



INSA CAREER INSIGHTS

Civilian Careers in U.S. Intelligence and National Security

THE U.S. INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY (IC) offers a wide range of interesting, engaging, and exciting career paths. Whether you choose to work at an intelligence agency as a career civilian or to support the Community through work at a private sector contractor, you will have the chance to serve your country by contributing to U.S. national security.

This paper provides some information on the types of intelligence-related opportunities and career paths one can pursue as a civilian in government and in its private sector partners. It also offers some perspectives on how this career path can affect your personal life and identifies issues to consider as you decide whether and how to pursue a career in the Intelligence Community.

WHO IS PART OF THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY?

The Intelligence Community consists of 17 agencies, which collect, analyze, and disseminate information for use by government decisionmakers. For more information on the roles and missions of each agency, go to the website for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence at www.dni.gov.

Private contractors partner closely with their government counterparts and are integral components of the Intelligence Community. Agencies engage contractors to complement the work of government staff and to obtain specialized expertise that they may not possess in-house. Some firms specialize in certain functions or support to specific agencies, while others (generally large services contractors and consulting firms) engage in a wide range of roles. Many contractors work on-site at intelligence agency facilities doing jobs that are virtually identical to those of their government counterparts. Contractors in the IC receive the same security clearances and follow the same security rules as government employees. Anyone pursuing a career in intelligence should consider opportunities in both government agencies and the private companies that support them.

WHAT ROLES EXIST IN THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY?

Many different types of jobs and specialties exist in the IC and its industry partners. Most intelligence professionals play the following types of roles:

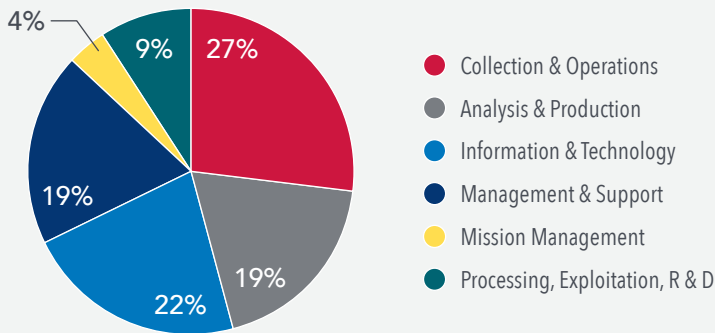
- **COLLECTION:** Intelligence must be collected, whether by a person, a sensor, or a system. Human intelligence (HUMINT) collectors recruit foreigners to spy for the United States. Cyber specialists may probe adversaries' networks to collect information or identify vulnerabilities. Open source collectors comb

the internet, technical publications, and trade show materials for information of intelligence value. Technical intelligence collectors generally operate sensors or systems to collect communications, satellite imagery, emissions (such as radioactive fallout from a nuclear test), and other types of data.

- **ANALYSIS:** Analysts make sense of the information that is collected. All-source analysts use all available information to assess strategic political, economic, military, and social dynamics around the world. Other analysts specialize in examining communications, geospatial data, electronic media, operational military developments, and open source (publicly available) information. Others specialize in specific types of threats, like foreign espionage (counterintelligence), cyber attacks, illicit finance, proliferation, terrorism, and transnational organized crime.
- **SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY (S&T):** Science and technology professionals, who are often (but not always) engineers, develop and apply innovative technologies to intelligence challenges. Like "Q" in the James Bond movies, they may develop gadgets for use by spies in the field, such as disguises, fake documents, and secure communications tools; however, they may also develop technologies to solve tough collection and analysis problems using artificial intelligence, space-based sensors, cyber tools, and other advanced technologies.
- **MANAGEMENT, ADMINISTRATION, AND SUPPORT:** All large intelligence organizations need people to develop strategic plans and budgets, design and implement human capital strategies, manage procurement and acquisition, oversee physical and personnel security, engage Congress and the media, and provide legal advice.

As the following chart shows, all of the above roles can be undertaken by both government employees and private contractors. One can be an analyst, an engineer, a programmer, or a strategic planner for the Intelligence Community and spend one's entire career in the private sector. According to a 2015 Congressional Research Service report,¹ when the IC undertook its first inventory of contractor personnel in 2007, the IC employed 100,000 government civilians and military personnel and 37,000 contractors performing core mission roles. About three-quarters of the contractors worked on-site at intelligence agencies' facilities, while one-quarter worked at their companies' offices or elsewhere. Both the IC total workforce and the number of cleared IC contractors have increased since then.

Roles of Contractors Supporting IC (FY07)



CRITICAL SKILLS FOR INTELLIGENCE WORK

Although different career specialties require different expertise, several skills are critical in any intelligence job. As you consider an intelligence career, think about ways you can develop these transferable skill sets through academic work, internships, or professional experience in other fields.

- **Writing clearly and concisely.** Whether you are writing an analysis of Chinese foreign policy, an argument to fund a technology that could enhance intelligence collection, or a justification of agency spending to Congress, you must be able to explain complex ideas clearly and concisely.
- **Briefing.** Just as you must be able to communicate clearly in writing, you must also be able to convey information and present conclusions orally. No matter what the issue at hand is, you must be informative, credible, and convincing.
- **Working collaboratively.** All IC work is collaborative. Whether working with analysts with complementary expertise, developing multi-INT collection plans with counterparts from other agencies, or participating in a working group that brings together analysts, collectors, and engineers, you will frequently engage people with different expertise, perspectives, and priorities. Teamwork and problem solving skills are critical.
- **Data analysis.** All IC professionals should be able to use complex data for analytic or decisionmaking purposes. In the era of “big data,” analysis often involves large data sets that must be understood and applied to national security challenges. Program management decisions are based on data regarding problems, progress, and measurable impacts.

GETTING A SECURITY CLEARANCE

To do intelligence work, you will almost certainly need a top secret (TS) clearance with access to sensitive compartmented information (SCI), which is raw intelligence data. Jobs at some agencies, whether as a civil servant or as a contractor, may also require a polygraph. It is difficult to predict how long the clearance process can take, so you should gather relevant information in advance and apply to cleared positions long before you want to start work.

While intelligence agencies generally cannot let you start work until your clearance is granted, contractors may be able to hire you without a clearance and assign you to unclassified projects while your investigation proceeds. During this time, you can gain valuable functional skills even if you are not working on national security issues. Once you receive a clearance, the firm can move you to intelligence-related projects.

JOB-HUNTING IN THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY

The first step of an intelligence career is to get in the door. Given the often opaque hiring and security clearance processes, this is not always an easy step. Moreover, from the outside, it is often hard to tell what jobs exist at which organizations, the exact nature of those jobs, or how you would fit into an organization.

Pursuit of a career in the Intelligence Community will likely lead you to consider a few well-known agencies or companies. However, the pool of potential employers is quite large; it would be prudent to consider multiple organizations – in both the public and private sectors – that have similar functions or missions. For example, while cyber missions may be NSA’s specialty, CIA, DIA, NGA, and FBI also have important cyber roles, as do the military Services; someone seeking a cyber-focused career would be wise to explore opportunities at multiple agencies, as well as at the private contractors that support them.

Intelligence jobs exist nationwide, so considering home bases outside of the Washington, DC, area may increase the range of opportunities available. For example, NSA has Cryptologic Centers in Colorado, Georgia, Texas, and Hawaii. Each of the FBI’s 56 field offices nationwide has a Field Intelligence Group with intelligence specialists and analysts. Many of the Energy Department’s national labs have Field Intelligence Elements that employ analysts, engineers, and others with technical expertise related to weapons of mass destruction, proliferation, and cyber. Private contractors support agencies in locations throughout the United States and abroad.



CAREER PATHS IN THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY

Career paths can be linear, following a fairly clear progression through well-defined and closely related jobs with increasing levels of responsibility. However, they can also be quite diverse, involving rotations or contracts at multiple agencies, assignments overseas, support to senior policymakers, and responsibilities in a range of functional domains.

When you get a job offer, you may find that it is not quite what you had in mind. Perhaps you want to be an analyst of Chinese politics, but the agency offered you a job as an analyst of terrorist groups in the Middle East. Consider taking it anyway. You will learn valuable functional skills – in this case, analytic tradecraft – that you can apply later on to issues that better match your interests. (Besides, you may end up liking what you do.)

As you grow in the Intelligence Community, you will discover a wide range of missions that you did not know existed. Exploring new roles can allow you to gain skills and explore avenues for advancement that you had not previously considered. After operating signals intelligence systems, for example, perhaps you will want to move to a different part of the organization where you can develop such systems. Or after serving for several years as an analyst, you may want to serve as a liaison to an allied nation's intelligence services, which would enable you to apply your analytic expertise and understanding of the organization in an international environment while living overseas. Many of the IC's senior leaders held positions in multiple components of their home agency, served overseas, and performed rotational assignments at other intelligence agencies, policy agencies, or Congress; indeed, joint duty assignments are required for promotion to the IC's senior ranks.

Throughout an intelligence career, it is important to remember that Intelligence professionals inform policy but do not make policy decisions. The Intelligence Community's principal task is to provide the best possible information and insights to policymakers, military officials, and other decisionmakers. You may not always agree with the ways in which decisionmakers apply the work you have undertaken, but as a career civil servant and intelligence professional, it is important to remain impartial and apolitical. The IC's credibility depends on its objectivity.

PERSONAL LIFE IN THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY

The cornerstone of an intelligence career is a sense of "community". You will enter a tight-knit, albeit tight-lipped, group of public servants focused on executing their missions. Depending on the assignment, long hours and frequent travel may be required, just as they might be in any job. But a career in the Intelligence Community impacts one's lifestyle in a few unique ways that should be considered.

One unavoidable aspect of an intelligence career is the secrecy inherent in the work. Although very few people in the Intelligence Community work undercover, all intelligence professionals are expected to be discreet about their employment. While many intelligence professionals can talk in broad terms about their work, you will not be able to share the details of your latest project with friends and family, and you may not be able to discuss your job at all. In many IC jobs, you will be unable to work from home, as much of your work will involve classified or sensitive information that cannot be removed from secure facilities. You may need to maintain a low profile on social media or, in certain career specialties, perhaps even avoid using it altogether.

Depending on your job, you may travel extensively, and you may even deploy overseas alongside U.S. military personnel. Such assignments may involve some hardship, but intelligence personnel who support the military overseas often report that such tours are among the most satisfying of their careers.

Once you have a security clearance, whether you work for a government agency or a private contractor, you will need to comply with all federal, state and local laws. You will be required to protect classified and sensitive information. Using drugs that are illegal under federal law, such as marijuana, could cause you to be ineligible for a security clearance or to lose a clearance you have already been granted. You will likely work in offices where you cannot use your cell phone while at work because of the threat that an adversary could compromise a phone and use it as a listening device. Although such concessions seem extraordinary in an era when we feel compelled to be connected at all times, these are minor inconveniences to which one easily becomes accustomed.

CONCLUSION

All intelligence professionals, whether they work for the government or for a private company, have chosen career paths devoted to public service. Should you pursue an intelligence career in government or industry, you will be expected to maintain a high level of integrity, professionalism, and dedication. In return, you will have myriad opportunities for interesting, satisfying, and often exciting work that makes a significant contribution to national security.



ABOUT INSA

The Intelligence and National Security Alliance (INSA) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit forum for advancing intelligence and national security priorities through public-private partnerships. INSA works to make government more effective and efficient through the application of industry expertise and commercial best practices. INSA's 160+ member organizations are leaders in intelligence collection and analysis, data analytics, management consulting, technology development, cybersecurity, homeland security, and national security law, and its 4,000 individual members include leaders, senior executives, and intelligence experts in government, industry, and academia.

INSA's Intelligence Champions Council (ICC) enhances the ability of the Intelligence Community (IC), including its partners in industry and academia, to accomplish their missions by advising, mentoring, and educating individuals who are interested or engaged in intelligence-related careers.



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www.INSAonline.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Office of the Director of National Intelligence: www.dni.gov
- Information on intelligence agencies' roles and missions: www.intelligence.gov
- Information on security clearances and government job vacancies: www.intelligencecareers.gov
- Contractor job listings: www.clearancejobs.com
- Intelligence and National Security Alliance (INSA): www.insaonline.org
- Leading IC contractors: www.insaonline.org/about/members
- Networking resources:
 - INSA Intelligence Champions Council: www.insaonline.org/issues/ic-career-development-mentorship
 - AFCEA Emerging Professionals in Intelligence: www.afcea.org/site/?q=intelligence/epic
 - International Association of Law Enforcement Intelligence Analysts: www.ialeia.org

¹L. Elaine Halchin, *The Intelligence Community and Its Use of Contractors: Congressional Oversight Issues*, Congressional Research Service report R44157, August 18, 2015, p. 9. At <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/intel/R44157.pdf>.