

«Make sure to communicate your transferable skills»

cinfo talked to Daniel Pfister, former Junior Professional Officer and currently Humanitarian Affairs Officer in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General in New York about the competencies he gained during his JPO assignment and his motivation to continue working with the United Nations. Furthermore, he reveals useful tips for young professionals aiming at applying for a JPO position.



Daniel Pfister worked as Associate Humanitarian Expert for OCHA's Intergovernmental Support Section during his Junior Professional Officer (JPO) assignment from 2010 to 2012. After his mission, he had the opportunity to continue with the United Nations. Daniel is currently employed as a Humanitarian Affairs Officer in the Policy Planning Unit in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG). One of the things he enjoys most in his job is the variety and diversity of dossiers he works on every day and to collaborate with talented people on issues that matter in people's lives.

cinfo: Where did your motivation to apply for a JPO position funded by Switzerland come from back in 2010?

Daniel Pfister: From my previous work with non governmental organisations I already had an idea about the excellent work OCHA does in the field. When the position was advertised, I was sure that this would be a great opportunity to gain UN and more humanitarian experience. The topics OCHA is engaged in motivate me. Further, the fact that it is an organisation that drives humanitarian affairs at the policy level, but is also very active in the field made me realise that this was an important position to support international and national actors to efficiently help people in need.

What do you think made your application successful?

Clearly my studies helped – I hold a license from the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva (IHEID) and thereafter did a one-year programme on conflict analysis at a British university. But I believe the work experience I had at the time of my application had the greatest impact: My work as an intern for the Swiss Embassy in Nigeria and for NGOs in Chad gave me some field experience. Further, I had worked with various different institutions such as the European Union, humanitarian NGOs and think tanks. Having this broad mix of work experience with NGOs and international organisations, both in the field and at headquarters probably made my application competitive.

You admired OCHA's engagement in the field but you were a JPO at headquarters in New York. Were there any chances to travel to the field?

Yes, there were. I had the opportunity to become part of the emergency response roster, from which you can be deployed to the field for short term assignments. I was called upon to deploy to Mali just after my second year as a JPO. But what might be more important is that my work – even though based in New York – supported the work in the field.

What competencies did you gain during your JPO assignment? Were you able to apply them in your subsequent positions?

There were many: Professionalism, creativity, team work, communication skills. My JPO position also demanded a lot of flexibility, sharpness and pro-activity. I was fortunate to learn a lot from my colleagues and supervisors. Further, I was okay – from my point of view – not to specialise in one area of humanitarian work, but was engaged in a wide range of issues and with many different colleagues. Thanks to this, I learned how humanitarian issues – from protection to WASH¹ and from financing to gender – come together and to communicate them in an understandable way for various different actors. I consider this an important skill I can apply in my current job.

Why do you want to continue working with the United Nations?

It is an organisation that has fundamental beliefs and values that I subscribe to. And it has great people coming together from all over the world to do their best to resolve complicated issues. I am very fortunate to work for an organisation that changes lives of people around the world every day. Even though my current job is in an office at headquarters, it is one of the most diverse jobs I've ever had. I get to work on topics that are important in the world right now – protection, peace and security, development, human rights, humanitarian assistance.

What do you advice young Swiss professionals interested in a JPO assignment and a career with the UN?

For people who want to apply: make sure to highlight your professional experience, but also your transferable skills and competencies. Show that you have done a great job so far, that you believe in what you do and how passionate you are about your goals.

Interview: Gabriela Müller, cinfo, February 2014

¹ WASH, used in international development programmes, refers to «Water, Sanitation and Hygiene».