

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

FOREIGN SERVICE CONSULAR PROFESSIONAL ASSESSMENT INFORMATION GUIDE

- ✓ Critical Thinking
- ✓ Cultural Adaptability
- ✓ Experience and Motivation
- ✓ Information Integration and Analysis
- ✓ Leadership
- ✓ Negotiation
- ✓ Objectivity and Integrity
- ✓ Planning and Organizing
- ✓ Presentation Skills
- ✓ Teamwork
- ✓ Written Communication



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**Foreign Service Consular Professional Assessment
Information Guide
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Note: This Information Guide is for all candidates who will take a Foreign Service Consular Professional Assessment (FSCPA). This includes those applying under the Consular Fellows Program (CFP) and those applying under the Appointment Eligible Family Member (AEFM) program.

Introduction

The purpose of this Foreign Service Consular Professional Assessment (FSCPA) Information Guide is to familiarize candidates with the selection process so they will be able to better focus on their performance during the assessment rather than spend their limited time reviewing procedures. While the main elements of the FSCPA remain constant, information on details – for example, time limits or sequence of exercises – can change quickly. Candidates should stay alert and follow the instructions provided on the day of the assessment.

This guide includes the criteria used to evaluate candidates, common sense strategies candidates might use to ensure they are performing their best, and a description of the activities during the FSCPA day. It also includes sample test materials that represent the kind of information and exercises all candidates will be given during the assessment.

This guide is for the FSCPA only – other guides are available for Foreign Service candidates, such as the FSOT Information Guide, the FSOA Information Guide and the FSSA Information Guide. Candidates should check careers.state.gov for general information on Limited Non-Career Appointments, as well as offers information on Foreign Service careers, Civil Service careers, professional fellowship opportunities, and student/intern programs.

The Foreign Service Selection Process

The Foreign Service assessment process is an employment selection tool used by the Department of State to identify the most qualified candidates for Foreign Service positions. In other words, it is a hiring process. The nature and purpose of the assessment process are different from those of educational testing.

In education, assessment focuses on “mastery testing,” and the goal is to determine if the student possesses sufficient knowledge or skill to pass a

course. The assessments are usually comprehensive, covering the entire body of required knowledge or skill. The scores verify current competence and command of a definite skill set. Such assessments are often accompanied by extensive feedback, and possibly remedial training and reassessment, with the ultimate objective of passing.

In employment selection, the goal is to determine which candidates are the most qualified because an organization wants to hire the best. These assessments only sample a job-related body of knowledge or skills because assessment time is limited. The scores are predictors of future job performance, rather than indicators of current competence. Thus, tests like the assessment are not accompanied by feedback or remedial training because they are not meant to measure an entire body of knowledge or skills. Moreover, the organization's hiring process is meant to be highly selective given the limited number of openings available.

The Assessment Process

Before the Assessment

Foreign Service Consular Professional Assessments (FSCPAs) are held virtually, with assessors based in Washington, D.C. and subject matter experts participating from around the world. Candidates can participate from a location of their choosing, although some rules may apply.

- Be rested. Candidates who are tired are not at their best – taking the FSCPA can be a stressful experience, and candidates need to be alert and focused at all times during the assessment.
- Test your system in advance. Check your connection speeds, camera, audio, and lighting.
- Plan to take the assessment from a quiet room on a computer or laptop with access to the internet. (Note: Tablets, iPads, or phones **will not** work for the FSCPA).
- Your computer or laptop should be equipped with a webcam and microphone. Computers and laptops equipped with internal

webcams and microphones will suffice.

- Please have on hand a paper and pen and government-issued photo ID.
- The FSCPA is a job interview; candidates generally wear professional attire.

The test day is tightly choreographed, so it is essential to be on time and in the right place. You will receive detailed instructions for using the online platform and other technical specifications in advance of the assessment.

The Department of State provides provisions known as reasonable accommodations to candidates with disabilities. **Candidates requiring reasonable accommodations for any part of the assessment must request them via email from the State Department’s Office of Accessibility and Accommodation at oa@state.gov at least three weeks before their assessment date.** Please ensure your email has a subject line that reads “Reasonable Accommodation Request for FSCPA – Your name.” Decisions for granting reasonable accommodations are made on a case-by-case basis.

Assessment Summary

Candidates must log in to their FSCPA no later than the time indicated in their invitation letter or e-mail. Candidates arriving late may be refused entry to the assessment. The invitation will include necessary links for accessing the FSCPA. The assessment itself may take three to four hours over two days so candidates should plan their time accordingly. The e-mail message that invites candidates to the assessment also advises candidates what documents or materials to have on hand. This list can be found on the Department of State’s careers.state.gov website by clicking on the “Downloads” link. In addition, candidates will be asked to provide the names and dates of birth of family members who might live with them overseas – this will help speed the medical evaluation process.

Candidates are allowed to have water, coffee and/or soft drinks available

during the assessment.

Successful Consular Professional candidates will demonstrate the following dimensions that reflect the skills, abilities, and personal qualities deemed essential to the work of the Foreign Service:

CRITICAL THINKING

To discern what is appropriate, practical, and realistic in a given situation; to weigh relative merits of competing demands using sound judgment; to consider multiple points of view when making recommendations; to formulate creative alternatives or solutions to resolve problems; to show flexible and innovative thinking/problem solving.

CULTURAL ADAPTABILITY

To work and communicate effectively and harmoniously with persons of other cultures, value systems, political beliefs, and economic circumstances; to recognize and respect differences in new and different cultural environments.

EXPERIENCE & MOTIVATION

To demonstrate knowledge, skills or other attributes gained from previous experience of relevance to the Foreign Service; to articulate appropriate motivation for joining the Foreign Service.

INFORMATION INTEGRATION & ANALYSIS

To evaluate the importance, reliability, and usefulness of information; to distill relevant details from available information; to absorb and retain complex information drawn from a variety of sources; to synthesize and analyze available information; to recognize patterns or trends and draw reasoned conclusions from data.

LEADERSHIP

To recognize and assume responsibility for work that needs to be done; to persist in the completion of a task; to influence a group's activity or direction significantly; to motivate others to participate in the activity one

is leading.

NEGOTIATION

To recognize divergent and overlapping interests; to recognize advantages and disadvantages of agreement and available options; to advocate, influence and/or persuade others using information, facts, and reasoning rather than emotion; to resolve disagreements; to maintain or develop mutually beneficial working relationships with counterparts in the process.

OBJECTIVITY/INTEGRITY

To be fair and honest to all employees and keep an open mind; to present issues frankly; to analyze facts and data effectively, without interjecting bias; to be consistent in words and actions; to be dependable.

PLANNING & ORGANIZING

To prioritize and order tasks effectively, to employ a systematic approach to achieving objectives, to make appropriate use of limited resources.

PRESENTATION SKILLS

To present fluently in a concise, grammatically correct, organized, and precise manner; to think on one's feet, adjusting quickly to changing situations; to convey key elements and nuances of meaning accurately; to respond to questions from others effectively; to use appropriate styles of communication to fit the audience and purpose.

TEAMWORK

To interact in a constructive, cooperative, and harmonious manner toward a common goal; to work effectively as a team player; to establish positive relationships and gain the confidence of others; to ease tension as appropriate.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

To write concisely yet comprehensively; to use clear arguments and facts; to use correct grammar and syntax; to use appropriate vocabulary to promote understanding.

The dimensions are the core of the Foreign Service Assessment process. Candidates are encouraged to read the definitions of the dimensions carefully and to spend some time thinking about what they mean. While the definition of leadership, for example, may seem obvious, it is unlikely that the average person in the street would focus on the same aspects of leadership as those highlighted by the Department's definition.

Candidates are evaluated against these criteria by two assessors who observe the performance of candidates in a variety of situations designed to enable the candidates to demonstrate the requisite skills. Generally, the assessors are Foreign Service Officers, at least one of whom has proficiency in consular work. Assessors receive training on how to conduct assessments in an objective manner. They learn how to observe the candidate's performance and how to correlate the candidate's performance with an established performance standard.

The assessment is not an adversarial process. Candidates are not competing against other applicants for the same position but are judged on their capacity to demonstrate skills and abilities necessary to be an effective Foreign Service Consular Professional.

The Assessment for Consular Professionals

Candidates who take the assessment are asked to fill out several forms, including a Non-Disclosure Agreement and Conditions of Employment in the Foreign Service. By signing the Non-Disclosure Agreement, candidates agree that they will not discuss the content of the assessment with anyone. This ensures that assessments are fair for all candidates. These forms must be submitted in advance of the assessment. A program assistant will provide the forms a week in advance. Please send them in as promptly as possible.

Consular Fellows are hired via limited non-career appointments (LNAs). The Consular Fellows program is not an alternate entry method to the

Foreign Service or the U.S. Department of State, i.e., this service does not lead to onward employment at the U.S. Department of State or with the U.S. government. Consular Fellows are welcome to apply to become Foreign Service Specialists, Foreign Service Generalists, or Civil Service employees, but they must complete the standard application and assessment processes. The complete list of the Conditions of Employment for Consular Fellows is available online in the Downloads section of the Department of State's careers.state.gov website.

Next, candidates will take the two elements of the assessment listed below.

Case Management

In this part of the assessment, candidates are given a scenario describing issues which may typically arise in the Consular Professional context. They have 45 minutes to read several realistic problems, analyze them, develop recommendations, and then write a logical and clear 1-to-2 page memo to their supervisor summarizing the situation and providing solutions to the problems identified. Candidates do not need to know U.S. government or State Department rules and regulations – they should rely on their own knowledge and experience. The timing of this exercise is deliberately tight, as the Written Communication dimension measures, among other things, how well a candidate writes under time pressure. All writing exercises are done on a computer.

See page 11 for sample Case Management questions.

The Structured Interview

All FSCPA candidates participate individually in a Structured Interview conducted by two assessors, one of whom will be a Subject Matter Expert proficient in the consular field. Candidates are expected to respond to questions based on their personal background, experience, and motivation. Candidates should be careful to respond to the questions that are asked, rather than give a response that highlights their qualities or resume but

does not respond to the specific question.

This is a focused job interview designed to evaluate a candidate's skills. Candidates will likely find it more formal and structured than other interviews they have experienced. They should expect assessors to remain neutral throughout the interview. They will not provide any clues – including non-verbal ones – about how candidates are doing. During the Structured Interview, assessors may interrupt a candidate, shuffle papers, or cut short answers. Candidates should not assume that this signals anything either positive or negative.

The Structured Interview portion of the assessment consists of three sections lasting 60 minutes. The interview has a lot of ground to cover, so candidates have only a few minutes to answer each question. The time is controlled to give all candidates the same experience.

Experience and Motivation Questions

In this portion of the Structured Interview, candidates should convey to the assessors a clear and precise picture of themselves, including their understanding of the Foreign Service. The assessors will consider candidates' expressed motivation to work as a Consular Professional, education and work experience and cross-cultural skills. It is helpful to have previously become informed about the Foreign Service in general, and also about the type of work performed by Consular Professionals.

Past Behavior Questions

In this segment of the Structured Interview, the assessors ask the candidate a series of questions to which the candidate should respond with examples from their own experience. Candidates will be shown on the screen definitions of the dimensions being assessed during this portion of the interview, with two questions listed under each dimension. Candidates will have sixty seconds to select the question they wish to discuss for each dimension (one question for each dimension) and to prepare their

responses. After one dimension is answered, the candidate will have sixty seconds to select and prepare the next dimension. Candidates' examples should be appropriate and drawn from their own experience. During this portion of the Structured Interview, candidates should ensure their responses relate directly to the dimension and emphasize what they did in each situation, even if the work was done in a group.

Hypothetical Scenarios

This part of the Structured Interview consists of a series of hypothetical scenarios designed to test the candidate's situational judgment. Although the problems presented in this exercise are hypothetical, they are closely related to real-life situations regularly encountered by Foreign Service Consular Professionals overseas. Candidates are advised, however, that, while the problems occur in a Foreign Service setting, they are not expected to know how an Embassy operates or to be familiar with government rules and regulations. Rather, they are asked to fashion a solution that employs good judgment and knowledge of their desired field.

See page 14 for sample hypothetical questions.

Evaluating the Exercises

Assessors read or listen to the candidate's answers carefully and individually enter their scores for the Case Management exercise and the Structured Interview into a master score sheet. The score for the Online Competency Exam/Consular Fellows Program Test is automatically computed and entered into the master score sheet. The average of the three exercises determines a candidate's overall score. The Online Competency Exam/Consular Fellows Program Test, Structured Interview, and Case Management Exercise each count for one-third of the total score. Overall scoring is on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing poor performance and 7 representing outstanding performance. The cut-off to continue a candidacy is 5.25.

Assessment Results

Candidates receive the results of the assessment by email within two business days following the FSCPA. Along with their final overall score, candidates learn whether they reached or exceeded the cut-off on any of the three major components of the assessment.

Successful candidates receive information on the next steps in the Foreign Service Consular Professional selection process, including information on the security background investigation, veteran's preference points, the process to meet minimum medical qualifications, and suitability review.

Sample Assessment Exercises

The material listed below is meant to illustrate the types of questions a candidate may encounter during the assessment. The actual questions on the day of the assessment will be different.

Case Management

Situation: When you arrive at your new post, your supervisor asks for your opinions and recommendations for how to address a number of current problems because you have a “fresh perspective.” Here are the three main problems your supervisor wants you to address.

- 1) Your supervisor recently read an article that showed how another embassy saved substantial amounts of time and money by outsourcing its fingerprinting of visa applicants. Your supervisor realizes you have no knowledge of fingerprinting, but asks you for a plan to examine the feasibility of outsourcing the process for your embassy.
- 2) Your supervisor believes that the local and American employees in the Visa Unit have formed their own cliques. There is little interaction between these groups at lunch time or after hours. Your supervisor thinks this is affecting office morale and productivity, and wants some ideas on how to improve the situation.
- 3) The Visa Unit has always closed down at noon for lunch and re-opened at 1:00 p.m. Your supervisor wants the unit open all day and asks for your suggestions on how to manage this. The employees who staff the unit strongly prefer this schedule and will be resistant to change.

Your Task: Your supervisor wants you to draft a plan of action, 1-2 pages long (single-spaced), outlining your recommendations to address each problem.

You should use a normal paragraph narrative format, but you may include some ticks and bullets.

Structured Interview – Hypothetical Questions

You are a Consular Professional in the Visa Unit of a medium-sized embassy and you have formed very good relationships with the Locally Employed Staff. You soon learn that many of them believe that you have influence over your supervisor's decisions on office matters, and they have begun to raise their office-related problems and requests with you during social events such as shopping trips or community picnics. How do you respond to these approaches?

You have been doing visa interviews at post for a few months and have heard that local visa brokers have created files on all interviewing officers that they sell to visa applicants. You start to notice that people waiting in line for an interview suddenly decide to use the rest room when they are about to be called up to the window of a visa officer you hear has a broker file that says that officer is very tough. One day, an applicant pushes the person behind the applicant to the front of the line to avoid the "tough" visa officer, and this applicant then appears at your visa window. What do you do?