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brilliant

Intern

How to get the best
internships and
make them count



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intern

Don't forget, it is not just about a company picking you – it is also about you picking a company.

This chapter will help you both avoid the exploitative internships, and ensure you are a good fit for a placement before you start it.

Source of internship

A key thing to bear in mind when avoiding a bad internship is the source where you originally found it. If it is from a reputable source, you should have fewer concerns about its quality; if it is from a less well-monitored source, you should be a little bit more careful. That is not to say there are hundreds of low-quality internships waiting out there, but that you should exercise a sensible level of wariness if the internship has come from somewhere that has not already verified its calibre. In much the same way you wouldn't buy concert tickets from someone on eBay without first checking they were a reputable seller, so you shouldn't dive headlong into an internship if it hasn't been properly scrutinised.



brilliant timesaver

If you have found an internship through an agency or university, then they should be able to attest to its quality, certainly if they are a reputable firm. Ideally, they will have met already with the company to assess the office, the culture, and find out exactly what it is the business wants from an intern. They can then pass this information to you to help you decide if the placement is a good fit. You should still ask relevant questions of both the agency and the company itself, if you end up meeting them, but the fact that checks have already been carried out should give you some peace of mind. The other advantage of using an agency is their continued support throughout the placement, so, if things do not go as planned, you know you have someone on hand to help deal with things.

If you find your internship through a job board, I would be a little more cautious. You may take some comfort in the fact the Graduate Talent Pool is run by the government, but do bear in mind that they do not necessarily monitor all the content on the site. They may well block adverts that explicitly contravene posting rules, but that does not mean that every advert gets thoroughly researched before it is posted. Indeed, there has been some criticism that the GTP is too open and should clamp down on the more vague listings that appear on it. So, if your opportunity has been found on GTP, be sure to conduct thorough research into the company and the internship. This goes for other major job boards too, such as Reed and Totaljobs.

Let me reiterate that the vast majority of listings you come across will be legitimate internship opportunities, and you should not presume a company is hiding something. However, because there are a few rogue listings out there, it is important to use your common sense and do a bit of background research to ensure you do not get caught out.

Goals of internship

One excellent way of making sure both you and your potential host company are fully briefed on what to expect from the internship is to have a clearly defined list of goals for the placement.

A good internship advertisement will set out the goals and learning objectives involved in the placement explicitly. If you find a more vague listing, with fewer details on what you will be doing and what you can expect to gain from the position, do not presume that it is a bad internship. Do, however, spend time finding out more about what the placement will involve and what you can expect to learn.

Some internships will centre around one specific project. If this is the case, the employer should have little difficulty in telling

you exactly what sort of work you will be assisting with, what the objectives of the internship are from their point of view, and what you will be learning over the course of the project.

If the internship is of a more general nature, then the employer should be able to outline the sorts of tasks you will join in with, roughly what to expect on a day-to-day basis, and again give you a basic idea of the kinds of skills this will help you develop. Of course, if these do not match with what you are looking for, do not be afraid to politely withdraw your application.

It may be that the employer has not given much thought to exactly what sort of work the intern will be involved in. Your questions could prompt them to spend a bit more time coming up with a solid plan for the intern. Also, be aware that some internships are intended to have a degree of flexibility to allow them to naturally progress into the areas that most interest the intern. If, however, the employer really cannot (or will not) give you a good idea of what you will be doing and learning, then think carefully before agreeing to join.

I am not in the business of warning you off internships and there will be companies that offer beneficial experiences to interns without being able to give much information beforehand (if they haven't run a programme before, for example). Nevertheless, the more you know about an internship, the more confident you can be that it won't be a bad match for you.

Mentor

Before starting an internship it is important to establish whether you will have a specific mentor at your host company and, if so, who it will be. This will not necessarily be the person who has direct responsibility for you. Often it is beneficial to have someone who is not directly involved with your work who you can talk to and who can offer you advice and guidance.

If you are working in a smaller company, it is unlikely that they will be able to offer a separate mentor. This is absolutely fine, but make sure you have established who you can talk to in the company about your progress and what level of support to expect from them. We will talk more about mentors in Part 2 of the book.

Company culture

When trying to avoid bad internships, be careful not to overlook the company culture where you will be working. Of course, making sure you will be stimulated, learning relevant skills and doing things that interest you are key to finding a good internship. However, the culture of the workplace you find yourself in can be surprisingly influential on how much you get out of the placement. It is much harder to learn and to form relationships (which is a key part of an internship) if you are in an environment that does not suit your personality. So keep a particular eye out online for any clues to a company's culture. Their website can tell you only so much: looking at employees on LinkedIn, finding if they have any videos on YouTube, even checking the tone of their tweets, can provide interesting insights into whether you will fit in with their team.

However, you can garner only so much information on company culture from the internet or hearsay. It is therefore very important to be aware of the office surroundings if you are asked to an interview. An office that is a hive of activity blasting out loud music could be detrimental to your development, if you consider yourself a bit of a wallflower. Similarly, if you are outgoing and lively, then working in a silent, highly focused office may actually stifle your progress.

**brilliant recap**

- They are rare, but be aware of companies that may try to take advantage of their interns.
- Make sure the internship is a good match for your requirements.
- Check the host firm has a clear idea of the goals of the internship, both for you and for them.
- Ask whether you will have a specific mentor and whether they will be your line manager or (in larger companies) someone from a different department.
- Investigate the company culture to establish whether you will fit in well.
- Do not be afraid to ask these questions; an employer will respect the fact you are taking the internship opportunity so seriously.



CHAPTER 6

CVs and cover letters