

The Langley Files: A CIA Podcast
Episode 3
The Recruiter: What Does it Take to Join CIA?

Host #1 – Dee

Host #2 – Walter

Guest #1 – Mike

(music begins)

Narrator: Decades ago, a quote was carved into a marble wall at headquarters. “And ye shall know the truth,” it reads, “and the truth shall make you free.” At CIA, there are truths we can share and stories we can tell. Stories of duty and dedication. Stories of ingenuity and mission. Stories beyond those of Hollywood scripts and shadowed whispers. Today we're taking a step out from behind those shadows, sharing what we can, and offering a glimpse into the world of the Central Intelligence Agency. This is The Langley Files.

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Dee: You know the movie scene. It's almost as synonymous with the CIA as that inscription itself.

Walter: Somebody's closing up the bar they work at for the night, or maybe finishing some cutting edge research at school, or recently home from a tour of duty with the military.

Dee: And a stranger approaches them.

Walter: The conversation's vague at first ...

Dee: ... intriguingly so.

Walter: But it becomes increasingly clear that some sort of unusual job is on the table.

Dee: And eventually it always ends with some variation of ...

Walter: ... do you want to work for the CIA?

(music ends)

Dee: Welcome back to The Langley Files. I'm Dee.

Walter: And I'm Walter. Thank you all for tuning in for another episode of our podcast as we aim to give you a look into the world of CIA. And you know, Dee, I was thinking about it, that saying “the world of CIA” actually does reflect the uniqueness of this organization. It's, it's kind of a world unto itself sometimes, you know?

Dee: It completely is. You're absolutely right there.

Walter: And so I want to ask you - what is it that made you want to actually apply to work here back in the day?

Dee: You know, it's a, it's a good question. I think back then I was kind of tired of the occupation I was in and in the field I was in, um, and at the time I was watching a lot of movies and television shows that had a lot of CIA references, spy, intrigue, mystery, things like that. And I thought to myself, you know, how cool would that be to be able to work in an agency like that to really understand, like, what happens behind those closed doors? So I actually just took a shot at it and applied, and here I am.

Walter: Oh, for sure. I mean, I'd applied to several places and CIA actually got back to me first. Which was surprising because I thought I had completely bombed the interview.

Dee: Well, I'm glad you didn't. And I'm happy that you're here.

Walter: Thanks Dee. Me too. But enough about us. Let's turn to our guest today. We are going to be speaking with one of the Agency's recruitment leaders about what it takes to join CIA and how true to life that cliché we described in the lead-in really is. Mike - welcome to the podcast.

Mike: Thank you. Thank you for having me. Pleasure to be here.

Dee: We are happy to have you here, Mike. We just got done telling a little bit about our interest in CIA. How about yourself? Why did you consider CIA as an employer for you?

Mike: Absolutely. Uh, you know, my story is you know, I bring roughly 25 plus years of experience in the area of recruitment and talent acquisition prior to joining the Agency. So, my goal, really, upon entering the Agency, was really to have an impact in the recruitment field. How we change recruitment, uh, educating the Agency in some ways on how we can change from, you know, a reactive model into a more proactive model. And those efforts are ongoing. So it's always been, you know, uh, the mission of recruitment for any organization, particularly Agency, I've always had a very strong interest in. So to pursue this mission, it was, I was very fortunate. And I feel honored to actually have the opportunity to do it. So it's a, it's a great challenge, and, uh, I take it on with, with a lot of ambition and, uh, with a lot of pride. I'll be honest with you.

Walter: So, Mike, aside from our stories, what about CIA do you feel draws people to want to work here? What do we have to offer that, say, the private sector doesn't?

Mike: Absolutely. Yeah. We are certainly a unique organization. I think we're very, um uh, we're an organization I think that a lot of people don't fully understand obviously just by nature of our mystique and, and our mission and things of that nature. We're not as public as the average employer. Uh, there's a lot of benefits to working to the Agency. Having worked in the private sector, now coming into the government, I have had the experience of working both sides. So just to give a little bit of insight and perspective there, you know what, what does the Agency actually offer that your average, you know, corporate organization may not? I mean, this is a very, when I say unique, uh, you can't really perform much of the work here that we do at the Agency anywhere else. I mean, our mission is unique. Our mission is challenging. It's fascinating. It's tip of the spear. Certainly you can go work for any Fortune 500 company, but our mission, I mean, where else can you do this work, right? I mean, obviously you know where you look at at our mystique, our reputation, you know, we are spying organization. So you're not really going to do that in the corporate world.

One of the things I think that a lot of people don't really realize, when I said we're misunderstood, we're not really known, is there's a number of career opportunities here across the organization. What? 140 plus different types of occupations, job types. I mean, when when you think of the Central Intelligence Agency, a lot of times you're not thinking data science. You're not thinking, you know, physicians,

medical doctors, logisticians, HR, finance. In addition to what, of course, you know, we typically think of, right? The spies in the field, the case officers, the analysts. Those types of things, they're, they're what typically will come to mind. So when we are out there actually promoting our brand, promoting our message, we want to make sure that that message reaches a lot of audiences, right? Geographically across the United States, but also the diversity of, of disciplines and things across the board. So we want to make sure that we motivate folks of all different disciplines and backgrounds to actually consider us. Uh, so really, that's that's something.

I mean, certainly, you know, the private sector does offer some some pluses, but this is unique. And I think this takes a real mission approach. And I know we say that a lot. You know what does that I mean? You know, when when asked, a lot of people will say, well I do it for the mission. But what does that technically mean? Well, if you think we're the tip of the spear for the United States Intelligence Community. Uh, we are the leaders in HUMINT, not only here, but around the world. Uh, you know, that takes a special type of desire. It takes a specific type of direction. I think you really have to give a thought to come here. Our bar is high. We just don't hire anyone. We have a very what I would say rigid, right, and I mean that, a rigid and it should be, the bar needs to be high. We want people to compete for work here because it is going to be an experience like no other. Uh, it does offer, you know, obviously, adventure, it offers challenges. So this is this is certainly a career path that I think would interest a lot of America, but it's certainly going to work for it. Right?

Uh, you know some of the some of the feedback that we typically will get is, and I know this is going to go to a wide audience. So what are some of the questions that we typically hear as Agency officers? Well, our process is too long. We don't communicate. Uh, and that's in many cases there are reasons for that. I think I'd like to make a couple comments if I could about that, because I interact with a number of candidates you know, from academia, mid-career and so forth. And that's typically one of the, what I would consider, one of the criticisms for us. And I do explain that, right? We are unlike any other organization. There are challenges. There's security challenges. We just can't pick up a phone and give you a call, you know, we have very clever adversaries and things of that nature. And, you know, and you know, protecting applicants, protecting our officers is certainly paramount for us. So I would like anyone that's listening to this that may have been frustrated with our process or is going to enter our process and maybe not necessarily have the interaction or the rapport that you may get with an average company, that there are reasons for that. So, uh, and it's really the protection of you as it is with our officers. So there are things that we are doing to improve that going forward and we are working on those efforts. And I think if you do apply to the organization, you know, in the very near future you will probably see that there are efforts going on to improve our speed, uh, to really streamline and make our processes more efficient. So, you know, there there are some differences, but at the same time and again, you do have to have the patience. Uh, but if mission is what you're chasing, if that's what you desire, if that's what you're after, I think you know, having a high bar and, uh, sitting and waiting a little more, it'll all pay off in the in the long run. But again, our process has to be challenging, right? Again, we just don't hire anyone. So, you know, the the bar is high for a reason.

Walter: So you're talking about trying to improve the process wherever possible without sacrificing standards, some of which are for security?

Mike: True, right. You know, today, and why do we have to get faster? Well, for a lot of reasons, certainly we want to be competitive with other employers. Today, you know, the workforce changes over the years, right? What worked 20, 30 years ago may not be as competitive today. Today we are competing with a workforce and an employment base that it tends to be very, very fast. Although you know, based on what I have just mentioned, certainly we want to make an effort to do what we can to more streamline and, yes, speed up that process. However, we don't want to do that sacrificing quality, standards, equities,

diversity, and things of that nature. We have to make sure that we're very methodical in our approach, that we really make sure that we obviously do the appropriate vetting, use the, I would say, appropriate processes, obviously integrate the technology that we need. We need to seek out the best of America for our mission, and that you know, there's talent across the United States, across the country. We want to make sure that we hit different geographies, different communities, diversifying our workforce, much like you see throughout the country. So there are a number of factors that we have to maintain. You don't want to sacrifice any of that because you're getting faster. Does that make sense?

Dee: Absolutely. And I'm thinking, you just mentioned how we are looking to obviously diversify our workforce. So, having been on, you know one of the main leaders here in the in the recruitment side, can you explain a little bit more about how we are doing that? How we are looking to diversify our workforce in in more ways than just the normal way we look at diversity?

Mike: Absolutely. And and I think, like many employers, right, we really have, you know, you want to diversify for a lot of reasons, right? And there, there are different ways to approach diversity, right? We look at racial, ethnic, gender, geographical, socioeconomic, and we're trying to cover all of that, right? Uh, a lot of that has to do with the way that we conduct our outreach, we communicate with certain communities, certain academic communities. Uh, it's your ability to reach out, be committed, be consistent, and deliver a message that's ultimately going to resonate with whatever audience you might be pursuing. Obviously, people from different backgrounds bring different skills. They bring different areas of expertise, different experiences that apply to our mission. The Agency is doing that. We are. We are really investing more in our workforce and our ability to recruit. I will tell you, um, without going into much detail, having been across the private sector and the government, I can tell you that the government really highly invests in this mission. I will tell you that there are probably private companies that would be envious of the support and the investment that is made in the human capital and the recruitment area here. So you know, what the Agency needs to continue to do is to change over time. I mean, that's that's just what it is. This is not a static type of of function. It is something that changes, uh, rapidly. It changes frequently. We all saw what Covid has done to our workforce. It's changed us, not just here at the Agency, but, you know, nationwide. Uh, so just that quickly, some societal disruption could come in and actually change the course of an entire, you know process or an entire function, if you will. So all of these things we have to stay out in front of.

But diversifying our workforce is one of the top priorities. Our Director has made it one of our top priorities. Talent has made it, and the organization in general has made it one of our top priorities. But again, we are competing, right? Every other employer is attempting the same things. So that goes into the strategy that we put together. We've got to be that much better. But we also have to make sure that we're reaching the populations of the communities that ultimately we feel we'll meet our mission and certainly through through diversified efforts, you're going to achieve that.

Dee: Absolutely. And I really appreciate you highlighting that diversity is one of our mission priorities here within the Agency. I like to quote Director Burns. He's often heard saying about himself, "we can't always be effective, and we're not going to be true to our nation's ideals, if everyone looks like me, talks like me, and thinks like me." So I think you did an excellent job right there, kind of highlighting why we continue to review our processes and are committed to bringing in that well balanced workforce.

Mike: Absolutely. And it lends itself to innovation. Uh, you know, obviously you don't want to have a homogeneous organization, it leads to groupthink and things like that. Diversifying your staff through all of those areas that I've mentioned allows you to really be innovative in your workforce. I've seen it firsthand. I see it here. I, I do see it here. So you have to continue that right? And and again, trends change. Things change. Uh, we're changing. We're changing. Uh, this is this is the most change I think the

Agency has seen in its ability to do outreach and recruitment, probably for the last 75 years. Here we are at the 75 year anniversary. So there is some very, uh, I would say for the Agency, some massive changes here which are good changes, innovative changes in the area of recruitment. We're seeing that nationwide, but I can tell you that, you know, for the for the public that's actually listening to this, the investment here to recruit the next generation workforce for the protection of America is certainly there.

Walter: So we've talked about some of the recruitment process, some of the benefits of working here and why some people might want to come work at CIA. But can you talk about the characteristics and the expertise that CIA is looking for in candidates? I know we must get asked this question a lot.

Mike: Absolutely. And and I think we touched on a few earlier as I mentioned the, really the diversity of opportunities out there. You know, just just I would say some of the first skills, competencies that come to mind because we are uh, you know, a foreign intelligence collection agency, our ability to communicate, whether that is verbal communications or whether that is written communications. I mean, certainly we are not a policy shop. However, we provide information to policymakers. Our ability to articulate and convey that information is extremely important, right? We need to make sure that, uh, that what we provide is thoroughly understood by, by our policymakers and everything. Uh, so that that's, that's just off the top of my head.

But again, I mean, every opportunity I mentioned, 140 plus different disciplines. Now, not everyone is at the tip of that spear, right. Here, uh, here in the Washington, DC, metro area, we have a very large contingent of employees that are actually supporting that foreign mission. Expertise comes across many different competencies. So to actually, I don't know that we would have enough time for me to go into detail with all of those, but um, certainly the ability to do something that's probably larger than yourself and sometimes larger than your nation. If you have, if you have that feeling if you have that, uh, for lack of a better term ambition, uh, you can apply it here. There are a number of things that actually motivate individuals. And if folks are motivated by, uh, that feeling, the ability to, and I don't want to say give back because I don't think it's a give back, I think it's actually a feeling who wants to promote the security of the United States for its people. If that is something that you were drawn to, I think this is a very unique place to actually execute that mission. So you certainly have to have that, right? You have to have an affinity for that. I think that is a competency that we need here in the organization, ultimately to drive our mission, to provide leadership to the future and then ultimately leave that legacy behind for the next generation. So being able to build that type of workforce across that many, you know, diverse disciplines it's a challenge, one that we take on.

But I can tell you that this particular mission will feed the Agency. The recruitment mission does feed the Agency. So putting that, and I appreciate that you're inviting me on here because I think this is a message that doesn't always get out. We talk about our mission, we talk about a number of other things. There hasn't really been this focus on recruitment and talent acquisition, however, and this is across the board, across the United States every employ trying to do this. But I think there has to be an awareness. I think a public awareness for this because this is what creates really the tip of the spear. I mean, it's up to us to really identify, to recruit, to engage, to perform outreach, to bring in that expertise that's ultimately going to continue to innovate and push our mission forward.

Dee: All excellent points. And I know, you know, you kept mentioning that we have a very large amount of occupations here. Would you mind just for the audience sake, to maybe tell us a little bit about how we're structured here within the Agency and how we align those occupations within the offices and how we do that across the board?

Mike: Sure, Absolutely. So it's interesting you know, and a number of folks, I'm glad you asked the question, because a number of folks are probably very unfamiliar with the way that we are structured. I mean, if you look across the Department of Defense of the U.S. Military, pretty much you see that, you know, across the board you have all the services. Here it's a little different, right? Um, we are obviously again, the the, the HUMINT, uh, and for those out there, it's Human Intelligence uh, we are the leader for the United States and the world in Human Intelligence. So how are we structured? How are we set up? It's interesting because we're on a very similar military model. So currently we do have five Directorates. And without going into much detail, you have your Directorate of Operations, which is the Directorate of, obviously all, you know it really drives our mystique and our brand, which is a good thing. They are the tip of the spear. They are the spies. They are the case officers overseas, in addition to other duties. There's also the Directorate of Science and Technology, which is extremely interesting. They do a number of engineering functions and other technical, uh, and STEM related functions in support of that overall foreign HUMINT mission. We also have the Directorate, which is a relatively newer Directorate, I guess what 10 years now, since since Director Brennan had rolled out what we considered then our reorganization or I apologize, it's escaping me. But modernization. Thank you. Uh, so it's been about 10 years there where we had established the Directorate of Digital Innovation, right? Obviously threats today in area of cyberspace, are in artificial intelligence, data analytics, things of that nature. That's a Directorate that specializes in that area. And, of course, our Directorate of Analysis, I mean, the Agency performs analysis, obviously the the leader, the world leader, in analysis when collecting raw foreign intelligence. Our ability to analyze that of course, provide to policymakers is critical. So we have the Directorate of Analysis, and then ultimately we have our Directorate of Support, which is the largest Directorate here in the organization. And that's all of the support functions. That's like a corporate body within private industry, providing HR, providing finance, logistics, security and a host of other functions. So careers are actually across all of those Directorates and certainly disciplines do kind of span across all of those Directorates.

One of the other things I'd like to mention is our, our Mission Centers. During modernization, we created what are called Mission Centers. For those of you that may be familiar with the military model, if you're familiar with combat commands and things of that nature, you can apply the same logic. If Directorates, which would be the services like Army, Marine Corps, Navy, our combat commands, if you will, are our Mission Centers that might be a geographic focus, it could be a particular functional focus. So, it's where all of our Directorates will ultimately integrate to support a foreign mission. So, uh, and of course, 140 plus disciplines, uh, support those missions every day 24, 24-7. Right?

We are an organization, I do want to say this because, you know today, how are you competitive in recruitment? Certainly people want to talk about work-life balance, remote work. Although remote work isn't very common with our organization, for obvious reasons. And I know that that's something that we compete with, and I and I make that because, uh, we are looking for the folks that want to join the mission and that is probably going to require either deploying overseas or working here within the Washington, DC, metro area. Certainly your ability to relocate and things of that nature. So for those of you out there who are looking for a career to join the team, come on board for, for reasons, unfortunately, we just don't have that competitive edge. I can't set you up from home in Chicago or Los Angeles because of just the nature of the work that we do. So we want to appeal for the folks who really are looking to, to take that on and who may not necessarily be looking for a remote opportunity. Although I, I love the idea of remote work, it's just not really conducive for our mission and the work that we do

Walter: Well, I think that would be informative for a lot of people. And we know how tough it can be to put a human face or voice, at least on the folks who work here and what it takes to join CIA. So Mike, thank you for coming on today and for, for giving us an overview of this process and the types of candidates that CIA is looking for.

Mike: Absolutely. Thank you.

Dee: But before we go, um, we just want to highlight that going down the road with this podcast, we would like to go dig a little deeper into some of the occupations that we have here and really put a focus on some of the skills and abilities that we're looking to recruit. Um, and we're wondering, would it be possible to ask you back on here in a future episode?

Mike: Absolutely, anytime, Anytime. I think it's extremely important with the size of the audience I believe that we are reaching here. And again, we are not as public as most organizations are. Any information that we can provide on this particular platform related to recruitment and, and maybe providing maybe an incentive for somebody who may not, otherwise, you know, pursue an opportunity here that possesses the skill set of expertise that we could use. Certainly I want to be part of that. So thank you absolutely.

Dee: Excellent. And might even ask some questions on social media to see if folks have anything that they're dying to ask a recruiter. We might bring those on and kind of showcase those to you as well.

Mike: That would be fantastic. I would I would I would field those to the best of my ability. Absolutely.

Dee: Thanks Mike.

Mike: Thank you.

Walter: Actually, Mike, can I ask you one more question?

Mike: Sure.

Walter: So, as you probably imagine, uh, there are a lot of rumors floating out there that we hear or see every day in movies, TV shows, even everyday lives when talking to people about joining the CIA, applying to CIA. Are there any rumors that you would like to clear up, right here and now while we have you in the studio?

Mike: Yes. Absolutely. There are a couple. I'm glad you mentioned that. It's interesting because again, because we are a very, what I would consider a more insulated, traditionally and insulated organization for obvious reasons. You know, when we go out and we talk to the public, when we perform outreach and things of that nature, and that's where I'm going to address some of these things. We, we get questions such as, you know, do you have law enforcement and arrest powers? Do you carry weapons and things of that nature? We don't. We don't. We are not a law enforcement organization. We don't even operate here domestically. We are a foreign intelligence collection Agency. Our mission is completely overseas. So all the work that we do is, of course, overseas.

Uh, we're not, um we're not superhuman. Okay as much as I would love to say that, okay, sometimes I have to, you know, uh, yeah, but but no, we're not superhuman. Uh, we don't employ Jason Bourne, right? I don't know if I can say that, but we don't employ Jason Bourne. However, um, you know, we are very serious about our mission. We're human, just like the next person, right? Another, um, myth I'd like to crack is, you know, some of the feedback that we get from people, at least in focus groups that we have recruited or just people out there as to why you wouldn't maybe apply or pursue or, or consider the Agency is, some people have this impression of this perception that they're not good enough for this organization. And I think probably that that entertainment value and that mystique may make you feel

that way. I can tell anybody listening to this, if you have a skill set, I've already mentioned 140 plus, that you feel that you could bring to this mission for whatever purpose, we want to hear from you. We want to see your interest. We want you to ask questions, particularly on social media or any other particular platform. We want to hear from you. Again, we're trying to broaden and open up to a more diverse base, a wider base of folks. We know there's a ton of talent here in the United States, uh, that we probably haven't touched. It's almost impossible to touch everybody, but there's so much competition out there.

So for those of you that are out there in the United States that are, have not maybe given us a thought or maybe have thought, hey, I can't compete on that level, we do want to hear from you. Again, tons of opportunity, tons of areas of expertise around the organization. We certainly want to hear from you.

Walter: Awesome. Mike. Thank you. Truly. Thank you for coming on. Thank you for chatting with us.

Mike: Absolutely. My pleasure. Thank you.

Dee: And we'll look forward to having you back on. So thank you very much.

Mike: I look forward to it. Thank you.

Dee: And so far our listeners out there, if you are interested in learning a little bit more about the occupations we have here at the Agency, feel free to visit our website at CIA.gov/careers.

Walter: And as Mike said, jobs at CIA include everything from cyber threat analyst, to operations officer, and from data scientists to language officer.

Dee: And who knows, we might actually see you roaming the halls here at Langley with us sometime in the near future. Even if you think you whiffed that interview.

Walter: An inspirational story. Take heart everybody.

Dee: Well, that about wraps up the episode of The Langley Files. But before we go, I think we actually need to provide the answer to our last episode's trivia question.

(music)

Dee: Which former director of Central Intelligence shares a name with a major US Airport?

Walter: Travelers through DC know this one. It is, of course, Dulles International Airport, code IAD, which shares a last name with former Director of Central Intelligence, Allen Dulles.

Dee: Twist though, the airport is actually named after his brother who was a former Secretary of State.

Walter: Interesting dinnertime conversation that family must have had. Director of Central Intelligence Dulles served during the early Cold War. So between that and our would-be colleague from the CIA forerunner, OSS, Julia Child, our first few trivia questions have been from the origins of this organization. So, Dee, what do you say we do one from a later chapter in CIA history?

Dee: I think we should do it.

Walter: Okay, so here's one from the 1970s, and it's a spy gadget question. During that decade, the CIA's Office of Research and Development built a micro-sized unmanned aerial vehicle, or UAV, with the specs six centimeters by nine centimeters by 1.5 centimeters. And it was disguised as something to blend into the everyday world. The question is, what was it disguised as?

Dee: Find out next time here on The Langley Files.

Walter: We'll be seeing you.

(music begins)

Dee: Why did you think you bombed your interview?

Walter: You know I don't even remember anymore.

Dee: Before you came on, were you worried that Mike here was the one that interviewed you?

Walter: It was a long few seconds as the door opened.

(music ends)