

GET THE INTERNSHIP YOU WANT

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The fastest way to perk up your résumé is to participate in an internship, but the benefits don't stop there. By interning, you not only gain professional skills, but also gather insight into a particular industry or organizational culture, and establish connections that might lead to a job.

Human resources directors see internships as a training and testing ground for potential new employees. Firms are spending more time and resources to develop internship programs because it provides them with an efficient way to cultivate future employees and weed out the undesirables.

However, before diving into the first internship you're offered, make sure you have investigated all your options. Internships vary widely in the amount of pay or academic credit offered, the type of supervision and mentoring you receive, the length of time you are expected to work, and the amount of learning you will do.

Criteria to evaluate a potential internship

PAID VS. UNPAID

Not surprisingly, the majority of paid internships are found in the world of big business. Consulting, investment banking, commercial banking, accounting, information technology, venture capital, entertainment, and marketing offer some of the highest paying internships.

More glamorous industries such as entertainment and book publishing tend not to pay because so many people are clamoring to get in the door. Still, almost all industries offer some paid internships to attract talented students at an early stage in their education.

For those of you who are completely turned off at the thought of working for nothing, there are some alternatives. Increasingly, organizations are realizing that although some students are motivated by paychecks, many just want enough income to cover basic necessities. In response, many traditionally unpaid internships now come with one-time stipends of \$2,500 or more to help students defray their costs of living.

If you decide against—or can't get—a paid internship there are still opportunities to gain valuable work experience. For example, if you're interested in politics, an unpaid internship campaigning for your local Congressman may help you establish valuable connections for your future career. Working in a hospital lab offers the opportunity to practice skills, such as blood drawing or microscopy, that will come in handy for a doctor-to-be. A future lawyer will gain understanding of a firm's document and litigation services by working as a legal assistant.

Even if you are not paid for these internships, you'll get connections, training, and an understanding of the field that makes the lack of pay less significant.

CREDIT VS. NON-CREDIT

Some colleges, hoping to steer students toward the real-world experience an internship provides, grant college credit for approved internships. Other cooperative education colleges and universities require students to do internships as part of their curriculum. Unfortunately, the majority of colleges do not award credit for internships.

MENTOR-LED VS. SELF-DIRECTED

The difference here is initiative. If you think you work best when you structure, develop, and monitor your own work, then by all means do it on your own. However, if you know you want to create a certain product or learn a particular technique or technology, but don't have the foggiest idea of how to go about achieving it, then seek guidance from a mentor.

That mentor could be your academic advisor or a professor who specializes in your field of interest. Be sure your mentor has a clear understanding of what you would like to achieve and what your time frame is, and knows how to structure an internship and track your progress throughout the project.

SCHOOL-TIME VS. SUMMERTIME

Many internships are only available in the summertime. Organizations want to ensure that they have enough work to keep students busy and don't want students to compromise the quality of their academics while interning.

However, if you're interested in learning outside the classroom during the academic year and are confident your schoolwork won't suffer, then look for employers who hire interns all year round.

PART-TIME VS. FULL-TIME

Two options exist for the student who wants long-term exposure to a particular company. Your first option is to take a year or semester off from school. These types of experiences can be immensely rewarding and can provide a break from the academic world. You'll also get a chance to refocus your career goals and align the rest of your education with those goals.

The second option is a part-time internship that extends through the academic year and summer. Part-time may not provide as clear a picture of what the daily demands are in a given profession, but chances are you'll learn enough to assess whether or not you enjoy and feel challenged by a given job. Best of all, part-time internships don't require you to take a year off, so you can still graduate with your class.

Regardless of your goals or constraints--internships can be a major asset to any job. Know what you desire, and go for it!

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