

Public Affairs Consultant Profile

Job description and Activities

Public affairs consultants are often referred to as 'lobbyists', but their work is more wide-ranging. They use their understanding of the political system to offer political and public policy advice to their clients.

Clients may include private sector companies, not-for-profit organisations, or overseas governments. Keeping abreast of political developments, in order to advise clients on a possible response, is vital to the role.

Public affairs consultants also identify key stakeholders in the decision-making process in European, national, regional and local government bodies. They work to maintain relationships with these individuals and to assist clients to promote and protect their interests effectively.

Typical work activities

Public affairs consultants work on behalf of their clients, carrying out tasks such as:

- monitoring information sources , the edited verbatim report of proceedings in the National Parliaments or European Parliament; government departments; the European Commission ; think-tanks; non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other bodies, in order to keep clients informed of any developments related to their field of activity;
- communicating this information to the client, usually by email;
- advising on potential responses that may be required;
- responding to requests for information, often received at short notice by phone or email;
- researching, forecasting and evaluating the effects of public policy on an organization, using public sources, political intelligence and personal contacts;
- writing newsletters, briefings, campaign material and press releases;
- attending select committee hearings, party conferences and other events;
- establishing and maintaining two-way communication with relevant official bodies;
- maintaining regular contact, in person and in writing, with politicians, civil servants, and/or staff in local authorities and regulatory bodies to brief them on clients' work and concerns;
- providing strategic advice to clients;
- responding to problems, e.g., dealing with a hostile takeover bid;
- maintaining relationships with existing clients;
- developing new business.

The amount of time spent on the above activities varies according to the employer and your level of experience. At entry level, you will be involved in a high level of research, while an account director will be principally involved in strategic planning and relationship management

Public affairs consultant: Salary and conditions

Range of typical starting salaries: € 20,125 - € 24,725 .

A senior account executive or account manager, with two to three years' experience, could expect to earn an average of € 28,750 - € 34,500.

Salaries at director level start at approximately € 57,500 and may rise to over € 115,000 in larger consultancies.

Salaries vary depending on the size and location of the consultancy and the types of client they work for. Additional benefits, such as medical insurance, may also be offered.

Working hours are usually fairly regular. However, flexibility is important as the work can be pressured - working to deadlines means you must put in as many hours as are needed to complete the task. During parliamentary recesses, working hours are generally less pressured and more regular.

While the work of a junior account executive is largely office-based, it also involves some visits to clients and attendance at meetings, conferences and other events. More senior staff visit clients on a regular basis.

Self-employment is possible after several years: many lobbyists use their experience and contacts to set up their own consultancies. Freelance work is another possibility.

Most political consultancies are located in the national capitals or Brussels.

A smart appearance is essential when meeting clients and contacts, although the dress code in the office may be less formal.

At entry level, the proportion of male to female consultants is about equal and, although men still predominate at more senior levels, several women hold high-level positions in consultancies.

Travel within a working day is occasionally required but overnight absence from home is uncommon .

Public affairs consultant: Entry requirements

Although this area of work is open to all graduates, the following subjects may increase your chances:

- politics/government/public administration;
- business/management;
- public relations;
- social policy;
- modern European languages;
- law.

Political knowledge and commitment, together with personal qualities, are more important than your degree subject.

While a postgraduate degree is not essential, many entrants to public affairs consultancy do have Masters degrees, usually in politics or a related subject.

Pre-entry experience related to politics is essential. This experience will usually be gained through:

- voluntary work or internships, such as working for an MP or a member of another political institution;
- involvement with a political party, trades union or employers' organisation;
- holding office in a students' union;
- campaigning work for a charity or pressure group;
- a work placement (stage) at the European Commission.

Some public affairs consultancies offer internships to undergraduates.

Candidates will need to show evidence of the following:

- excellent research, communication (written and oral) and people skills;
- a strong interest in, and enthusiasm for, politics;
- the ability to assimilate written material quickly, analyse it to pick out the most relevant information, and summarise it to report to clients;
- IT skills, as many information sources are online and you will often have to prepare documents and Powerpoint presentations for clients and potential clients;
- excellent listening skills;
- the ability to offer advice and be diplomatic;
- the ability to work on your own initiative and to relate well to colleagues, as well as clients and other contacts;
- the ability to inspire trust and confidence in clients as they may be making extremely commercially sensitive decisions, based in part on your advice, and will therefore need to trust your judgement and discretion;
- commercial awareness, in order to attract new business.

Use consultancies' websites and general politics sites to keep yourself informed about public affairs generally. These sites may also carry job vacancies, when they do occur.

Whilst most people enter consultancies at a junior level in their twenties, graduates with relevant and substantial experience may be recruited directly into more senior positions, bypassing the initial training and research-centred tasks.

Public affairs consultant: Training

Training is largely on the job, supplemented by short, external courses covering topics such as parliamentary procedure and policy making.

The graduate programmes run by larger consultancies follow a similar approach to training, but may additionally provide a more formal induction, offer exposure to wider aspects of public relations (PR) and communications, and include some in-house courses. Some consultancies arrange work experience placements in outside organisations for their trainees.

Public affairs consultant: Career development

New entrants to a public affairs consultancy spend a large proportion of their time on research, monitoring and responding to requests for information. However, face-to-face contact with clients will come quickly – initially through attending meetings, briefings and conferences alongside more senior staff – and will increase as your career develops.

A typical career path would be from account executive to account manager, heading up a small team within the consultancy and being responsible for a group of clients. The next step may be to senior account manager or account director and then associate director, handling the consultancy's work for its most important clients, providing strategic advice and developing new business for the consultancy. At higher levels, the ability to win new business, as well as servicing existing clients, becomes increasingly important.

As public affairs consultancies are generally small, it is common to move between employers to develop your career. Many consultants also move into in-house public affairs departments as public affairs managers or policy advisers. Some may move into full-time political roles, such as working for a political party or as an adviser. These moves may be permanent or may be used to further develop experience and contacts before returning to consultancy.

Public affairs consultant: Typical employers

Public affairs consultants either work in-house for an organisation (e.g., a charity, pressure group, business, or professional association), or for a consultancy acting on behalf of a range of clients. Public affairs consultancies may be independent or part of a larger public relations (PR) or communications company. Several specialist public affairs consultancies have been taken over by larger organisations in recent years, although they often continue to function independently within the parent group.

Most consultancies are fairly small, very often with less than 20 staff. The majority of consultancies are based in the National Capitals or Brussels.

Several of the larger PR agencies have a specialised public affairs or government relations division.