Building Relevant Work Experience

Getting the Most From Your Internship Experience

Learning, confirming, impressing, and positioning. When you take an internship, these should be four of your goals.

Of course you want to learn as much as you can about your employer and its culture, and about the industry in which it operates. You're looking to confirm that both the employer and the industry are good matches for you.

But you also want to impress managers and leaders to position yourself for an offer of full-time employment from the organization once you graduate.

“If you get a 'high-quality' internship that gives you the chance to apply what you are studying in school, it will give you the opportunity to confirm that your major is really the right direction for the start of your career,” explains Steve Canale, General Electric’s (GE) manager of global recruiting and staffing services. “An internship is a great testing ground to make sure that you are on the right path.”

Most companies hire the majority of their full-time college graduates from their pool of interns and co-ops. Canale says that 70 percent of GE’s full-time hires have interned with the company. What can you do to get the most out of your internship experience? First, you need to know what employers look for in their interns that makes them candidates for full-time positions.

First and foremost, employers see potential in you, says Julie Cunningham, president of The Cunningham Group. Potential, Cunningham explains, is indicated by your:

- Ability to learn quickly (not just the job tasks, but the informal rules of the organization)
- Perseverance when confronted with obstacles
- Ability to work independently and finish tasks
- Ability to work as part of a team
- Technical skills related to the job

“Lastly,” she continues, “don’t underestimate how much social poise and good manners count.”

Burke Walls, Intel’s intern program manager, agrees, adding that a positive attitude during your internship is a key indicator of on-the-job success.

“Many times, students come into an internship ready for their dream job,” Walls says.

“However, in some cases, that dream job may be several steps away from the original internship. Even if this is the situation you’re in, you need to perform at a high level. Managers want to see you take care of your assignments, understand your deliverables, and use your skills and the resources available to you to get the job done. Be humble and appreciate the work others have done to make you successful.”

In this competitive job market, it’s important to keep in mind that the overarching goal of an internship is to get a full-time job offer, Canale says. “Realize that, like school, you are in a competitive environment and that your actions, attitude, and deliverables are being ‘graded,’ ” he adds. “With this in mind, look for ways to differentiate yourself.”

To make your mark, take advantage of the opportunities your employer makes available to you, says Shannon Atkison, Vanguard’s intern program manager. An example is speaking or presenting in front of senior leaders.
“Treat this like a final exam and prepare as much as you can,” Atkison says. "And be creative with your projects. Every project has the opportunity to turn into something robust and value-added given the right amount of time and creativity you put into it. These opportunities are like auditions and represent an incredible chance for you to set yourself apart.”

Incorporating these strategies will help you meet your internship goals in pursuit of the ultimate prize: a full-time job offer.

*Courtesy of the National Association of Colleges and Employers.*