

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR INTERNSHIP

By Christina Richardson

"One-hundred percent of the people I hire have had internships," says Michelle Goza, a campus recruiter for The Gap. "It's foolish not to pursue the opportunity."

As companies realize that successful internships benefit both the employer and the employee, the diversity of internships is growing: from mentor-led programs to unpaid volunteering to well-paying gigs. Follow these steps to make your internship a success.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT INTERNSHIP

Think in advance about what you want from your experience. As Dave Bracken notes in *Define Your Internship Goals*, "You'll sound more informed and focused if you can describe to potential employers exactly what kind of experience you want."

Assess your motives—taking into account your strengths, weaknesses, affinities, and expectations. Think about the way you work best: Do you value flexibility? Creativity? Coworker interaction? Do you want to learn a specific skill or just beef-up your resume? Are you willing to work for free or next-to-nothing or do you need a cash incentive? Use the temporary nature of the arrangement to your advantage. An internship is a great way to see if your major can become your career, or if your plans are realistic or idealized. It can also be a time to try something completely new.

DEFINE THE JOB EXPECTATIONS

Agree on a detailed job description and performance expectations. "The candidate should evaluate whether [the company's] project will meet her needs," advises Lowell Beatty, 3Com's college-relations specialist. "Ask plenty of questions upfront. 'Will I be evaluated? Can I make a final presentation?'"

Make sure your expectations are clear. As former Bear Stearns intern Annette Rodriguez notes, "Sure [an internship] looks good on your resume, and it could lead to [a job], but you do it for you."

Try to settle upon a wage or stipend—even a small salary will make you take the job more seriously. If money is out of the question, look into the possibility of school credit. Avoid taking another part-time job just to make money—it will only distract you from your internship experience.

MAXIMIZE YOUR TIME ON THE JOB

Be responsible. Show up on time, work hard, and limit the amount of time you spend socializing. Doing so will go a long way toward proving your integrity and worth.

Take initiative. If you're bored, tell someone. If there's a project that interests you, volunteer to help. If a coworker is attending a seminar, ask to go along. If you're not finding enough guidance, request a mentor or supervisor—someone you can shadow or work with directly.

Be self-sufficient. Says Thomas Reynolds, an analyst at Lehman Brothers, “[Our intern] impressed me because we would give him a project and he would do it correctly without hassling us too much. [It's not] that we weren't open to questions, but he learned quickly that big firms have big resources, so he got answers himself.”

Observe the company culture. Is there a lot of gossiping going on? Do employees look stressed? Do people work together or separately? A company's atmosphere can reflect the industry as a whole, and give you clues about whether it's right for you.

Learn about the business. Get to know your company from the outside—its history, standing in the market, goals, clients, competitors. Reading the newspaper every day is an easy way to get a feel for the trends and current events that affect your job.

Network. Don't hesitate to interact with coworkers whenever possible. Ask them how they got their jobs, what they do, and about the pros and cons of the industry. Arrange for informational interviews to discuss jobs at the company that interest you.

Use Your Experience to Get a Job. If you'd like to work at the company after graduation, make sure you stay in touch with your contacts. Send them emails with updates on relevant courses or your future plans. Even if you decide on a different career direction, you will still have an excellent source of references.

Keep a copy of any reports, articles, or presentations you worked on and create a portfolio. When you go to job interviews, make sure that you highlight your internship experience—it will set you apart from applicants with no on-the-job experience.

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