



## Case study

### Language and Culture Specialist

**Name:**

**Kess**

**Age:**

**30**

**Current Job Title:**

**Language and  
Culture Specialist**



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### **How did you get your current job?**

“Before joining GCHQ my main line of work had been in both private and commercial aviation. I’d had a fantastic career that really gave me an amazing amount of exposure and wealth of knowledge of cultures throughout the world, but I was after a job that provided a challenge. So I started researching opportunities in London (which was where I was based at the time). Because of my various language skills and other experiences I researched jobs that would benefit from them and I found a job advert for the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, or MI6 as most people know them) and noticed that they recruited language speakers.

Whilst I have native ability of many different languages, I had never considered that this inherent skill could be used extensively in a workplace...let alone for one of the UK’s intelligence agencies! So I was intrigued and started to investigate further. It turned out that MI6 weren’t recruiting for my languages at that time but they informed me of GCHQ – whom admittedly I’d never heard of! After taking a look at the GCHQ website though I was encouraged to discover that they were looking for individuals with an understanding of two of the languages I had a natural ability in. Consequently I updated my CV and submitted an application online.”

### **Why did you decide to join GCHQ?**

“I was really intrigued by the work. You obviously have this glamorous view from the way the intelligence agencies are portrayed in the media or TV shows like ‘Spooks’. (Having spent some time here I can tell you how skewed that portrayal is!) However, I was fascinated by the nature of GCHQ’s work and the fact that I – with this ability to understand foreign languages (which I just took for granted) – could potentially contribute to such major worldwide events.

That’s not to say I didn’t have a few reservations. For one thing, I had concerns about living in Cheltenham – where GCHQ is located – as it seemed to me to be quite remote from London. It does take some adjustment if you’re used to a major city but having now lived here for a while I can really say it is one of the nicest areas to live in, and although I had a few worries I’m glad I gave it a go. Plus it’s not that far from London (and there are good train links).”

### **How relevant was your previous experience in securing your current job?**

“On the face of it ‘not very’ you might say, but I don’t agree with this. Admittedly, working in the aviation industry doesn’t translate to intelligence work and using my language ability, but the skills I developed whilst in that role are actively used all the time. For starters, my aviation experience as flight crew meant I came into contact with people from all walks of life – including foreign nationals, public servants within Parliament and well known high profile public figures – so I really had to develop strong communication skills and be able to engage with people at all levels, whilst constantly thinking on my feet. Having this ability is crucial for my role at GCHQ where one minute I might be discussing some source material with a colleague at a working level, and then the next I might be representing GCHQ’s interests at a cross department meeting or ministerial briefing. Yes, you’ve got to have the language ability but as someone with a natural understanding this wasn’t all that much of a challenge. I would highly rate my analytical and communication ability as an important factor in my securing the role.”

### **Describe a typical working day in your current job.**

“I know it’s a cliché but no one day is the same as the next. It’s true. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not preventing a terrorist attack or breaking down a drugs ring every day, but there’s an amazing amount of variety. Plus, as I understand a number of languages, I can often be asked to support lots of different tasks compared to a normal language analyst, but I enjoy the range of responsibilities the role has to offer.

Take a look at the ‘day in the life’ profiles on the website.”



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### **How has your role developed and what are your career ambitions?**

“My role really has snowballed. Initially I was worried it might just be a translation service but I now appreciate it is so much more than that. I really have to provide a full picture around the material I am investigating; this means I have to know the nuances of the culture, its people, the religions, the economy, etc.

Consequently, I'm so much more engaged in the overall intelligence work than I ever expected – I'm responsible for informing the intelligence analysts through to briefing high-ranking seniors. Being able to understand others' needs and view things from their perspective is important. I have had a considerable amount of interest from various intelligence partners, as well as other departments within GCHQ, which I am sure will enable me to progress into more senior positions and potentially determine policy.”

### **What skills are necessary to perform well in the role?**

“I've already mentioned that communication ability is valuable, as is an affinity with IT – you don't need to be an IT expert, but a willingness to use IT on a daily basis is crucial. (That's not to say we don't also need those individuals with language ability who just happen to be technical wizards).

It's also important to be open to change. GCHQ is always evolving and it needs people who will challenge some of the traditional ways of doing things and bring new ideas to the table – I'm known for being someone who thinks 'outside of the box' and will willingly ask questions.”

### **What do you enjoy most about your job?**

“The thing I enjoy most is the job satisfaction I receive from knowing that my analysis, transcribing, briefings and comms have assisted GCHQ in reducing, if not completely demolishing, a terror attack or serious crime on an international level. Also, at GCHQ there are so many different opportunities and different activities you can participate in. It's not like working anywhere else.

Plus, there's the satisfaction derived from realising that my piece of work can be so far reaching. I can't go into the specifics (for obvious reasons) but just recently I was involved in an operation that potentially saved countless lives – there aren't many jobs where you can say that! This aspect is just incredibly rewarding and motivating.”

### **Finally, what advice do you have for other people who would like to get into this career?**

“Be open-minded to what GCHQ is actually like. Before joining I had a view that it would be very technical and IT related, but in reality the actual environment and people are more diverse than you would ever expect. You'd be hard pushed to distinguish the inside of GCHQ from any corporate organisation.

Be up for a challenge. The work really is unlike anything else so it will be a bit of a culture shock initially, this soon passes though and everyone is extremely supportive.

Finally, and this is an important bit of advice – be patient! It takes a long time to join GCHQ (it took me well over 16 months) and it is only once you join the department that you will appreciate why. While I think the website says it takes on average six months to undergo the security vetting stage, it will depend on your personal circumstances. I had obviously travelled extensively and had a series of different jobs so there was a bit more for my vetting officer to look into. However, I'm testament that you haven't been forgotten about and so whilst it may be a while before you join it'll be worth it – trust me!”

**[www.careersinbritishintelligence.co.uk](http://www.careersinbritishintelligence.co.uk)**