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Experience Matters Most

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Summary
Even in foreign services that, like Germany's *Auswärtiges Amt*, follow a generalist principle in their human resources' management, individual careers are shaped by specific experiences. The author uses his own curriculum vitae as a case in point; he served many years in Press and Public Affairs at the German Embassy in Washington DC and as Foreign Office Spokesman in Bonn; he also acquired solid expertise in Personnel and Administration and headed the German Foreign Ministry's Central Department. He was later selected for an assignment as the United Nations' Inspector-General.

Paschke feels that interaction with the media, administrative matters and oversight in international organizations are as challenging and attractive as any other diplomatic activity. His professional expertise continues to be in demand even after his retirement.

Keywords
Diplomats: generalists or specialists, media relations, human resources' management, budget negotiations, UN management deficiencies, internal oversight, multilateralism.

Introduction

What gives a diplomatic career its shape? Foreign services have always grappled with two options: should we select, train and manage our staff to be generalists or should we follow a policy of creating specialists for the various diplomatic and consular tasks that the service covers? And should we have an in-house preparatory period for our junior officers or should they learn by doing, by gaining the necessary skills on the job?

The German Foreign Office has traditionally favoured the generalist principle and a formal preparatory service for its diplomats. In our selection procedure for diplomatic/consular staff, we take the applicants, all of whom are university graduates, through a screening process in which we

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look particularly for practical and social intelligence, versatility, creativity, communication skills and team spirit, along with solid knowledge in history, law and economics plus a good command of English, French and/or other foreign languages. We want to hire and groom junior officers who can be dispatched to any mission that we maintain around the globe and who can perform adequately in any post that needs to be filled. The training period tries to develop and strengthen their professional skills, but also aims at smoothly integrating them into a service that relies on cooperation and teamwork, loyalty, and an awareness of the obligations and constraints that most bureaucracies, and certainly every foreign service, entail. Are we thus forming generalists? Do we create the type of diplomat-globetrotter who knows a little bit of everything and muddles through in whatever assignment, but does not excel in any particular field? Definitely not.

While our human resources' management tries to expose all staff to a variety of different job experiences during, say, the first ten to fifteen years, this period also serves to find out in which field an officer does particularly well. From there on, most careers take a specific path and gravitate towards repeated postings in one geographic or linguistic region or focus on the type of work in which the individual officer has performed with distinction.

I have often argued whether the 'generalist' categorization is applicable to the diplomatic profession at all. Admittedly, our profession is by definition so broad that it encompasses a wide range of geographic and substantive specificities. But the professional experiences that foreign service officers gain during their individual careers also enable them to adapt swiftly to different posts, to new job conditions and challenges, to the political, social, economic and cultural environments of their respective host country or, in multilateral assignments, to the international organization to which they are accredited. Above all, their experience in the service should teach them never to give up learning, never to lose their intellectual curiosity. It is this set of skills, this adaptability, that turns seasoned diplomats into specialists for diplomacy rather than superficial generalists.

I use my own career as a case in point. The specific expertise that I was privileged to acquire during my four decades of service covers four subjects in particular: interaction with the media; personnel and administration; management and oversight in multilateral organizations; plus an in-depth

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knowledge of the United States. This is probably not the average set of experiences of a foreign service officer, and for that reason it is perhaps worthy of some detailed reflection.

Interaction with the Media

I was assigned as Counsellor for Press and Public Affairs to the German Embassy in Washington DC in 1977, after having earlier served four years in the United States as Consul in New Orleans. There is no capital in the world where interaction between government and the media is more intense than in Washington DC. The influence of the media on public opinion and on policy-making decisions of the administration and Congress is probably higher in the US than in any other country. During the three years that I spent there working with journalists, both American and German (there is a sizeable correspondents' corps of the German media in the US capital), I gained a deep understanding of the interdependence between politics and news' reporting, of the impact of editorials and op-ed articles, of the eagerness of politicians to get media exposure, of the tendency of the press to go for the sensational scoop rather than for responsible, balanced, in-depth reporting. I also found out about the importance of a systematic, trustful, friendly, one-on-one dialogue between an embassy's press officer and those media representatives who count. My Washington constituency consisted of enormously interesting individuals, journalists with a sound judgement of everything that was politically important in this bustling city — and they appreciated the fact that I did not act as a 'spin doctor' for Germany. I did not use our conversations just to feed them information about Germany, but also asked them questions about topical American issues and listened to them. This, by the way, enhanced my standing in the German Embassy, because I could contribute additional angles to the reporting of the political division from my 'sources', angles that tended to be different and more colourful than what our political analysts had extracted from the US State Department, the National Security Council or other US administration contacts.

Washington has always been a preferred travel destination for German politicians, who request the Embassy to prepare and run them through a

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full programme of high-level meetings with top American leaders from the administration and Congress. Here, the press officer has to serve as the liaison with the German correspondents.

My most valuable Washington experience was my enhanced sensitivity to the requirements for quality of foreign policy information that is offered to media representatives. The Embassy's press officer has a dual challenge: diplomatic culture normally wishes to preserve the confidentiality of details and does not like to disclose the ways by which, for example, an agreement has been reached. Diplomats often assume that journalists do not have the savvy to appreciate the nuances of foreign policy work. They therefore believe that press briefings should be short and dry. The press officer, on the other hand, knows that his 'good clients' are seasoned foreign-policy watchers, well versed in the fine print of diplomatic issues, able to read between the lines of communiqué language and eager to know more about what goes on behind closed doors. So the press officer must advocate a more open and substantive briefing policy and must ensure that he keeps his journalistic constituency regularly and comprehensively informed about the topics at hand, even if he can provide certain details only 'on deep background'.

My work as press officer also taught me the importance of public diplomacy — this relatively new trend in the international community. Public diplomacy is a dramatic departure from the old foreign policy rituals of confidential interaction by government officials and ambassadors in the confines of meeting rooms. It is the consequence of the increased interest that civil society takes in foreign affairs in our global world and of the ensuing need to foster understanding and public support, at least in democratic countries, for foreign policy issues.

After three exciting years in Washington DC, I was summoned to Bonn to become the spokesman of the German Foreign Office. I could directly apply my US experiences to this new, even more challenging, assignment. My — very demanding — boss for the next four years was German Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher, who believed strongly in the importance of the media and in a continuously active information policy. His motive was not only to cultivate his image as a politician, but he was convinced that German foreign policy must always be underpinned by an informed German public opinion. Minister Genscher almost obsessively wished to see his relentless diplomatic activities covered by the German media. He worked hard for this objective and made sure that his spokes-

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man kept the same pace, so I had a tough and hectic, but challenging and rewarding, job. I also found that my Washington experience was confirmed during my job in Bonn: always stick to the truth, try to be as comprehensive and reliable as possible, do not pretend that you know everything and do not try to give a 'spin' to a story or a piece of information.

Interaction with the media — which many senior diplomats consider awkward, potentially dangerous, or less meaningful and satisfying than solid political analysis — has sharpened my judgement for the complexity of foreign policy issues and has enriched my professional life.

Personnel and Administration

When a university graduate opts for a career in the foreign service, the last thing that he dreams of is a job in the administrative field. And yet, the largest department in any foreign service is the one dealing with Personnel and Administration. Thus, the chances are that foreign service officers will have to serve at least one term in that department. Some may find such an assignment boring; others suddenly discover the challenge and charm of a management job. I was thrilled when, in 1972, nine years after I had completed my own training, I was chosen to be Director of Training at our diplomatic school, which is an integral part of the Department of Personnel and Administration. For many reasons, my enthusiasm for this job, which I held for more than five years, never ceased. It was a pleasant job because I had to coach bright young people through an intellectually stimulating programme; I was also the first foreign officer with whom they were confronted and I somehow served as a role model for them — not a small responsibility. It was challenging, too: the generation of trainees that joined our service during the early 1970s was the product of the 'universities of 1968' — a phase of academic and political unrest in Germany. Many of them came to Bonn with the ambition of radically reforming 'the institutions', in particular the Foreign Office. I spent long days and evenings with the trainees, discussing the rationale behind certain rules and habits that apply in the international community — and why junior officers should observe rather than disregard or fight them. I always argued that if they brought themselves to playing by the rules in formalities, they could more easily preserve their intellectual individuality.

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The role of Director of Training also involved writing the first personnel assessment of each individual attaché. I used this tool as an opportunity to conduct at least four private talks with each of them in the course of their training, giving them feedback about my observations and impressions, suggesting certain behavioural adjusrments, encouraging recognized talents and strengths, warning against false self-estimations — a delicate undertaking with men and women of high intelligence and well-developed self-confidence. But when I retired from the service about 30 years later, some of my former trainees told me that they still recalled with appreciation what I had said to them in our assessment conversations — and this made me very proud.

One conclusion that I drew from my assignment as Director of Training was that in the foreign service, an open and curious personality, the ability to work harmoniously with others in a team, the talent to build relationships and gain the confidence of partners, and readiness to work hard and with diligence for a common objective are the essential qualifications, more than high-flying individual brilliance. I also learned about the importance of caring and compassionate human resources' management: an administration that can place the right people in the right posts, matching specific skills with the specific requirements of an assignment, will achieve higher productivity and more job satisfaction.

Thirteen years after my tour of duty as Director of Training, I returned to the Department of Personnel and Administration, now as its head. 1990 to 1994 were the first four years after the reunification of Germany and they brought a number of big challenges for our service, not least in the field of management.

The new and larger Germany decided to open thirteen new embassies in the successor states to the Soviet Union, from Almaty and Aschgabad to Tallinn and Tiflis, plus several additional consulates. These duty stations had to be financed and manned. At the same time, we had the more awkward task of dismantling the East German foreign service. After long and complex deliberations and interviews we decided to integrate only a few relatively young GDR diplomats into our service; to others we provided assistance in finding a new job.

When the German Parliament voted in 1991 to move the federal government from Bonn back to Berlin, my department had to start planning an appropriate location, building and infrastructure in the new/old capital.

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We also had to grapple with the ongoing information technology (IT) revolution and its impact on our worldwide confidential communication requirements. These management decisions were complicated by a severe financial squeeze caused by the huge costs of reunification. Negotiating the Foreign Office budget with the Finance Ministry and with the Budget Committee of the Bundestag was partly my duty. It required thorough studying and memorizing all the relevant facts and figures, but also stamina and a bargaining talent, plus a political sense for what was attainable. While the workload for the foreign service grew significantly in the post-Cold War and globalization era, resources could not easily be obtained. The Foreign Office, like other ministries, had to swallow reductions and 'do more with less'.

Nevertheless, I tried to run my department as the service agency of the Foreign Office, supporting the other units as effectively as possible, exercising flexibility in the allotment of resources, but also looking for opportunities to economize, to promote structural improvements and to streamline work processes — without much fanfare or turmoil.

One subject on which I felt strongly was the need to strengthen the managerial qualifications of our heads of missions. Not all of our ambassadors were sufficiently aware of the type of leadership that the service expected of them: strong and engaged, but also compassionate and caring for their staff. So I created a 'senior seminar' where groups of ambassadors and department heads were gathered with professional facilitators for a week of practical training, focused on self-awareness, communication techniques, feedback, group exercises and other related learning experiences — a catalyst for in-depth self-reflection.

I was fortunate in having excellent collaborators in my three deputies. This allowed me to delegate many tasks while maintaining the ultimate responsibility and to flatten the hierarchy, with a trickle-down effect throughout the entire department and its well-motivated staff of close to 1,500 officers.

One of the most delicate duties of the Director-General for Personnel and Administration was planning ambassadorial assignments in the two highest categories of missions. I proposed the respective advancements or rotations first to the two State Secretaries and then, when I received their nod, to the Foreign Minister. To make convincing proposals required a thorough knowledge of the persons, their record, and their reputation, plus absolute fairness and an unprejudiced attitude towards all potential

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candidates. I have always tried to live up to these standards. My proposals did not all succeed, but a fair number were accepted.

Another task which came ex officio with my job was membership in the German Federal Civil Service Commission — complex but interesting work. But the most pleasant duty for me was to chair the annual Selection Commission of the Foreign Office, which screened applicants for our career. Not only did I now chair a committee of which I had been a dedicated member some fifteen years earlier, but I was convinced that this was one of the most serious and responsible decision-making processes for the service; after all, we probably had to live as colleagues with the young people that we selected for about 40 years.

Management and Oversight in International Organizations

In 1994 the German government presented me as candidate for a new position that the United Nations General Assembly had just created in New York: a job that called for administrative experience in a sizeable public bureaucracy, familiarity with budgeting and human resources management, knowledge of multilateral organizations (I had been Germany's Permanent Representative to the International Organizations in Vienna/Austria from 1984 to 1986) and sound political judgement. The assignment was Under-Secretary-General (USG) for Internal Oversight Services, commonly defined as Inspector-General of the United Nations. UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali thought that I had the required qualifications and the General Assembly confirmed me for one non-renewable, fixed-term tour of duty. So I became an international civil servant for five years. I was the only USG who had to be approved by the General Assembly while the others serve at the pleasure of the Secretary-General. To undertake effective oversight work, I had to enjoy complete independence. The fixed-term appointment also made me independent of the General Assembly; I had no incentive to endear myself to member states for eventual re-election.

Fairly soon I discovered that my new position was a big challenge, but that the expertise gained during 35 years of foreign service provided me with the required skills. Independent internal oversight had not existed in the world organization until 1994. External oversight was traditionally provided by the supreme audit institutions of three member states and a

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small inspection unit (JIU) of eleven inspectors which was supposed to cover the entire UN system including all of its specialized agencies. But systematic internal controls by in-house auditors, inspectors, programme evaluators and investigators were alien to the UN's management culture. Thus I had to invent this new office and get it accepted within the organization. I had to provide training, leadership and motivation to my staff of 120, draft manuals and handbooks and campaign for our oversight services with the other parts of the UN Secretariat plus the independent funds and programmes, the three other headquarters (in Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna) and the regional commissions, which all fell under my jurisdiction.

The creation of my Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) came as a shock to many UN managers. They had never been really controlled. Now, suddenly, a mechanism was established that critically assessed their performance. Worse, the reports about audits, inspections, programme evaluations and investigations that the OIOS conducted reached the General Assembly. These reports were addressed to the Secretary-General, but he had to transmit them to member states integrally and without change, only with his comments. This amounted to a fundamental change in the management culture of the organization. It also brought into the open a number of serious organizational weaknesses that seemed to be typical for the UN: weak internal controls; lack of fiscal responsibility and accountability of managers; under-developed horizontal and vertical communication; lack of transparency; no institutional memory; frequent overlaps and duplication; and competition. My office also faced a tall educational task: we could not limit our work to uncovering mistakes, deficiencies and irregularities; we needed to provide managers with help and advice to do better. This required us to gain the trust and understanding of our 'clients' — the OIOS did not intend to embarrass them by its oversight activities, but rather to assist them in improving their performance. It took time and effort to convey this message and to overcome fear and apprehension within the UN bureaucracy.

Confidence building work was also imperative on the political front: the creation of the OIOS had only been accepted by the General Assembly because of heavy pressure from the US delegation and the US Congress. 'Third World' countries initially suspected that the new oversight office would be a tool in the hands of the industrialized countries (the so-called 'big contributors') to assess critically and eventually dismantle UN

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programmes and activities that existed primarily in the interest of the developing countries. This mutual mistrust between the 'rich' and the 'poor' is unfortunately germane to the world organization. It is also one of the major reasons why UN reform is such a difficult undertaking. I faced heavy scepticism and outright animosity from certain delegations in the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly and worked hard to demonstrate that the OIOS was immune to outside influence and strictly followed its mandate without any bias. The Fifth Committee was also the forum where I had to fight for additional resources, as the workload of my office grew. When I vacated my USG position after five years, member states were unanimous in recognizing that independent internal oversight had become an accepted element of the UN management culture, that it had caused considerable improvements in the performance of the UN Secretariat and that OIOS must be continued and further strengthened.

In spite of the difficulties and occasional antagonisms that I experienced, I thoroughly enjoyed my affiliation with the United Nations. Because of my cross-cutting inspectoral responsibility, I gained a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of this global multilateral institution, which, despite its imperfections, is the essential North-South forum and global player. I considered it a privilege, after 35 years in my national foreign service, to become involved with a very different biotope, a multicultural bureaucracy with striking peculiarities of its own. My five years in New York also allowed me to gather a totally new expertise: oversight in multilateral organizations, an issue that has gained increasing prominence during the past decade. This specific UN oversight experience earned me a reputation that did not end with my retirement.

When I returned from New York to the German Foreign Office in Berlin for one more year before reaching mandatory retirement age, the German Foreign Minister entrusted me with a special mission: to inspect the German embassies in EU partner countries and find out to what extent their bilateral work profile had changed in view of growing European integration.

After I retired, the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, France, immediately hired me for three years as a part-time management consultant. Other international organizations also use my expertise: I serve on the Budget and Finance Committee of the International Criminal Court in The Hague; the German government reactivated me in 2006 as Special Envoy for UN

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Management Reform; and I teach UN Policy-Making at the Graduate School of Public Policy of the University of Erfurt in Germany. For a retired diplomat, this is a satisfying work programme and proof of the wisdom that 'experience matters most'.

Karl Theodor Paschke *is a veteran of the German Foreign Service from which he retired after a career of 40 years in November 2000. He served, inter alia, as spokesman of the German Foreign Office, Ambassador to the International Organizations in Vienna, Minister Plenipotentiary at the German Embassy in Washington DC and Director-General for Personnel and Administration at the German Foreign Office. In 1994, he was selected by the United Nations as Under-Secretary for Internal Oversight Services and worked in New York until 1999.*

Since retirement from the diplomatic service, Paschke continues to be sought for his experience and expertise.