# **Podcast Episode: State Department Careers with Susan Falatko**

# **Transcript**

**Susan Falatko**

One piece of advice that I would give people interested in foreign services, do not rule yourself out, and I think many people do that. People who know about our careers set themselves out because they have a vision in their head of what a diplomat is or looks like or what implement sounds like or where they come from, so do not rule yourself out. You belong to in the Foreign Service.

**Nicholas Hayen**

Welcome to the Global Minnesota podcast connecting and forming and engaging Minnesota with the World. Our mission is to advance international understanding and engagement in every corner of the state. We do this with a variety of programs, including our public events, K12 education programs, great decisions, discussion groups and professional exchanges. To learn more, visit our website at Global Minnesota. Org. I'm Nicolas Hayen, marketing and communications manager for global Minnesota. The US Department of State has the honor of representing the American people to the world whether our missions abroad at our nation's capital in Washington, DC, or satellite offices around the country. The State Department has a growing number of career tracks and entry points for various professionals. Some key individuals who can help us understand these opportunities and demystify the federal government. The diplomat and Residence program provides access to foreign service officers and specialists who provide guidance and advice on careers, internships and fellowships to students and professionals in the communities they. Diplomats and residents are available to answer questions and share insight with those interested in foreign and civil service careers, internships and fellowships on today's episode. We are honored to speak with the current diplomat and residents of the Midwest region, Susan Falatko. She is a career foreign service officer with diplomatic postings in Slovenia, Mauritius. Rwanda, Switzerland, Bosnia Herzegovina, Cuba and Mali. Her latest post prior to becoming a diplomat and residence was the as the Deputy Chief of Mission in Slovenia. She joins us today to talk about her time in the Foreign Service, the diplomat and Residence program, and how to get a job in the foreign or civil service. Susan, welcome to the podcast.

**Susan Falatko**

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Nicholas Hayen**

So first, why don't you tell us just a bit more about yourself and your time in the foreign service?

**Susan Falatko**

Sure. So I am from the Midwest, I'm from the Chicago area myself and I've been in for 25 years. I just had my 25th anniversary a couple of weeks ago. I am an economic officer, and we'll talk about that a little bit. What that means, there are several different kinds of flavors of diplomats, if you will, and when you come in, we have a certain rank kind of like in the military. You come in kind of at an entry level and throughout your career you're going to progress through different levels as an economic officer, I've obviously done several economic tours and I know we just mentioned some of the places that I've been. But everybody also does a counselor. Or on one of your first few tours. And that is basically where we're helping American citizens. We are issuing visas to foreigners, so I've done a consular tour. I did several economic tours. Eventually I also did a tour. We also welcome people who are doing assignments outside of their career track, so I've also done a public diplomacy tour and we can talk all about those different kinds of career tracks. But so, I've seen a lot of different aspects of foreign service in my career. And then eventually I became a deputy chief of mission. That's essentially the deputy ambassador, and I've done that twice. So, in, you know over 25 years, essentially 4 different kinds of jobs. Really. I just think what I love the most about the foreign service is that it's always changing and you're always learning something new and doing something new. And if you're the kind of person who loves a challenge and doing things like that, this is the job for you.

**Nicholas Hayen**

That sounds like you have quite a breadth of experience there. I'm wondering kind of what was one of the most like, unusual or interesting experiences you had while representing the United States around the World.

**Susan Falatko**

You know, it's hard to pick one we find ourselves in interesting situations quite a bit, but I always say that I think Council officers have the best stories and I think part of that is because they make a real difference in people's lives that affect people individually. And my story is from my first assignment.

**Nicholas Hayen**

Of course.

**Susan Falatko**

I was in West Africa in a country called Mali. And back then, you know, this was 25 years ago. It had a democratically elected government. It was very safe. It was a, it was a great place to do a first tour. But I was the consular officer there. I was the only one. And we do something called welfare and whereabouts where an American citizen or someone, a friend or a family member can call an embassy and speak. You know, I had a daughter, a son, a friend. They were traveling in that country, and we hadn't heard from them. And we don't know what happened to. And so, we can kind of try and track them down. And make sure that they're safe. I got a welfare and where whereabouts call in Mali? From a school in New York City. And they said, you know, we have these 4 million students aging from 12 down to, I think the youngest was about 6 and their parents were legal permanent residents of the United States. They were green card holders but not yet citizens. Four kids were born in the states. So, they're American citizens, the father. Had recently died, and so the mother had taken the kids back to Molly for the funeral. And then they never came back. And so, when the kids didn't come back to school, the administrators got worried. You know, what happened to these kids? So, they asked us to look into them and see what happened. And it turns out we were able to track them down in the mother's village. And what happened was when she got back, the husband's brother. Looked at the family and said, well, you know my brother has died. And so now you are my family. And would not let them leave, and so, you know, we're talking about a 12-year-old kid who's grown up in New York, suddenly in, in this little village in Mali and so. There really wasn't anything we could do until one day they came in to get their American citizen passports renewed, cause for the poor. Kids were American citizens and at that point I was able to take the mother aside and say, what do you want to do? And she said we want to go home; we want to go back. And the State Department has mechanisms where we could get a loan to get them on an airplane and get them back to the states. We had to do this. Kind of. We were under the radar because the family didn't want them to leave, so we were able to get them on a plane without their luggage because they didn't want to give away that they were leaving, and we got them out. I went to the airport with them and held the two of the kids' hands. And the mom was holding two of the kids' hands and we put them on the plane. And that's the kind of thing that we get to do as foreign service officers. Like we made a real change in somebody's life. And that's just one story. But you think this happens all the time, all over the world where we can really make a difference. And I think that's another thing that I just love about this career.

**Nicholas Hayen**

And that's incredible is people tend to think of the state. And you know these missions and embassies abroad as just dealing with kind of the high-level diplomat to diplomat things. But that story really highlights just how much you are working to protect American citizens abroad and to help with their interests and their problems while they're living or traveling abroad.

**Susan Falatko**

Mm-hmm. And absolutely that is our primary mission. In fact, you know, people say, why do we have embassies and? It's because we are. Ultimately the mission is to ensure the safety and the security and the prosperity as well of Americans and we do that by working with allies, working with countries that we're not friendly with, but we're doing this to forward the interests of Americans.

**Nicholas Hayen**

So, for someone who wants to work in one of those embassies, what is this diplomatic residence program and what are some of the main opportunities that you want people to be aware of?

**Susan Falatko**

Yes. So, the diplomat and residence program, there are 17 of us right now. We are located around the United States. We each cover a particular region. I'm in the Midwest. So, I have Illinois, Minnesota and Wisconsin and we are here to really ensure that we are recruiting from across the country to make sure of that. We are not all coming from the same place or the same schools. We want to make sure that our diplomatic corps is reflective of who we are as. A. Country. So, we are present. We each have a host institution and happens to be the University of Illinois, Chicago. And people, if you're from Minnesota, I am your diplomat in residence. You can reach out to your diplomats and residents. We are located. You can find us on our career's website, and this is important. I want to make sure everyone remembers this because I'm going to throw a lot of information out today, but our careers website iscareers.state.gov. No. Thatscareers.state.gov we have a page that has a map on it that shows how we're divided up as diplomats and residents. You can get, you know, click on your region, you can get contact information, you can e-mail us directly. We all have direct contact with people who are interested in our careers and our internships and our fellowships. We all have LinkedIn pages under, you know, diplomat in residence, Midwest or Diplomat in residence, North Central. So, they can connect directly with us and ask US questions. You know, we can help them. Kind of demystify the processes for getting into the State Department for internships and fellowships, so they should not hesitate if anyone is interested. Definitely reach out to your diplomat and residents because we are a resource, and we are here for you. That is our function.

**Nicholas Hayen**

Yeah. So, you mentioned there's paid internships. I think you also discussed Graduate School fellowships at one point.

**Susan Falatko**

Yes. So, we started paying our interns, which is really a game changer. I'm so glad we did this. Because it really helps us bring in people from across the country and that is something that was more difficult for people. Obviously, that was a barrier for people who couldn't get themselves to Washington or pay for housing. So, we have paid internships. They're ten weeks long, we have summer, spring, to fall cohorts. They are in Washington, DC at the State Department or at an embassy overseas. We will pay for travel and housing, and we will pay you. These are paid internships. It's at the GS4 level. That's the government salary scale, which right now is about $18.00 an hour. So, we want to make sure that anybody can do these internships and that, you know, we've eliminated the barriers. I have to say 20 years ago, when I was in grad school, I was offered a State Department internship and I had to turn it down because it was unpaid. So, I'm really glad that we are now able to give this opportunity to anyone who wants to do it. Then they sit competitive, of course, but. You know you can't get one if you don't apply, so I really encourage people to look into this. More information on our internships again is on careers.state.gov. We also have fellowships. That is, pay for your Graduate School and then give you a job. We have several different Graduate School fellowships. We have two, Pickering and the Rangle. These will pay up to $42,000 per year of grad school in an international relations related field, which you can argue is is almost anything. You know something that has. That is related to international affairs. We will also pay for an MBA on this because we need management officers and I want to talk about that a little bit as well. But yeah, so we will pay for Graduate School and upon successful completion you will be you will receive an appointment as a Foreign Service officer in the State Department. We have separately, we have an IT fellowship similar, it will pay up to $42,000 per year for Graduate School, this one will. Also pay for junior and senior year of undergrad instead of Graduate School. So, if we have any, you know, freshmen and sophomores out there in IT. And then upon successful completion, we will give you a career as a diplomatic technology officer because we need it folks in the State Department they serve overseas, they serve at our embassies, you know, running in our networks and we have a hard time attracting people. So that's what this is called the foreign Affairs IT fellowship. Again, it's on careers website, and then finally we have a new opportunity called the Clark Fellowship and this is for diplomatic security. So, we have an entire Diplomatic Security Service. This is a federal law enforcement branch of the State Department. They are responsible for serving overseas with us and ensuring the safety and security of our facilities, our personnel and our information. So, we will pay. For Graduate School in any field. And then upon successful completion, I will give you an appointment as a diplomatic security special agent. So those are the different kinds of fellowships we have. There is a service commitment. If we pay for Graduate School, it's either three or five years, depending on the fellowship. But yeah, like I said, let us pay for Graduate School and then give you a job.

**Nicholas Hayen**

I mean, that's an incredible deal. I would have wished I knew about those programs about 10 or 15 years ago. Yeah, that's impressive and a great way to make these more accessible to everyone because so many people are looking at that thinking well, I couldn't take just an unpaid internship. That's a great way to break down that accessibility barrier.

**Susan Falatko**

Exactly.

**Nicholas Hayen**

So, tell us that about career opportunities at the State Department. What are the needs and how can people apply?

**Susan Falatko**

Yes, so we have. Foreign service careers, which are the ones where you serve overseas. We also have civil service, which is domestic typically in Washington, DC but if we're talking about. Foreign service. I'll start with that. We have what is known colloquially as the Foreign Service officer. It's actually what we call the Foreign Service generalist. This is where we have the five different careers.

**Nicholas Hayen**

Exactly

**Susan Falatko**

This is where you could be a political officer or an economic officer, which is what I am, you know, and these are the people that are out, and they are building relationships. They're talking to people overseas. They're kind of like the eyes and ears of Washington overseas and they are providing input to policy discussions in Washington they are. You know, they're supposed to know who's who. They're essentially analysts. We are not policymakers ourselves, but we are part of that policy discussion by providing input to Washington. So that's political and economic. We have a public diplomacy career track, and these are the folks that are the public. Of the embassy. They're responsible for telling America's story to foreign publics so they work with. Press, but they also work with, you know, directly with the public. They have a huge toolkit and these great things they can do, they can do cultural exchanges, you know, musical groups and sports figures. And they have professional exchanges, educational exchanges. But it's all about building that mutual understanding between a foreign public. And Americans, we have the consulate current track. As I mentioned before, that's where you get to help Americans. You help issue visas to foreigners who want to come to the. States. And then I want to spend just a moment. We have another rear track that I think people don't think of when they think about the foreign service. We hire management officers, and these are folks, you know, we have some 270, some facilities around the world. We need people to manage them. So, these folks are going to oversee human resources and financial management, budget procurement, logistics. These people are the problem solvers of the embassy. You know, if you want to. If you like problem solving, then this is the kind. This is the place to be because management officers are working with two different labor laws. You have your US staff, and you have your local staff. They're working in two different currencies. You know U.S. dollars and whatever the local currency is, anything that happens, you know, procurement, logistics, there are all kinds of government. Procurement rules, so management officers are critical. And we have a deficit in them right now, so if anyone is out there, you're going to train you in all these different facets of management. It's an entry level position and you know, we're really looking for people and again, if anybody has questions, please reach out to your diplomat and residents. We have specialists foreign service Tracks. These are things like our diplomatic, security, our IT we hire health professionals, nurse practitioners, physicians, assistants, doctors, psychiatrists, lab techs, and this is because we often serve in countries where the healthcare isn't what we would expect. And so, we'll bring our own medical staff with us. A lot of embassies will have a health unit staffed by an American that will be essentially the primary care provider for the Americans and their families that post. We hire, we do hire different administrative specialists. So, for example, human resources, financial management, logistics, the difference between the specialists and the generalists, the specialists have to have already specialized training, perhaps a degree or work experience. In whatever it is human resources or financial management, they're always going to do human resources or financial management, whatever. We hire them for the generalist is going to learn all those different functions and ultimately oversee them. So, the management officer is really an entry level position where we'll train you, the specialist. Positions you have to have some training already or experience to come in. So, all of that is foreign service. These people are going to spend a lot. Of their career. Overseas, they might come back to Washington for an assignment or to, but most of its services. We also hire civil service. So, let's tell you. Are an expert in China and you speak Chinese or, you know, China policy, you could join the foreign service and we'll probably send you to China, especially if you have the land. But then we'll probably send you somewhere else because we are considered generalists. We're going to send you to different postings every couple of years. You're going to move postings, but if you know that you want to focus on China or just China policy, you could look for a policy job in the civil service. Typically, you know we have a China office when they need an expert, they're going to put out a vacancy announcement on usajobs.gov. So, it's a little bit different. We haven't talked about hiring in the foreign service yet, but I'll get to that. But most foreign services, both generalist and specialist, you come in via a test, you come in as a Class Civil service. You must look for the specific job that you're interested in. If you have policy expertise, or if you like the Idea of working in foreign affairs, but you don't want to go overseas. You're going to look on usajobs.gov for a domestic job in the State Department and we hire for many different categories. There are management positions. There are policy positions, there are public diplomacy positions that are domestic and then you would stay domestic. But those are all done through USA jobs. Or in service if you want to come in as a journalist, you register for a test that is offered three times a year. It's called the Foreign Service officer test the FSOT, and it's offered every June, October and February. So, the next one is coming up in June, it's a really broad test because like I said, for the Foreign Service generalist. We're looking for people who are intellectually curious and just have a broad general knowledge of the world we hire any major for any of those five generalist categories because we're not looking for your specific expertise in political science or economics, we're looking for people who are just intellectually curious. So, all five of those career tracks, political, economic, public diplomacy, consular and management, you all take the same. Test. Because it covers a lot of different things, you know it's going to cover a little bit of politics, a little bit of history, economics, but it's also going to cover culture, science and technology. So, it's kind of. A little bit of everything and that's that looking for these people who are just, you know, very broadly educated. Specialists also come in through a test. Their testing is going to be obviously very specific to the specialization, and their dates are different, so it depends on what the specialty is. Some of them are open all the time, diplomatic, security and IT you can register, you can go online today and register for those tests if you want to come in as diplomatic security. Or diplomatic technology off. Or some of the other ones, like human resources. Those are only offered a few times a year. You can watch on careers that state that Gov. We have a section where everything that's open right now there's an apply now section, so you can see what's available now, and you can bookmark that and come back and see. When they're open. So basically, foreign service, both generalists and specialists, come in through. Best civil service you have to search for the right job. The exact job that you're looking for and you applied for via a vacancy announcement and usajobs.gov the test used to be passed fail. You had to get a certain score, and if you didn't clear that barrier, you didn't move forward. Now. You know, we know that there are people who test well, we were hiring really smart people who test well but who didn't. Bring the skills that we were looking for. So now. It's really, it's a Two-part process, we're looking for certain skills that we call the dimensions. They're again on careers. Dot state.gov but. They're things like. Critical thinking and cultural adaptability. These are the things that we want to know that people bring to the table when they come to us. Because. You know, some of these things are hard to train. So, when you register for the Foreign Service officer test, you also have to fill out this application with personal narratives. And that's where you need to be. Telling us how. You have these skills, you know, tell us a story about how you demonstrate them, because now it's going to be a combination of. Those skills and the test. So what we're saying is that some people who might not have had have the test scores might not be as high. They're still being invited to the next stage because they have. The skills we're looking for.

**Nicholas Hayen**

I see. So, another way to make it more accessible.

**Susan Falatko**

Yes, exactly. And again, this is all on our website because I know it's a lot.

**Nicholas Hayen**

So, we've kind of spelled with one misperception the idea that, you know, you have to be this foreign policy wonk knows everything in the world. You don't necessarily have to do that in order to get started with this process. What are some of the other common misperceptions about the process of landing a job at the State Department that you found?

**Susan Falatko**

Yeah, well, you know what you just said about I think that is one of the biggest that you have to be studying political science. You know, if you think about global issues, you look at things like global health, environmental issues, science and technology issues, and somebody right now. I was talking to a professor at one of the schools I cover, and he said all the friends who's at the. State Department right now, who's actually a physicist? And he's working at the State Department because, you know, if you've heard of the Artemis program, this is a program the United States is going to put people on the moon again. But we're not doing it alone this time. So, we're looking for kind of a global coalition to help us put people on the moon again. And that's part of it. There's an international component to this. And in fact, it's funny because when I was in Slovenia, my Last Post, one of our jobs was to try and get the Slovenians on board to join the Artemis program, so.

**Nicholas Hayen**

Hmm.

**Susan Falatko**

We need stem majors, you know, we're talking about AI. We talk about things like data privacy, we do environment and climate change. You know who's out there doing the climate talks? It's diplomats. A lot of times we do wildlife trafficking, so we're looking for people. Yeah. We're looking for all kinds of diversity, you know, geography. University but all kinds because. We cannot, effective as diplomats, if we as a diplomatic corps, are not truly representative of who we are as a country.

**Nicholas Hayen**

Yeah. And there's also age diversity, isn't there? Well, didn't I hear what the average age of an incoming foreign service officer is? I mean, it's not just for, you know, students and grad students anymore, is it?

**Susan Falatko**

Yes. I'm so glad you mentioned that. Yes, we have a lot of second career third career folks. I think the average age over the last year or so is about mid 30s of our class because we bring people in as or into an orientation class. I think the average age was somewhere around 35ish. So that means we're hiring people right out of school. We're hiring people out of a master's program. But we're also hiring people who are changing careers, and we welcome that because. Is. You bring expertise from; you know that you don't have a right out of school. So, we absolutely welcome that as well. And for a lot of our positions for most of the foreign service positions, we'll hire you up until your 60th birthday. The exception to that is diplomatic security because it's a law enforcement position that is up till 30 so.

**Nicholas Hayen**

On that point, do you know what advice would you have for people who are curious about State Department careers? Like, what's the first step that they can take?

**Susan Falatko**

We'll definitely visit careers.state.gov. We have a lot of information on there, but we also posted videos. We're doing a lot more webinars. I know people want to sit there in our long webinar, but they're there. If we've done webinars on the different career tracks. So, we've put together panels of public diplomacy officers. And economic officers and kind of walked through what is their day like? What have their assignments been like? But there's a lot of resources like that. Definitely connect with your diplomat and residents, so the next foreign Service Officer test will be in June of this year. The registration is going to open on April 15th, so you've got time to do those personal narratives where you're going to tell us about the skills that you have. Be thoughtful about those. Those are really important. They're just as important as the test. So, make sure if you're going to register for the test that you're. You're doing a good job in those personal narratives. One piece of advice that I would give people who are interested in foreign services. Do not rule yourself out and I think a lot of people do that. People who know about our careers kind of set themselves out because they have a vision in their head of what a diplomat is or what. What a diplomat looks like or what a diplomat sounds like or where they come from. Like I said, that is not the case. We are trying to ensure that we represent the United States, and we can only do that if we have people from across the country, from all walks of life and all our wonderful diversity joining the foreign service. So do not rule yourself out. You belong to the foreign service.

**Nicholas Hayen**

Yeah, I think there's a lot of people who might look at their situation and go, oh, well, you know, I'm too old or, oh, I have kids in a family and it's just not feasible. But it sounds like there are options for people of all walks of life and all backgrounds here in the in the foreign service and civil service.

**Susan Falatko**

We bring our families with us. So, I joined when I was single. I did 2 assignments overseas when I was single, came back to the states to do a Washington assignment and met my husband. And I think what I had going for me is he had no idea what he was getting himself into. But we got married and he came overseas. And you know, he turns out to love it. And I've raised we've raised two kids in the foreign service so. It's just been a really, really great life.

**Nicholas Hayen**

So then how can people connect with you or with their local diplomat and residents to learn more and to kind of get? Started on this path.

**Susan Falatko**

If you're from Minnesota or you're in Minnesota, you can connect directly to me on careers.state.gov. There is a tab at the top that says connect with the diplomat. It'll pull up the map where you can find us all. My e-mail is on there. I mean I can give it now if anyone has been, but it's DIR midwest@state.gov you know DIR stands for diplomats in residence, but it's on the website connect with us on LinkedIn. We're going to post all of our opportunities and then we also have a talent. Network. If you go to our website and you go on our page on your diplomat and residence, it will say you know sign, sign up for my talent network. This is great because we each send out a newsletter every month. We'll say look, this is what jobs are open this month. You know, because some of those specialist jobs only open up a couple of times a year. So, we'll let you know when certain careers are open. We'll let you know. Deadlines for internships and fellowships. Joining that talent network is important because then we can stay in touch with you and make sure that you don't miss any opportunities.

**Nicholas Hayen**

Great. Well, Susan, thank you so much for joining and for all of your work to help recruit the next generation and not just the next generation, the current generation and future generations into the foreign service.

**Susan Falatko**

Yeah. No, I hope some of you reach out to me. I would love to. I do one-on-one advice. I can do online advising and I travel. That's the other thing I put in my newsletter. I don't know about other diplomats and residents, but in my newsletter, I usually will tell you where I'm traveling this month. So, if I'm in your town, you can even come and have a one-on-one in person with me.

**Nicholas Hayen**

That's all the time we have today. Thanks again to Susan Falatko for joining and for her work to represent the United States all over the world. Thanks, as always, to all the members of Golden Minnesota who make our programs possible, be sure to check out our website at globalminnesota.org to find information about upcoming events. Learn more about our international programs and sign up for our weekly newsletters. Don't forget to subscribe to this podcast if you haven't already, so you can hear untold stories of international connections each month and catch recordings of our public events. Thanks for listening and we'll talk to you soon.