



Determining if an Internship is Right for You

Too often students share stories of how they were let down by a particular internship, ending the account of their story with an “I wish I had known beforehand what the internship would really be like” sentiment. You obviously want to give serious consideration to whether or not an internship is right for you, but where do you begin? This tip-sheet provides evaluation criteria that should be used before accepting an internship. If offered an internship with a prestigious organization, don’t assume that you can forego the evaluation process because that internship will automatically be a great experience! There is a great deal of variability in how internships are structured – it’s always best to consider in advance how a particular experience will fit with your personality, career goals, and values.

Before Accepting an Internship Offer

What have you heard? Perhaps the easiest way to get started is by listening to your friends, classmates, coworkers, and acquaintances. If you’re in a similar field of study as your friend who just had an incredible internship, then you might benefit from hearing about that internship. The colloquial things we hear from day to day can be key ingredients in our internship search and evaluation processes. If someone shares a story about an unsatisfactory internship experience, this could be the first sign that it isn’t a good option for you.

This is only the preliminary step. While hearing good things about an internship may pique your initial interest, it is still necessary for you to pay attention to and analyze all aspects of any internship to determine how well it will support your career goals, provide skill-building experiences, etc.

Who would be your office contact, mentor, or supervisor? There should be at least one person at the internship who would be assigned to work with you and guide you. Having a contact, mentor, or supervisor (the title may differ from one workplace to another) will be, perhaps, the most crucial element in having a meaningful and rewarding internship experience.

Meeting with the supervisor before taking an offer provides you a critical opportunity to gauge whether or not you will be able to work well together. However, the internship site might not be able to accommodate this request if internship supervisors are appointed on a rotational basis, etc.

What would be your hours, schedule, and pay? Internships may take place at any time throughout the year, so you may have a number of conflicting obligations to handle. For instance, you might be taking classes, travelling, or participating in summer programs. It is crucial, for this reason, to have some estimate beforehand of what your hours and schedule will look like in order to ensure that your responsibilities and activities won’t overlap. Moreover, when you are preparing to accept a paid internship, it is important to know what your wages will be, especially if you are in any way relying on what you will be earning. For this reason, you should request that an offer be given in writing, so that the terms agreed upon are clear and consistent over the span of your internship.

What are your expectations? Although you might be tempted to accept an internship as soon as it is offered, it is important to first reflect on your expectations. A number of questions ought to be considered, such as, “What do I hope to learn?” “Is this the field I’m interested in pursuing?” “Do I feel comfortable doing the kind of work which will be expected of me?” In addition, you should ask yourself how the experience will contribute to your future plans. This could mean thinking about something as concrete as how the internship will add to your resume (i.e., what skills might you gain from the internship?).

In considering these questions, it is best to turn to the materials and correspondence relating to your internship. Will you be largely doing clerical work, instead of specific projects? Is the department doing the kind of work that you are eager to do? If you cannot answer all the questions you have, that’s understandable. However, by the time you are getting ready to accept an offer you should be in possession of a fair amount of information concerning what your activities will be during the internship. If you do not feel you have the information you need to address these questions, then this is a sign that you should request more information from your contact, mentor, or supervisor. And if such information is not forthcoming, then you are encouraged to be somewhat skeptical of the internship that has been offered.

Declining an Internship Offer

For whatever reason, if you decide not to accept the offer of an internship, be sure to be polite and cordial. These employers likely carefully selected you from among a pool of applicants. Keep in mind, if you become interested in working with this company during a subsequent year, a cordial decline will serve you better than never having replied to their offer.

Things to Look Out for During an Internship

Do your experiences align with what you were led to expect? An internship should provide experiences which are consistent with what you were led to expect. This means, for example, not being asked to do excessive clerical or errand work. Spending over 20% of your time on such tasks from week to week would be considered excessive. It can also mean not being expected to work overtime, for lower wages, or in unsafe conditions. Keep an eye out for these issues and be sure to speak to your mentor if you are experiencing any of them.

Employers are sometimes just as new to hosting an internship as interns are to having one; therefore, they are not perfect in their procedures. It can be helpful for you to point out issues that have arisen. However, if an employer is not able or willing to address the problem you have encountered, then this might be a sign that the internship needs to be seriously re-evaluated.

Do you feel comfortable and productive? Being able to participate in a healthy and professional working environment is a key component to a good internship. This requires an environment that fosters respect. Such respect is fostered primarily by the attitudes and actions of those from whom students are learning, i.e. primarily those who train and mentor them, but also other coworkers. Moreover, careful attention to the regulations of the Fair Labor Standards Act (see the Department of Labor's webpage <http://www.dol.gov/whd/flsa/>) is crucial. The FLSA guidelines were developed to prevent employers from taking advantage of student trainees, and serve as a reference point when evaluating if a particular organization is engaging in unfair practices. As a student trainee, an organization is not required to pay you as long as there is a balance between what the organization gains from your labor and the education that you derive from the experience. A common violation of FLSA is when an organization requires unpaid interns to do the same work as those on the organization's payroll, without providing any form of workplace education to the interns. This practice has diminished in recent years as more organizations now recognize that it is essential to place students in environments where they can learn best practices and procedures through observation and/or structured training programs.

As an intern, your goal should be to learn, take initiative, and pay attention to the details of your work. It should not be your responsibility to make sure your employer adheres to labor or equality laws. However, if you come to feel that your workplace fails to uphold these regulations, then you should bring these concerns to a supervisor.

Grievance Process

Students who are currently in or have been through unsatisfactory internships can enter into an unofficial grievance process to address their experiences. The first course of action should of course be internal. As advised above, contacting your supervisor is the best initial step. Students who are receiving academic credit for an internship should also contact their academic advisor. Additionally, and especially for students interning with an organization that recruits via the Buckeye Career Network and/or campus career events, contacting your college's career services office is also a good step to take. If you met with an Internship Advisor before obtaining your internship, consider emailing him/her to request a phone or in-person meeting to share the details about the problems you are facing at your internship.

Asking the following questions when meeting with internship recruiters at campus events and during interviews, is a great way to obtain the information needed to evaluate if the experience will likely be a rewarding one.

- Would you describe some of the projects or assignments I would be involved in and what my role would be?
- What type of supervision do interns receive? Do interns meet with supervisors regularly? How do interns get feedback on their work?
- How do you describe the work culture at this organization?
- What are the most important qualities you seek in an intern?
- Would you give me an example of an intern you thought of as outstanding? What made the intern outstanding?
- Are interns included in staff programs such as staff meetings, seminars or training sessions? Do interns observe site visits or meetings with clients?
- How many hours would I be expected to work each week? Would I have the option of adjusting my schedule if I had a family emergency or some other pressing conflict?
- It is my understanding that this internship pays (insert wage). Is that correct? Will I be paid weekly or bi-weekly?
- It is my understanding that this internship is unpaid, but is structured in a way to help me develop career related skills. What forms of training do interns typically receive?
- How many interns do you typically hire each year for full-time employment?

Helpful Resources

Vault

<http://www.vault.com/internship-rankings/>

Vault surveyed thousands of current and former interns about their internship programs and keeps the responses in a database that is free to use.

Glassdoor

<http://www.glassdoor.com/index.htm>

See anonymous employee reviews, salaries, and more for over 250,000 companies.

Internship Ratings

<http://www.internshipratings.com/>

A resource to rate, research and compare internships in various industries across the United States.

Succeeding as an Intern Tip Sheet

http://ascareerservices.osu.edu/files/Succeeding%20as%20an%20Intern_v82014.pdf