

Justin Cohen
Foreign Commercial Service
Argentina
Summer 2016

This past summer, I served as an intern for the Foreign Commercial Service in the United States Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In essence, the Foreign Commercial Service has the responsibility of promoting US trade abroad. In my specific office, the organization helps US companies locate partners, learn about the business climate of the country, and make educated investment and strategic decisions about whether or not to expand to Argentina. I had an incredible time in the country, although I was challenged intellectually, linguistically, and even, at times, emotionally. Overall, the scope of what I learned about the US government, the Argentina business climate, and my own personal strengths and weaknesses was invaluable for a summer experience, and provided far more than I expected from any internship.

For the eight weeks that I worked in the Embassy, I was assigned a wide variety of tasks that ranged from responding to the office's phone to writing a succinct brief for the Ambassador. I worked with the healthcare trade specialist to collect current information on the Argentine pharmaceutical and medical equipment industries. Using this information, I collaborated with the specialist to prepare the 2017 Argentina Healthcare Technology Research Guide, while I also drafted a more specific market report for a US pharmaceutical company that was seeking both assistance and partners in Argentina. Similarly, I was tasked with creating databases that listed Argentine supplier and distributor information, and I was also responsible for reaching out to firms on behalf of the Embassy to gauge their interest in partnering with US companies. I developed a presentation that the Senior Commercial Officer used at an international trade event that highlighted the investment potential of Argentina as a whole. Finally, I assisted the locally

employed staff in their day-to-day responsibilities which included attending client meetings and networking at trade shows.

In my opinion, some of the most rewarding moments of the internship were during non-Embassy events where I was able to serve as a representative of the Commercial section, while simultaneously meeting Argentine businesspeople and sometimes, even policy makers. In one specific case, I attended an entrepreneurship conference in which I was able to hear a multitude of different presentations from Argentine start-ups that were seeking some sort of funding. Not only was this an exciting and encouraging event for many individuals, but also, during intermission, I was approached by a man who saw that I worked for the Embassy. He and his business partner were searching for an Argentine company that could manufacture their complex medical product at a lower cost. I contacted the healthcare trade specialist, set up a meeting for the three of us, and used what I had been researching to help advise the businessman on possible courses of action. Notwithstanding, most of the conversation was in Spanish, so it required a fair amount of circumlocution and a great deal of trust that the vocabulary I had recently learned was accurate.

Initially, I thought that the work would require more technical skills regarding knowledge of economics, finance, and all around commercial activity. However, the work that I was given, while based in research and some quantitative analysis, was mostly qualitative in nature. At first, I was tasked with somewhat basic responsibilities, and I struggled to feel as though my skills were adequately being utilized. I really cannot say that I ever felt overly busy, which in all honesty, allowed me to slow down and appreciate the work that I was doing all the more. In the moment, though, I did not feel this same gratitude. I frequently asked other employees if I could assist them, and most of my rewarding projects came through these sources, rather than any

project that I was assigned by my supervisor. Even though some of the work may have felt menial, there were plenty of engaging projects, and I can genuinely say that I feel I contributed a significant amount to the organization in both tangible and intangible ways.

Tangibly, I was able to help almost every employee in one way or another throughout the summer. I drafted reports, researched current information and events, and created databases for two trade specialists in the pharmaceutical and automotive industries. The presentation that I designed was, and in the future will be, used by various members of the Commercial section who want to emphasize the wealth of business opportunities present in Argentina. I corresponded with a number of firms who will be using, in some capacity, the services of the Embassy in the future.

On the other hand, intangibly, at my “despedida”, which is more or less a farewell party, many members from the office told me that what they appreciated most about my time with them was my willingness to help, no matter the task, my positive demeanor, and the friendly way in which I represented the Commercial section both in and outside the office. The office itself was almost fully bilingual, and thus being able to communicate smoothly in both English and Spanish was a huge help to my coworkers, which they vocalized to me at the end of the internship.

In terms of success, for an undergraduate student with little initial knowledge about the Foreign Commercial Service or its role in promoting US trade abroad, I feel that I performed the tasks assigned to me at a high level, but more importantly, that my studies had equipped me to research, translate, draft reports, and complete projects without any significant roadblocks along the way.

All of the aforementioned tasks helped me sharpen my interpersonal, intrapersonal, research, communicative, and cultural skills, but many of the most shaping experiences came outside of the office. I chose to live with a host family, which can be quite a hit or miss as I soon

found out. However, in my situation, I was very lucky and ended up with a compassionate, quirky, and overall fantastic family. They were a relatively large family, with the parents, a few children, a cousin, and another student all living in an apartment in Buenos Aires. At first, I was not sure how we were all going to fit comfortably, but I had my own room and plenty of space to spend by myself and with the other members of the family. My family loved to talk about both Argentine and American politics, but for me, I preferred to listen rather than voice my own opinions. *Porteños* (people from/living in Buenos Aires) love to talk about anything, but I was careful not to bring in any strong opinions that might cause offense. I would recommend that any future interns possess both humility and an appreciation for varying opinions, because I encountered more than a handful during my time in Argentina.

A few other State department interns and I travelled to Iguazú falls, which was one of the most incredible sights I have and will ever see in my life. I would highly recommend taking a trip to the falls, down south to Tierra del Fuego, to Salta, Mendoza, or any combination of these unique places. Not only is the geography across Argentina vastly different, but the cultures and ways of life also differ between provinces and areas. In my situation, while I would have travelled more if I could do it over again, I still found plenty of things to do in the city of Buenos Aires. Domestic travel, while more expensive than in the United States, is well worth the plane and/or bus ticket.

Many of the times where I was pushed outside my comfort zone pertained either to cultural situations or linguistic challenges. Argentine Spanish (or *Castellano*) is a different dialect than what I was used to, but a few weeks in I was already picking up the slang and colloquialisms. I applied for this internship hoping to gain business experience on an international level, while also sharpening my Spanish speaking abilities, and both of these goals

were fulfilled. While this internship is ideal for anyone looking to pursue a career in the Foreign Service, I did not feel as though there was pressure to work only in the public sector. Rather, the internship gave a holistic picture of what the intersection between government and the private sector looks like. I would recommend this internship to anyone with a strong grasp of the Spanish language looking for a challenging summer experience, who has the ability to independently pursue projects and positively contribute in whatever ways he or she can.