

Career Opportunities in Think Tanks

There are a large number of think tanks and research organizations with a focus on domestic and foreign policy issues. These organizations are often supported by contracts from the government, foundations, private businesses and endowments. Think tanks, in the most traditional sense, are seen as non-partisan organizations, which employ interdisciplinary approaches to finding long-term solutions to policy-related issues.

There are many variations in the perspectives and focus of research organizations: some may be viewed more as advocacy groups which promote a particular agenda; others may resemble private sector consulting organizations or academic institutions. In addition to their research efforts, many research institutes produce major publications or organize professional conferences, lectures and policy forums. Think tank scholars testify before congressional committees, submit articles to major newspapers and may serve on government task forces.

Career Paths and Entry Salaries

The type of positions available varies considerably between organizations and is very much dependent upon one's level of education. In addition to research-related positions, which usually require an MA or Ph.D. and specialized expertise, many organizations utilize interns and individuals with BA and MA degrees for a range of administrative positions. Entry-level positions for individuals with MA degrees include:

Program Manager/Assistant – Coordinates and handles logistics for major program events, meetings, conferences, and international visits, and manages a range of program support functions, including communications and publication work. Starting salaries can range from high \$20s to mid \$30s, depending on the organization and level of responsibility.

Research Assistant – Provides research support to Fellows and Senior Associates, drafts documents, manages database records, handles correspondence and provides general administrative support. Salaries average in the high \$20s to mid \$30s, depending on the size and funding base of the institute.

Research Associate – Develops and implements research plans, prepares funding proposals, analyzes data and synthesizes findings, publishes and presents findings to various audiences. Starting salaries can range from mid \$30s to \$ 40s, again depending on experience and the organization.

Advancement into senior positions usually requires education at the Ph.D. level and/or extensive specialized expertise, so it is common to see those in junior level positions leaving after 2-3 years to pursue higher education and professional opportunities in academia, government, private corporations and consulting firms.

Qualifications Necessary/Application Procedures to Enter Field

Higher education, at a master's or doctoral level, and experience in the field is generally required for substantive research positions. Strong communication skills, both written and oral, are essential. One must be able to write concise briefing reports as well as longer, academic works. Presentation skills are also important, as is comfort in addressing an audience of experts. Competitive candidates also will be able to demonstrate proficiency in

foreign languages and will have a solid command of word processing and spreadsheet applications and the Internet. Many positions require good quantitative skills and knowledge of statistical packages.

Sample Employers

- Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, www.brookings.edu
- Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, <http://www.cceia.org/>
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, www.ceip.org
- Committee for Economic Development, <http://www.ced.org>
- Council on Foreign Relations, New York, NY, www.cfr.org
- Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, www.csis.org
- East-West Center, Honolulu, HI, www.eastwestcenter.org
- Hoover Institute, Stanford University, www.hoover.org
- Institute for Food and Development Policy (Food First), <http://www.foodfirst.org>
- Institute for International Economics, <http://www.iie.com>
- National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle, WA, www.nbr.org
- National Center for Policy Analysis, <http://www.ncpa.org>
- Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development, <http://www.nautilus.org/>
- RAND, Santa Monica, CA, www.rand.org
- The American Council for Capital Formation, <http://www.accf.org>
- The Heritage Foundation, <http://www.heritage.org>
- Woodrow Wilson International Center, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org>
- World Economic Forum, <http://www.weforum.org>
- Worldwatch Institute, Washington, DC, www.worldwatch.org

Demand and Future Challenges of Profession

In the 21st Century, many policy research organizations are re-examining their focus, in response to changing world affairs, public interests, funding and budgetary constraints. Entry-level positions remain highly competitive and success in securing a post requires planning and persistence. Most think tanks and research institutes do have formal internship programs and many look first to current and former interns to fill vacant permanent positions. Not only are interns in a position to hear about openings before they are advertised externally, but they also frequently have had prior occasion to demonstrate their specialized knowledge, skills and dedication.

Some professionals in the field predict that the information explosion caused by the Internet will increase the demand for expert analysis, interpretation and synthesis of information. Others, however, express concern that limited funding sources may hinder think tanks in the fulfillment of their mission of providing objective policy-relevant knowledge. Responding to the changing world political/economic situation and the interests of the public, some think tanks have already broadened their range of expertise and diversified their focus.

Resources For More Information

Associations/Websites

- Carnegie Endowment listing of selected think tanks and links to websites, www.ceip.org/files/news/library/libtanks.htm
- Index of public policy research institutes, www.yahoo.com/Social_Science/Political

Publications

Careers in International Affairs, Edited by Maria Pinto Carland and Lisa A. Gihring, Georgetown University Press, 2003.

International Research Centers Directory, Gale Publishing (2006).

Research Centers Directory, Gale Publishing, 2005.