



Transcript: Chris - senior analyst, National Audit Office

What is your current appointment?

Currently, I'm a senior analyst at the National Audit Office during the day nine to five, Monday to Friday and outside of working hours I also have a self-employed career as a writer, primarily writing about Russian affairs, contemporary Russian politics and some elements of early twentieth-century Russian history.

Can you tell me what your work at the national audit office involves?

Yes, basically the National Audit Office conducts audits but that, there are two different categories of audit. There is financial audit, which trained accountants carry out, which basically makes sure that government spends the money that it has been allotted in the proper categories within an allotted time and writes down what it has spent correctly, and that is not what I do. The less well-known type of audit is called 'value for money' audit and in many respects it is closer to a form of consultancy, except that the government departments which we do value for money studies on don't choose or invite us to do them. People who work at the National Audit Office are not strictly speaking civil servants; they work for parliament rather than for the government and offer parliament assurance and hold government to account for tax payers' money. So we choose the studies that we do in different areas of government and because of the national audit act and other laws that set us up we have the right to go into departments and demand to see any papers or any people who we need to see in order to satisfy ourselves that money has been spent in an effective, efficient and economic way. Where we find that it has not been then we publish reports and give them to parliament but also we put them in the public domain criticising those wrong decisions or poor decisions which may lead to a committee, a select committee of MPs taking evidence from the chief civil servant of the government department in question. Since I joined the National Audit Office in 2005, I've worked on a range of studies, most of them in the area of defence so looking at how the ministry of defence spends tax payers' money. But it's normal in the National Audit Office to circulate and I am about to move now to another area.

Do you know which area?

Yes to Home Affairs. So to do studies that look at how the Home Office and also the Ministry of Justice, which has been recently created, spend tax payers' money.

Do you have any choice in where you move to?

Yes. And they're trying to increase the element of choice at the National Audit Office, I suppose traditionally your stint may last five years on any one department and then there'd be a sort of smoke and mirrors set of decisions about why you would move and it'd be very much the needs of the organisation. They're trying to put in a more responsive system called an allocation system where you can express preferences and so long as they meet with the business needs of the NAO, National Audit Office, then you'll be able to move where you want.

On a day to day sort of basis, what does your job involve?

It varies greatly from one part of the year to the other. The studies that we do each last around eight months, eight to nine months and begin with a period of scoping when we sit down and do mostly desk-based research to see if an area in which we think, we have a hunch there might be something interesting for us to look at, we look into it a bit deeper and try to work out where the risks to value for money are and we might organise some early meetings with government officials to test whether that is true or not.

That lasts about one to two months and we will then develop a business case which we will draft ourselves and if that meets internal approval, we will go ahead with the study. Then generally there is about three months, three to four months then there's a lot of travel and a lot of meetings with government officials and a collection of data and towards the end of that period then analysis of the data and typically that would involve being out of the office three to four days a week travelling to different government buildings in different parts of the country – possibly, depending on the nature of the study, holding focus groups with members of the public or government officials to understand in greater detail the nature of the problems that we are identifying.

Then we move into a period of report, well, of identifying our conclusions and then drafting a report and back in the office again for that, and after that and our reports have been approved internally for quality, they go into a process of clearance with the government department about which they've been written. This doesn't mean the government department can alter our conclusions, because they are our conclusions, but it means they're allowed to comment on the factual accuracy of the information in the report and on the fairness and balance. This means we shouldn't – as the National Audit Office – look very narrowly at one part of a subject because we know that something atrocious has happened there if more generally in the area the government department has been doing well, and it's, they're within their rights should we do that and we don't do it, we try to avoid doing it, they would be within their rights to say 'this isn't very fair, you know you've only looked at something very narrow where we haven't done very well and ignored all the rest'. At the end of that period, the report is published and we begin the cycle again.

When you say 'we' does it mean you are working in a team?

Small teams, typically, well when I joined as a researcher which is how most people who don't want to become accountants joined the national audit office, I was the most junior member of the team of four which, there is a senior analyst above me, which is now my grade, and then an audit manager who has responsibility for more than one study and so devolves quite a lot of the day to day control of the study to the senior analyst, and then a director who has responsibility for relations with one government department each and would be looking after a portfolio of studies, typically six in year, something like that. So on a day to day level, the team was really two people, and sometimes we draw in consultancy support or trainees, who are training to be accountants to do short bursts of work for us when we need to. But yes, on a day to day level, it was two or three people.

Other than seeing me today, what are you doing?

Today I'm writing up minutes of meetings that I held yesterday with members of a department and I've also been selecting photographic images to go into the latest report that's going to be published at the beginning of July. That's not very typical, we only get to do that about once every nine months but it is one of the things that we do and I've commissioned our desktop publishing team to mock up various images of the front cover and we're going to choose between them.

What is the physical environment like that you work in?

Up until December 2007, the environment was rather awful, we were in an office that hadn't been refurbished for twenty five years and had broken air conditioning and tweed carpet on the walls. But that's now thankfully undergoing refurbishment and we're in temporary accommodation which is typically as you would expect in most modern offices. It is open plan with break-out areas for meetings and then enclosed internal meeting spaces. It's quite congenial and we expect that when we move back, next year, to our own offices, they will have been transformed in a similar way.

And what are your working conditions like?

Do you mean in terms of hours and things like that? Generally speaking very good. Nine to five is not just an aspiration, many people do work nine to five or nine to five thirty and the hours culture is good in that you are not frowned upon for leaving when the day is over. Or you are not expected to sit clocking at your desk looking like you've got lots of work to do when you haven't. At certain times of the year especially when it comes up to publication or in the midst of clearance you might be expected to work longer but and this is one of the areas where I think that the National Audit Office is a good place to work for people who have been used to delivering their own projects as PhD students are. There's an expectation in value for money work that you will feel a great sense of ownership of your own study and that's easy to do because you're given a lot of power and authority to run with ideas and explore avenues yourself. And obviously that leads as it does in PhD work to sometimes wanting to burn the midnight oil because you feel you own your project, you want to make it as good as possible and that is very much encouraged so there's, I know that creates a contradiction in some ways but it's a healthy tension. There's not a lot of pressure from above to work long hours but there's an understanding that the ownership you feel of your own project may mean that at certain times you may want to.

Please can you tell me something about your dual career as a writer?

When I was finishing writing my thesis, I got the opportunity to write a book for a popular press about the Beslan school siege which also took place in the Caucasus. The editor of the popular press approached my supervisor whom he knew from previous work and asked her if she knew of anyone who would be interested in writing such a book and she approached me. So it's one of those cases of serendipity crossed with networking and who you know and it is always worth, I would say, asking your supervisor for any contacts they have outside of academia but in your subject area if that's what you're interested in pursuing away from universities because often they do keep in touch with old students and people who have gone on to do interesting things – especially in languages because of course people learn languages for all kinds of professional purposes that aren't linked to research. So I knew that I was going to have this exciting opportunity of trying to become a professional author after doing my PhD. I also knew that, largely speaking, the prose that I was writing in my PhD was quite turgid because of the need to sprinkle footnotes everywhere and to be very very precise and use lots of jargon terms from literary theory and cultural theory. It felt like a

good challenge, I felt that the story of the siege was obviously a fascinating one and filling in the context was going to be really interesting and very much in line with what I had been doing as a PhD student. Then the additional challenge of telling a story in layman's terms that didn't alienate people or make them feel you were trying to prove you were cleverer than them. So I was really looking forward to it but I knew from the very beginning that there was a very limited amount of money involved and that's going to be true for anyone who wants to become a commercial writer on the back of being an academic. There just simply is not enough money in book writing to make the advances very generous. It's not going to be the same as being Jilly Cooper. And I went to Russia to research the book.

After your PhD?

As soon as I finished the PhD

Before your viva?

Yes. I went and travelled to Beslan and interviewed people and it felt very refreshing to – I mean the subject matter was very very grim – but it felt very refreshing on a professional level to be engaging with real people and current stories and trying to fit history with something that had happened contemporaneously and understand where there were echoes and where there were even causal links. Of course that's not always true, but there were some. All the while I knew that when I came back to Britain I was not going to have enough money just to go away and write for seven months and finish the book and publish it to great acclaim and never have to do a days work again. And I started to think about what I could do next at the same time as writing up my book and I applied for the job at the National Audit Office. I didn't know at the time of applying that it would provide me with enough time to write the book with some ease, I suppose that's the best way of describing it. I didn't understand until I'd worked here for some months that it genuinely had a good hours culture and didn't try and keep you here until half eight at night or anything. But I can say with high insight that it would not have been possible to write Beslan in the time frame that I did unless I had been able to go home most days at five or five thirty. Typically what I did, while writing the book, was I would do a normal nine to five working week in the office, I would write two evenings during the week, possibly going to the library. I have to say I did enjoy the fact that that reminded me of being a PhD student, possibly going to the British Library, possibly working at home and then I would work one full day at the weekend on writing and towards the very end, two full days a week, at the weekend on writing.

Was there ever an opportunity to take a day off a week to write? To reorganise your hours and reclaim from the week for writing?

I took some annual leave to write which is absolutely not what you're asking. So I did take some of my own holiday time to write which shows how crazily committed someone can be to a not very economic activity. There aren't opportunities on a day to day basis to do that but the office has very good career policies with regard to flexible working. So you would have to negotiate a cut in your hours overall and go to a situation where you were working only four days a week, if you see what I mean. You can't rearrange your time and just say 'I'm going to work my full working week in four days', you'd have to lose some of your salary and be a, be someone who worked four days a week – but they're quite open to discussing that and that is something I may try to do in the future.

But you must have to have enormous self-discipline to go home after a long day, even if it hasn't been a really intellectually taxing day, just fulfilling your function at work and then going home and trying to work must have been difficult at times?

Well it was difficult at times and sometimes I didn't manage it and we'd go to the pub instead or watch rubbish TV. I think you have to be very motivated by the goal that you are chasing and one of the interesting things that I've realised that I didn't see before I'd started working outside of academia, is that employees in organisations have all kinds of goals that they seek to achieve outside of work. So one of my colleagues is a keen semi-professional cyclist and goes on the most outrageous training sessions immediately after work three days a week and will go racing at the weekends and finds that to be a leisurely activity, although it leaves him exhausted and involves exactly the kinds of summoning of energy from nowhere that I felt at times I was having to do with the writing. Someone else tries to paint and has recently had their painting accepted for the Royal Academy summer exhibition. So yes, it did involve what sometimes felt like super-human efforts to get back down to writing this book, but it's not unusual in the work place. You're not unique for trying to do that and I was careful to plan so that I wasn't writing my book, I tried to plan so that I didn't have to write my book at the same time that I was drafting reports at work. I tried to manage it so that I wouldn't have to write all day from nine in the morning until ten at night, if you see what I mean, so I tried to marry up the times of year when I was submitting parts of my book to the editor and I think that that worked quite well.

I think you have to believe passionately in what you're doing and you have to see it going somewhere. And so I mean I do hope that I will be able to make part of my career at least as a professional writer and in order to do that, whether you have a second job or you don't, most people go through a period of hardship. Either it's hardship of poverty because they're not making any money or hardship of having to work too hard because they have a second job.

Do you have an agent?

I have an agent now, I didn't have an agent for the first book because the book was the idea of the publisher

and they sourced a writer so there was no benefit to having an agent because in a sense it wasn't my book to take to any publisher who would have it, I was being commissioned by the editor to write the book. Since the book has been published and has had some good reviews and I have decided to write a second book, I have gone out and found an agent.

How did you do that?

I asked my editor to suggest names of agents and he, after some initial reluctance because obviously he could see that that would make it less likely I would publish my next book with him, gave me some names. It is, I don't have direct experience of this but I think it is very difficult to get an agent if you don't have a book under your wing already and so in that sense I was just lucky to have the opportunity to write a book for a popular audience and then to find an agent, which does make it much easier.

How does the agent, how do you, what happens, do you have an interview with the agent or does the agent look at some kind of CV and take into consideration the book you have published before he decides to take you on?

It's a mixture, and I'm sure every agent is different because of course they are self-employed although they work in larger agencies. For me because I had a book, I sent a copy of my book to the agent, they read it, then we met, we discussed whether I would fit in well with the other authors that she looks after and therefore the expertise, the areas of expertise that she has developed and we agreed that I did. Then I signed a contract under the terms of which she gets ten or fifteen percent of anything I get from writing, but in return for that she obviously has much greater expertise at selling ideas for books for a higher price than I could get or that I have time to get. Even at that stage, even when you have signed a contract, if you haven't, if she hasn't, if your agent has sold a book on your behalf, you're not quite sure if the relationship is going to work or not. What was, what was very interesting about it was that there are similarities with the relationship with the supervisor, very strongly, because the agent on one level is on your side and on the other level is not on your side, they have to be a critical friend and my agent has spent the last year honing and changing my latest book proposal in a way that has been quite arduous for me. And I think I have put in, by an order of magnitude, more effort into the proposal than I had ever intended or thought would be necessary especially since I thought 'well, I have this successful first book already'. For all that, the proposal is, by order of magnitude, better and stronger than it would have been without that input and now I suppose is the stressful time for her because she is now in the process of selling it and if she can't sell it for enough money then neither of us will be very happy. But if it works out I'd say that's the point at which we know we have a good working relationship going forward into the future.