

# What you need (and have) to get a RussiaCIS job in the private sector



Students of Russia, CIS, and the broader Central and Eastern Europe region can often find it disorienting trying to link their knowledge and skill sets to the needs of the private sector, which can often come across as completely disconnected from work in an academic setting. This can extend to private sector employers too, who may not be able to make the linkages between the skill sets required for getting an advanced degree in regional studies and the day-to-day needs of a business.

Unfortunately, that puts the onus on the job seeker to make those connections explicit in interviews and cover letters. Below is an example of what that could look like – **of course with the caveat that each person's background, experience, as well as each job in the private sector could mean there are lots more possibilities as well as ways in which skill sets need to be contextualized.**

## 1. Languages



students of languages, especially complex ones, like Russian, can often feel that this is a key advantage when applying for a job. In fact in the private sector, depending on the role, this can be quite irrelevant.

Additionally, the kinds of language skills that are useful to an employer will vary depending on the tasks and you'd want to explain how your knowledge of the language can fit in with those. For instance, would you be able to conduct business correspondence or negotiations with customers or business partners in Russian? Can you read and analyze the original document of the government's budget reasonably quickly? Will you be able to accurately understand a news article about new regulations?

Language skills for the private sector can be quite binary – you may either need to be fully fluent in the language (being able to order coffee or ask for directions is largely useless to your employer if you can't also hold a business conference in the language) or are they irrelevant to the role you are applying for. More on this in a future post.

## 2. History, context, and perspective



This is a hard one to sell to employers, but quite valuable. There are many people out there who claim to know the country or the region, and who may have traveled there for business and be convinced that they are highly knowledgeable about the country.

Your job is to explain how your knowledge of context can influence the accuracy of business decisions your work should be informing. For instance, think about the way the company you're applying for needs to relate to the government through regulations or is exposed to social factors like popular perceptions, product preferences, etc. and try and bring some good examples of the nuance that your background can bring to their ability to navigate this environment. How does the political structure of the country affect the decision making power of the government in their sector? What kind of societal trends should they be taking into account when thinking about their or their customer's brands in the market?

The more you can demonstrate the practical use of your deep contextual knowledge for their business, the more value you can claim it offers to a prospective employer and the more you will differentiate yourself from the casual, superficial observer of the country who may claim to be just as knowledgeable.

### **3. Cross-country and cross-disciplinary background**

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This is another one that's hard to explain, but skill sets gained while working on cross-country comparisons, as well as exposure to different disciplines are all skill sets that offer you range when solving complex business problems.

For instance, if you are helping a firm refine its marketing in the country, you may draw on your background in anthropology, history, culture, languages, and statistics: all of which combined can provide powerful, localized solutions to the business. It's up to you to draw those linkages, however. Use practical examples that demonstrate how classes you've taken or projects you've worked on have given you tools you can deploy for what may seem like a task you've never done before.

### **4. Writing skills**

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This is an obvious one, but you'll actually need to overcome some objections there as academic writing has a bit of a bad rap in business circles for being long, complex, and difficult to digest. Business writing is in fact quite different and is ultimately about efficiency and clarity in passing on your message to others.

However, adapting your writing style is much easier than learning how to be a great writer from scratch. Use any examples of short essays, blog posts, memos, and others you've written to demonstrate your flexibility.

The one thing not to do is use your masters or PhD thesis as an example for good writing – typically that would be the exact opposite of what a business is looking for. That includes not sending excerpts from it (or the whole thing!) as a writing sample to future employers. Chances are, an employer looking to assess your writing style would read a page at the most or glance at a few paragraphs.

## **5. Project management**

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Every paper or project you've worked on is something you can use as an example of mini project management experience relevant to the workplace. You have to be able to explain your process, step by step, as well as the planning and execution that went into it as your employer may not necessarily think of a MA thesis as an example of project management. Being able to manage multiple deliverables across short- and long-term deadlines while working with others (if you've done group projects) are all relevant to the workplace, as long as you describe them in practical terms that visualize that for the interviewers.

## **6. Ability to break down a complex issue into component parts**

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This is something that most people overlook, but is absolutely critical as a skillset. Setting out a number of hypotheses and then going about systematically testing them, analyzing underlying issues, refining key statements, and collecting and assessing evidence to help you build a set of conclusions are essentially what a lot of private sector projects, analysis, and consulting work are about.

The subject matter can be completely different, but the processes are remarkably the same. An inability to analytically break down issues to component parts can lead to poor conclusions and decisions that can be harmful to businesses if important issues are left unaddressed or are incorrectly analyzed. In your interview, you can explain how you went about doing this for a particular project and make sure you point out how the process can be applied to many subject areas. If you can, give an example of how you might use this process in a context applicable to their business to bring it to life.

## **7. Communications/presentation skills (especially if you have done teaching)**



A lot of businesses will advertise that communications skills are an important requirement for an applicant. What does that mean in practice?

It largely boils down to being able to confidently, competently explain things to others – colleagues, superiors, customers, business partners. Implied is also a certain amount of social awareness and skills to build rapport with others, essential to any workplace, but particularly important if you are going to be in an expert or advisory role.

To demonstrate this skillset, emphasize breadth of experience – group-discussion set classes, presentations of projects, conference participation, etc. The most relevant skill set actually, however, is teaching. Teaching involves two activities that can be directly applicable – leading and guiding group discussions; and standing up in front of an audience and trying to explain to them something new or complex while holding their attention. These are exactly the skills useful for group work, project presentations, client meetings, and other corporate activities.

## **8. Critical mindset for new issues and ability to learn from scratch**



This one may sound a bit far-fetched, but a lot of academic training is about learning how to learn new things from scratch with minimal or no guidance. That's often what's necessary when undertaking a project, or doing research in the private sector.

The industry of your new employer could be new to you as well. Just as you had to learn about Soviet military techniques or Silver age poetry from scratch, so can you learn about R&D processes or industrial tools for specific manufacturing processes. With the exception of some highly technical fields where deep specialized knowledge is required (ex. Pharmaceuticals R&D), a lot of what may seem intimidating about how businesses work is something that can be learned within a reasonable amount of time.

Therefore, it's critical to emphasize your ability to quickly learn new fields and skill sets that would be necessary for your work to your prospective employer. Being flexible and having the tools to quickly master new fields of knowledge can help alleviate doubts they may have about hiring someone with geographic, but perhaps not industry or technical knowledge.

## **9. Personal relationships and on the ground experience in the region**

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In order to be credible to customers or partners, have accurate local information, and get hard-to-access insight, many private sector companies value the networks that regional specialists build over time through research, but especially on the ground experiences like study abroad, rotations, internships, and even extended travel to their countries of expertise.

Having contacts on the ground you can tap into can be a powerful differentiator from candidates who have weaker networks and have to rely on more secondary sources for their information. Make sure you are clear about the scope of your network and ideally provide specific examples. More on this in our upcoming posts.

Additionally, explain how your on the ground experience comes with useful insight. For example, having lived and shopped in Russia, you've likely gained some unintended insight into the Russian retail landscape – who are the big players, what are the price ranges, how consumers choose where and how to shop in a particular city or social class. For an FMCG company looking to enter the Russian market, that's valuable information. Think back to your experiences and bring out some examples that can help put what may seem like trivial experiences to you in the context of helping to inform business decisions to make your experiences shine.



Founded in 2010, Crossroads Eurasia aims to get students to discover Russia for themselves — by working, living, and relaxing with locals. For students aspiring to integrate the Russian language or regional expertise into their careers, the program is a natural stepping stone into sought-after internships, jobs, fellowships, and graduate study.

To learn about our programs, visit [www.CrossroadsEurasia.com](http://www.CrossroadsEurasia.com) or email us at [info@crossroadseurasia.com](mailto:info@crossroadseurasia.com)