challenges as well. But across your entire career and your life living and working abroad, do you have a favorite experience to share, a memory of some aspect that will bring it to life for people?

Julie Chung:

Yeah, I think the most memorable was when I was working on North Korean issues... and again, as an immigrant of Korea, of South Korea – and having my own family gone through the Korean war and the families were split – to go to North Korea and also actually cross the demilitarized zone by foot, usually we flew, but the one time we actually crossed the bridge of no return, crossed over, and as I was walking across, one of the North Korean soldiers proposed to me. And I thought “oh that’s interesting”! He’s like, “I’ve got a great apartment in Pyongyang – you want to marry me?” And I thought that was just hilarious as I was having this very scary, frightening moment of crossing by foot to North Korea, getting a marriage proposal. But just being in North Korea and having these engagements and meetings as a Korean American – it was very poignant, it was very emotional for me, and to think about my ancestry and the split of that country and then to be there as an American, as an American diplomat, to speak on behalf of the US Government. I found that just a very powerful moment to be a part of that.

Stacie Berdan:

I love that story! Wow, you must have been experiencing quite a range of emotions walking across that bridge. That’s a really great story, Julie, so thanks so much for sharing it. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you’d like to add?

Julie Chung:

Well, I would offer my final note to students – just be optimistic. And I’m not saying be a Pollyanna. I know there’s a lot of challenges going on within the State Department, within our society, within our country, and our world. A lot of issues with race relations... we certainly aren’t a perfect country, and we don’t pretend to be when we go out as diplomats to talk about the US. But I do have a great deal of optimism because I believe in the young people, I believe in the basic foundations and values of who we are as a people. And, as an immigrant, as a diplomat who has been in this position for more than two decades, there will be ups and downs and there will be many challenges that our country faces, but we can’t do it if we believe that whatever we do won’t work. And that we can’t even try. So, I really encourage everybody out there to maintain that sense of optimism as you work hard and endeavor to pursue whatever passion that’s important to you.

Stacie Berdan:

Excellent advice and much needed at this moment in time. Thanks again, Julie for taking the time out of your schedule to share your personal journey and perspective on working globally during and beyond the pandemic. You are so inspiring, thanks again.

Julie Chung:

It was my pleasure, thanks for having me.

[Music]

Stacie Berdan:

You have been listening to the GW-CIBER Global Careers podcast “Working Globally Through the Pandemic” and the outlook for global careers in a post COVID-19 world. Join us again next time, and in the meantime – go global!