

Internships: Previewing a profession

by Elka Jones

An ounce of experience can be worth a ton of research—especially when it comes to exploring careers. Internships are one of the best ways to get that experience and to test a career choice. And later, when it's time to get a job, internships attract employers.

Internships provide short-term, practical experience for students, recent graduates, and people changing careers. Most internships are designed for college students, but many are open to high schoolers; others welcome career changers seeking exposure to a new field.

Elka Jones is a contributing editor to the OOOQ, (202) 691-5719.



Internship positions are available in a number of disciplines. They can be arranged through your school or the organization for which you'll work. And they often provide either pay or academic credit—sometimes, both.

Regardless of how it is coordinated, completing an internship increases your chances of getting a job that you'll enjoy. Not only do you discover your job likes and dislikes, but you enter the job market with experience that is related to your career goals.

This overview is geared toward college students. It discusses the who, where, which, and how of pursuing an internship.

Who should pursue an internship?

Almost anyone—both students and non-students who have yet to settle into a career—can benefit from doing an internship, no matter what their motivations. A liberal arts major, for example, may have a less obvious career path than, say, a nursing student. But even well-directed students can benefit from the practical experience that an internship provides: After all, a hospital emergency room, a pediatrician's office, and a nursing home each provide different work environments for nurses.

College students often take part in a summer internship after their junior year. Other students might work as interns during the school year, receiving academic credit toward their degree. Some students participate in more than one internship over the course of their academic careers.

Part of an internship's value comes from the opportunity for experiential learning. Whether students have some, little, or no idea about the kind of work that they want to do, they can get firsthand knowledge about a particular type of work or work environment.

Where are internships located?

Internships may be located anywhere in the world. It's probably easier for students to arrange something closer to their homes or schools than to set up something halfway around the world. But with a little effort, an internship can be created just about anywhere.

There are several ways to locate available internship opportunities. Public libraries, career centers, and offices of school counselors usually have resources that contain hundreds, even thousands, of national listings. These internships include positions with fashion designers, publishing companies, biotechnology research firms,

software developers, and Federal and State government agencies, to name a few examples.

Job fairs can also be a source of information about internship opportunities, as can the Internet. For example, the U.S. Government has a list of available internships online at www.studentjobs.gov/d_Internship.asp.

In addition, colleges and universities usually maintain local listings of employers who hire interns. Career counselors and academic advisors may be aware of possibilities, and professors may know what types of internships students in a particular field of study have had in the past. Programs that offer academic credit typically have an internship coordinator who oversees placement and monitors interns' progress.

Some companies have formal internship programs. Others accept informal arrangements. Directly contacting companies, or visiting the career section of their Web sites, is usually the best way to learn whether they offer internships. Students might also be able to propose and set up their own internships.

Which internships are best?

The best internships allow students to learn by doing, helping them to focus their career goals. Not surprisingly, most students choose an internship that is related to their major or to their career objectives.

But many students aren't sure what they want to major in, let alone what they want to do for a career. And the differences between one internship and another can be hard to discern, particularly for students who are new to the working world. Making several important decisions can help students choose the best internship for them.

Perhaps most important, and most difficult, for some students is to decide which fields or occupations they are interested in. Career counselors, academic advisors, and vocational guidance publications, including the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (available online at www.bls.gov/oco), can aid in the process. Browse the *Quarterly's* online index, www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/ooqindex.htm, for other topics of interest.

A related decision that students must make is which industry to work in. Occupations, and their related internships, differ from one industry to the next: An internship for a would-be management analyst would be much different in a bank, for example, than in a nonprofit organization. The *Career Guide to Industries*, online at www.bls.gov/oco/cg, provides in-depth information

about many industries.

Internship duties often vary, but any position can be worthwhile. Whether interns do odd jobs around the office or do challenging work that is related to their fields of study, they get a feel for workplace culture and make contacts that may be valuable for career networking.

How do I apply for an internship?

Start early when applying for internships. Deadlines for turning in application materials vary, but many summer internships require that applications be submitted by February or March. Career counselors often say that Thanksgiving break is a good time to start gathering materials and researching opportunities for a summer internship. Other experts suggest starting the process a few semesters before the desired internship period.

Applying for an internship might seem overwhelming, especially for those who have never written a resume or cover letter. But preparing these documents when applying for an internship means not having to start from scratch when applying for a job.

In addition to requiring a resume and cover letter, internship sponsors might request other items, such as a completed application, transcripts, coursework samples, and references. Applying for several internships increases the chance for success. Because high-profile employers are likely to get many applications, students who use personal or school contacts are most likely to stand out.

Reviewing application materials for accuracy and completeness before submitting them is a must. The most careful students have someone else read over their application as well. Materials should be sent on time, with a followup telephone call confirming that the application was received.

Some internship sponsors might require candidates to appear for an interview. To prepare for such a meeting, students should read up on employment interviewing, participate in mock interviews, and attend interviewing workshops offered at their school. And students who follow up with a thank-you note after the interview make a good impression.

Career counselors, books, and other resources can be helpful in the application and interviewing process. See, for example, *Quarterly* articles about writing resumes and cover letters (www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/1999/summer/art01.pdf) and

interviewing (www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2000/summer/art02.pdf).

Still not convinced?

Students who still aren't sure of an internship's value should consider this: Jobseekers who have completed an internship have an edge in the job market.

According to a 2005 survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, employers reported that, on average, more than 3 out of 5 college hires had internship experience. Moreover, many employers hire directly from their internship programs. The association's survey also reported that, on average, more than half of all students were offered a full-time job after completing their internship.

Internships aren't the only path to postcollege success, of course. But the process of researching, finding (or creating), and applying for an internship may be as valuable as the benefits gained from the internship itself. The entire experience is likely to make your job search easier—after all, you'll have previewed the steps. 

