



What you should look for
and what to expect

Internship programs for internationals

It's not unusual to hear people say that the most valuable part of their studies was the internship. Often an internship will enhance your academic work and bring the theoretical and practical together in hands-on application. Keep in mind, however, that there are two types of internships.

In a stand-alone internship program, you may end up running errands, getting lunches and making photocopies. But in a reputable academic study program, after hard work and preparation, you have the option to enroll in an internship – where you will be asked to take on real-life projects using your problem-solving abilities and education to improve not only your own experience, but to contribute to the company.

Choosing a program

So how does one go about finding an academic program that provides great internship opportunities? Consider one that offers internships in your area of study, whether that is Marketing, Business Management, or International Hospitality, for example. Look for dedicated internship coordinators with extensive knowledge of the business environment in their own locale. Some institutions give lists of possibilities, but the best programs have a large database of host companies and will advise you in selecting an internship that best fits your needs and goals. Orientation sessions, résumé writing assistance and search techniques are other valuable services to look for in a provider.

Top programs help get you 'market ready' by conducting interview seminars that do everything from coaching and asking typical interview questions, to advising you on how to dress for success. In some programs, you can meet current interns who will talk about their on-the-job experiences.

Putting it all together

Despite all of the benefits of an academic internship path, your biggest challenge will be going out into the marketplace to find a compatible internship. You must have the ability to "sell" yourself, taking everything you've learned and presenting it as a marketable set of skills that an employer needs.

After preparing and doing initial research, you will need to keep these factors in mind if you want your search to be successful: Know your goals. Clarify them. Learn how to think and conduct business 'American-style' within the U.S. market. Have a focus, either on a sector or a specific industry. Have patience. Today, everything is click-send and instant replies, but many human resource managers are simply overloaded, and things may take time. Be persistent and follow up. There will be rejection letters when you apply for internships, so have a Plan B.

Know what to expect

The internship can be a tremendous opportunity to improve and enhance your skills. As you trade your jeans and flip-flops for that power suit to impress your potential employer during the interview, you'll also need to don a professional demeanor. You will have to be a team player, take initiative, use your brainpower to help out, and be an effective communicator. The interaction in a real-world setting provides for improved language skills and practice that you just can't get in a classroom.

Be realistic

Hopefully you will have the good fortune of finding an internship where you can work in a variety of cross-functional disciplines such as finance, human resources and marketing. On a single job you may be responsible for a wide range of activities, further broadening your skills while developing a better understanding

of different job functions. You may be able to see how each department within a company works together to function as a cohesive team. So, if you are assigned to a project that seems basic and low-level on the surface (OK, perhaps even a bit of photocopying), the lesson may be that in real-world situations, people do these 'real' tasks for a greater goal. It is also important to consider the fact that you are in the process of building up your responsibilities in an organization by starting off small and working your way up.

Many students find that companies in their home countries are eager to hire them as a result of their multilingual skills and multicultural internship experiences. Those who do their internships in the U.S. gain a lot of insight about how

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we do business. This information becomes a sort of "insider knowledge" about what makes us tick, complementing existing skill sets and communication skills to make these students excellent candidates for hire. But students interning for a company in the U.S. with the goal of transitioning to a career with the same company at home need to be realistic. This is not the norm. Each worldwide location has its own area of expertise, function, and needs that may not match your career goals. While one intern earned such a great recommendation that Starbucks hired him when he returned to Japan, this happens very rarely.

The outlook is bright for Internationals

Since the late nineties, more and more companies are expanding into overseas markets – especially Asia, but also Europe and South America. Everyday in local and worldwide news, we read about American companies expanding abroad, as well as foreign companies coming to the U.S. Multinational and emerging companies are seeking foreign interns for their help in developing foreign market opportunities. And remember that intern from Starbucks? He observed that a lot of American companies are a year or more ahead in business trends, so having that internship experience can give you an edge when you return home to look for a job. Here's one more helpful tip: request a letter of recommendation before you leave your internship; this experience will look great on your resume.

Self-discovery

Overall, an internship will help you gain practical experience, build confidence, network for future contacts and jobs, and prepare you for a solid career in your chosen field. Not surprisingly, students change quite a bit throughout their internship period. They mature a great deal, developing from student to young professional in just 2-3 months. But what would a great experience be without self-discovery? ☞

This article is based on an interview with John Brawner, director of internship programs at the University of California, Irvine, University Extension, USA