

# STUDENT AND JOBSEEKER GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL INTERNSHIPS

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Note: This guide is intended to help students and other jobseekers get the most out of their internship experience.

Please note that the term "internship" is used loosely to include any work or service experience where an individual participates in work tasks on the jobsite on a temporary basis.

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## Why Choose Internship?

An internship is a work or service experience in which a student or jobseeker participates at a worksite as an active team member contributing to meaningful projects. An internship should be monitored and designed to accomplish the following goals:

- **To provide you as the student or jobseeker with meaningful tasks and responsibilities** so that you learn from the experience and apply your own knowledge and skills to benefit the employer.
- **To provide you with an opportunity to understand the industry, the company, the work culture, expectations, and day-to-day responsibilities of a job** so you can make an informed decision about pursuing a career in the field.
- **To provide the employer with a competent, temporary individual (that's you!)** who can add value to projects and tasks during the internship.
- **To provide the employer with the opportunity to get to know your knowledge, skills and work habits, and to assess your fit for potential long-term employment.**
- **The opportunity, if you are a student, to earn academic credit while gaining real world experience.**

## Internships Offer Many **Benefits** to Students and Jobseekers, Including:

- **Being exposed to the actual tasks, responsibilities and work culture** of an industry and a specific company or hiring organization;
- **Developing on-the-job skills, abilities and knowledge** that cannot be learned in a classroom setting;
- **Applying classroom concepts and training theories, and integrating them** with field experience;
- **Cultivating confidence and professional contacts in the field** that will lead to good job opportunities during school and after graduation; and
- **Boosting your resume with real world experience and strong references.**

## A Twelve-Step Program to Making the Most of an Internship

Ultimately your connection to a job—whether during school or training, after graduation or upon completing training—depends on you. Today, employers in almost every industry rate job experience in their field as a top priority when hiring new employees. To make sure you have a competitive edge in the job market, you must find ways to acquire job experience. Volunteering is one way to accomplish this; internships, apprenticeships and other work experience opportunities are another way.

Below are 12 steps that can help you gain valuable work experience and make the most of the opportunity. If you are in school or a training program, first find out whether they can help you secure an internship, and then use these steps to secure a placement with an employer. If you are seeking work, connect with your local Workforce Center to see if they can assist you.

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## Step 1: Define Your Interests

You know *you* best. You know your interests, your proclivities, your skills and abilities, and the type of work you might find most engaging.

- Take the time to write what you know about yourself in terms of interests, skills, abilities, knowledge and work styles. Talk to your parents and friends about your interests.
- If you feel unsure about your interests and skills, start by reviewing your past experiences. What past jobs have been most engaging to you? Why? What did you do? What classes or trainings have you found most interesting? Why? What were you learning? What have you always thought you would be good at, but never had the chance to try? Why that particular activity or job? Do you know someone who has a job that sounds intriguing to you? Find out more about that job, and do a self-assessment: would you be a good match?

## Step 2: Be Realistic

Be careful not to limit yourself too early, but also be realistic about the kinds of jobs that might be open to you in your field of interest. If you are a high school or college student, an out-of-school youth or young adult, a re-careering adult, or an unemployed adult who has been out of work for more than a year, you will need to consider jobs that help you get your foot in the door of an industry or company, not a mid- or high-level job that is more likely to be filled by a more experienced worker.

## Step 3: Create Your List of Potential Employers

Once you have determined your interests, start identifying places of employment that might be a good fit. Leave no stone unturned in this process. Talk to your teachers, professors, instructors, case manager or counselor. Who do they know that might offer an internship that would be a good fit for you? Search job posting sites, and do not be discouraged if they do not post any open intern positions. At this point, you are looking for types of companies or employers where you might want an internship. Talk to your local Workforce Center, and ask them if they arrange internships or assist you in your search. Search websites of industry associations, chambers of commerce, the Better Business Bureau, community-based organizations like museums and arts centers, and even community organizations like Rotary or Kiwanis whose members are often business owners or executives. Once you've developed a list of specific potential employers, find out the following:

- Who do you know that might know someone in that company or organization? Ask around, including your teachers, instructors, advisors, Workforce Center staff, etc. What do they know about the company? Can they help you connect with the company?
- The name and number of the human resource director, or the name of the person responsible for coordinating internships. If no one is assigned this duty, find out who would be the best person to talk to about a potential internship. How do you find this out? Call the main number of the company or organization and ask. *Note: It is best to do this by phone instead of dropping by unannounced, potentially interrupting a busy work day.*

## Step 4: Polish Your Résumé

If you have not done this already, you'll need to refresh your résumé. Once you've researched on the types of companies you are interested in, you can customize your résumé.

- State your objective clearly somewhere, including for example: "To secure an internship in X industry, in order to understand the types of skills and abilities needed to succeed and gain a clearer understanding of the types of day-to-day tasks, responsibilities and work culture of an entry-level job."
- Highlight any relevant skills or training you have received that might be particularly applicable to the type of work in the company or organization.

## Step 5: Develop Your Own Learning Objectives

If you are seeking an internship as part of an academic requirement, your advisor or internship coordinator on campus is likely to have a set of specific learning objectives for you to consider.

Be clear how this experience will contribute to your Individual Career Advancement Plan (ICAP), and if there is anything you will need to communicate with your future job supervisor or mentor related to your ICAP or requirements to receive academic credit. *Remember, this is not the responsibility of the employer. It is your responsibility.*

If you are doing this on your own, you will want to be clear about what you want out of this before going in for an interview with an employer. Consider:

- What strengths can you apply to this place of work?
- What areas of knowledge do you specifically want to gain if given the chance at this place of work?
- What specific skills do you want to build that are relevant to this place of work?
- What knowledge or skills can you transfer to this industry? Workplace?

Thinking ahead about these questions will help you answer the inevitable question that you will get from an employer during an interview: Why do you want to work here?

## Step 6: Get an Interview and Be Prepared

You have your list. You have your résumé. You know what you want out of an internship. Now network and do the outreach. Use every connection you have to introduce yourself. Where you have no connection, pick up the phone yourself and talk to the human resource director or, in the case of a small employer, talk to the owner or director. Be extremely respectful of their time. They are busy. Ask directly if you can send your résumé to them and if you can set up an interview for a potential internship. If they say no, ask them if they would be willing to set up an “informational interview” so you may learn more about their organization and the industry. *Do not be discouraged if you hear “no” more than “yes.” That’s normal. Keep trying.*

There are two essential elements of preparing for the interview.

- **Find out everything you can about the company or organization.** Look at their website, talk to people who know them or are employed by them. Write out a list of questions you have about the company based on this research. It will demonstrate that you are taking their company seriously.
- **Practice.** Use your school’s career service office, your local Workforce Center, and your friends and family as resources to help you. Prepare for questions like:
  - Why do you want to intern here?
  - Why did you choose this field?
  - What specific skill sets and knowledge make you a good fit?
  - What do you hope to gain from this internship?
  - When are you available to start? How many hours will you work per week? How long do you expect the internship to last?
  - What level of compensation are you expecting?

## Step 7: Follow Up

Send a thank you note. Why? Because most applicants do not bother with this step, so it will help you stand out. Write a short note or email thanking the interviewer(s) for their time. Tell them you really enjoyed the conversation, reiterate

that you would like to work for them, and briefly summarize why. Wrap up by saying that you look forward to hearing back from them and that you will call in one week to answer any additional questions they might have.

If you get more than one offer, assess which one is the best fit for you. Let the employer know you are interested as soon as possible. Let the others know that you appreciate their time and that you have opted to take another position. Be courteous, grateful and respectful. You may want to work for them later.

## Step 8: Take Care of all Needed Paperwork

This is the first real task-oriented impression you will make on your new employer. As soon as you get the offer, ask them what your next steps should be. Should you come in to fill out paperwork and forms? Should you discuss work schedule and start date? Let them guide you, but take the initial step and ask how to proceed.

## Step 9: Understand Your Responsibilities

Either before or on your first day, make sure you know who your direct supervisor or mentor will be. Ask to sit down with them as early as possible to go over the job description, specific tasks, types of projects and overall expectations that they have for you as an intern. Ask them about your work space and when you might be introduced to other staff that will be colleagues on specific projects. Finally, ask them: What have I not asked that I should know?

## Step 10: Your First Week: Learn and Communicate

You have two main objectives during your first week on the job:

- **Learn your job:** Know the expected projects and deliverables, the day-to-day tasks you are responsible for, who you report to and how to share your progress; and
- **Communicate:** Connect with others to help you succeed.
  - Greet everyone you meet and ask them questions about their job. Get to know everyone in your department or division.
  - When possible, offer to help others as long as it does not interfere with your core responsibilities.
  - Ask for help when you need it. Everyone knows you are the “new kid on the block.” Be okay with that.
  - Ask for clarity on protocol when needed (if you are unclear how to clock in or clock out, when you should take breaks, whether you are welcome at staff meetings, whether you should greet clients, or anything else that surfaces during your first week). This is the time to ask.

## Step 11: On the Job

Every job will be different in terms of work culture (laid back vs. suit and tie, for example). No matter the job, two basic rules always apply:

- **Be a professional employee all the time:**
  - Be prompt (never show up late, never leave early);
  - Dress appropriately (take cues from your boss, supervisors, others in the office that are in middle to high positions);
  - Ask questions that will help you learn how to do your job better, but be respectful of everyone else’s time (they are working full time and have tasks to complete just like you do);
  - Give your opinions and insights but remember that you are the learner in this situation; and
  - Be okay with the menial, day-to-day tasks in addition to the bigger projects or deliverables you may be responsible for completing. Every job is a mix of both.

- **Go Beyond Expectations:**
  - Never do the bare minimum. Always go above and beyond, even just a little bit. For example, show up to work five or ten minutes early. It tells your employer that you are interested and engaged. Stay a little later at the end of the day.
  - Put a little extra effort into documents or reports that you are working on.
  - Before leaving, ask your supervisor or others if there is anything else that you can do before you leave. This will get noticed.
  - Finally, as your internship proceeds, assess your workload, and ask for more projects or more responsibility as time proceeds. Be realistic with what you can achieve, but do not be afraid to take on more if you are able.

Keep a journal. This might be a requirement if you are doing an internship for academic credit, but if not, consider keeping a journal anyway. This will be something you value at the end of your internship when you need to reflect on what you learned, or when you need to cite specific skills and knowledge that you gained during your internship. It can also come in handy if you decide to ask your employer for full-time work after your internship is over.

Include the following in your regular journal:

- Describe your duties and responsibilities, including anything you did not expect to be doing or learning.
- Comment on the work culture and general behaviors of professionals in the company and field.
- Create or obtain a copy of the organizational chart, and pinpoint where you are on the chart. Make notes about specific jobs or positions that interest you. Which position would you want to hold in two years? Five years?
- What, in your own words, is the purpose of this company or organization? What does it achieve? What outcomes and impact does it have? What gaps does it fill? What are you learning about this industry each week?
- What is the company's business model? How is it funded? What new things are you learning about the business model each week?
- What has been your most positive experience so far? What has been your least? Why?

## Step 12: Conclude Your Internship (but Leave the Door Open for Hire)

As the official end date of your internship approaches, consider if you want to work for this company or organization full time. If so, schedule a meeting with your supervisor to discuss this option. If they say no, do not be discouraged. Let them know that the experience has been valuable to you, and if they are in a position to hire in the future, ask them to keep you in mind.

At the end of your internship, ask for an exit interview and, if possible, a letter of recommendation. Ask specifically for feedback on your strengths and areas for improvement. They may ask you questions, too, regarding your observations on their strengths and areas for improvement. Be ready with answers that are honest but respectful, and that leave a positive impression on them. Finally, if you are interested in working for them in the future, express that desire again, and be sure to ask them if they know of other companies in the field that are hiring. Ask whether they would be willing to provide a reference for you.

Take the time to reflect overall on what you learned, and how to articulate what you learned in terms of new skills, hands-on experience and increased knowledge of the industry or field. Immediately, while this is fresh in your mind, update your résumé.