



Succeeding as an Intern

Maximize the Experience

Internships are a key opportunity to explore career possibilities, gain hands-on experience, and meet “people in the field.” What you get out of an internship depends, at least in part, on what you put into it. Here are some tips on how to maximize your internship experience:

- Show initiative. When volunteers are called upon to perform a task, raise your hand. Show interest and enthusiasm for learning new material. Or, if you learn about a project you would like to take on – don’t wait for someone to put out a call for volunteers. Go ahead and ask if you can work on it. Step out of your “comfort zone” - volunteer for projects that will be challenging so you can gauge if you have the aptitude to develop skills in those areas.
- Be Professional. Let your supervisor and others know you take your role seriously. Your dress, timeliness, and preparation will all impact your success in the internship.
- Don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know how.” While employees are usually hired on the basis of their skills, most supervisors assume that interns need more training. View the experience as a chance to obtain training and enhance your skills. Also, encourage your supervisor to point out your weaknesses, and accept criticism with interest, not defensiveness. This is an opportunity for you to train yourself to learn from others.
- Be creative. Employers view interns as a “breath of fresh air.” You can help them by suggesting solutions to their problems. They want to hear ideas, but don’t expect them to jump on every suggestion.
- Form relationships. Internships give you the opportunity to meet other interns and employees. Take advantage of being on the “inside” of an organization. Arrange informational interviews with staff in other departments of interest to you. The more individuals you can meet within the organization, the better your prospects of making contact with someone who can assist when you are looking for full-time employment. (See the office’s tip sheet, Informational Interviewing, if you haven’t used this strategy before.)
- Be adventurous. Try something new; investigate a career area you’ve never considered. You may find a career path that is more to your liking! One method for doing this is to shadow employees working in the organization’s various divisions/departments. (You will need to first get the “go ahead” from your supervisor before taking this step.)

Common Employer Expectations

When an employer brings on an intern, the employer expects professional conduct and behavior. This is true whether the internship is paid or unpaid, and whether or not you are receiving course credit. Interns need to remember that they are being evaluated at all times. Here are some general rules of conduct to remember:

- Pay attention to the rules, procedures, and expectations given to you in orientation and training. If you are given an employee or intern handbook, read it and keep it with you for reference.
- Be prepared to work the agreed-upon number of hours. Arrive on time, and do not leave early without permission.
- If you are going to be absent or late, notify your supervisor as soon as possible. Even if you have left a message, continue to contact the company until you can speak to someone directly about your situation.
- If you are uncertain about the dress code, ask your supervisor.
- Pay careful attention to all forms of communication. Answer e-mails with full sentences, and proofread messages before they are sent. Use professional language and demeanor when speaking on the phone.
- Be careful when interacting with the full-time employees, especially if they are acting inappropriately. Often, interns will need to maintain a higher degree of professional conduct than some of the full-time employees with whom they work.
- Avoid office gossip and inappropriate relationships with coworkers.
- Treat everyone in the organization with respect, including administrative support staff, building and maintenance staff, and fellow interns.
- Be professional when attending off-site company activities (e.g., retreats, conferences, and company social activities).

Learn About the Employer

Another piece to maximizing your intern experience is to learn about the employer. Consider the internship an opportunity to learn all you can about how the professional realm really works. Small businesses, nonprofit organizations, large corporations, and public institutions all operate by a similar set of foundational professional principles; you can be certain that anything you can learn about organizational structure will provide you with helpful knowledge for the future. That said, each organization is different and has its own organizational culture; be sure to learn your specific employer by engaging in the following:

- During breaks, lunch, or slow times, ask co-workers about their jobs. Find out what they do on a daily basis and what they like/dislike.
- Try to get a sense for what employers look for when evaluating candidates for full-time openings. You may pick up valuable information that you can use in a cover letter or interview should you apply in the future to that company.
- Get to know top decision-makers – they can provide valuable insight as to why and how things are done.
- Ask to attend meetings (e.g., regular staff meetings, division meetings), as this is a good strategy for learning about the company's organizational culture.

Promoting Yourself for Future Employment

Besides gaining professional experience in your field of choice, internships are a great way to seek out permanent employment. The ball is really in your court as the intern to make or break any potential future relationship with the company and your professional colleagues. Along with adhering to the above guidelines about employer expectations, try to find ways to stand out with some of the following tips:

- Be recognized as a star performer.
- Save copies of things you create (e.g., press releases, flyers, research reports, etc.) to use as work samples when interviewing for full-time employment. These materials are primary content for a portfolio.
- Ask for a letter of reference before leaving the internship, while your performance is still fresh in your supervisor's mind.
- Work hard to make a good impression at all times, with the goal being to demonstrate your potential for full-time positions.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions – it will demonstrate an interest in learning, as well as help you to improve your performance.
- Demonstrate a positive attitude. Refrain from complaining that a task is too boring or tedious for you, and watch your non-verbal signals such as eye rolling, "irritated" sighs, or visible impatience.
- Make the most of every task you are given. Even small assignments will be noticed if they are done with rigor and attention to detail.
- Learn from the experienced employees you work with, and accept constructive advice.

Develop Core Workplace Skills

During your internship you will likely obtain specialized skills specific to the host company and industry. You are guaranteed to have the opportunity to develop core workplace skills that can be applied in any future professional setting. Discuss with your supervisor ways you can apply and develop skills such as effective communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and time management. As you perform your daily assignments, always be considering how a core workplace skill can be developed through the assignments you are given. At the end of the internship be sure to add examples of how you developed these skills to your updated resume! To see a complete list of skill areas, see the office's tip sheet: <http://ascareerservices.osu.edu/guides/skills>

Build Your Network

Yet another advantage of an internship is the opportunity to expand your network. Networking is crucial to professional success – in fact, 60-70% of people say they found their job through networking, not a job posting! Of course, if you are enjoying your internship and hope to be hired full-time, strengthening relationships with your coworkers and upper management will be instrumental to that end. Here are a few tips for taking advantage of the ready-made network of your internship environment:

- Collect business cards – you will need them when looking for a full-time job.
- Always send thank you e-mails/notes to those who help you in some way. Write a thank you note to your supervisor when you are finished with the internship.
- Keep in touch with your co-workers and supervisor after leaving the site. Set up an account on LinkedIn; request to connect with those who expressed a willingness to assist you with making professional connections.