

Do the Work: Choosing the Right Internship Company

The most important decision you will make for your career's future may not be the school you study at or even the degree you choose, but where you do your internship. According to the *Journal of Career Planning and Employment*, 55 percent of companies extend offers to undergraduate interns and 58 percent to MBA interns. In addition, the experience garnered from a successful internship can also prove invaluable when applying for your dream job. A resume touting the experience of an internship can be a beacon to potential employers who wade through dozens of resumes with the same degrees and qualifications.

So with this looming pressure on your shoulders to choose your internship wisely, how can you be sure to make the best decision? The answer is the same thing you've probably been doing all of your life as a student: research.

Like writing a research report, you must first form your thesis — or in this case — your career goals. Do your best to answer these questions:

- What industry do you want a career in?
- What position do you want within that industry?
- Where do you want to work?

If you are unsure what your answers to these questions are, at least write down a few potential answers so you can narrow your field of internship choices. Remember, your internship is your chance to “demo” your career choices — nothing is set in stone. More than a few interns have discovered another calling during their internship or have made important networking ties that led them to another industry altogether.

With your career goals in mind, you can now begin your research into potential internships, filtering out all those that cannot help you in attaining your goals. Although the Web is a powerful tool, make sure you also talk with your campus career counselors. They have valuable insights from those who have already completed their internships. Also, be sure to contact the internship companies and organizations themselves. Many have intern managers who are more than willing to answer your questions.

When gathering your information be sure to ask the following questions:

- How hands-on will it be?
 - You may not want to stuff envelopes or make copies all day. A follow-up question could be: what type of projects have interns typically done?
- Who will be your mentor?
 - Your mentor could be a fellow intern, a manager, or maybe even an executive director. The success of your internship relies upon who supervises you. You could have someone who is with you every step of the way, but has little experience and knowledge more than you; *or* you could have the company founder mentor you, but always be away on trips

- or meetings that you can't attend. Your mentor should always be able to give you frequent feedback on a regular basis.
- What networking opportunities are there?
 - Besides the obvious opportunities to network with co-workers, ask about future trade shows, social gatherings, or special events you can attend with others in your organization. It may surprise you to find out that a coffee shop next door is a famous hotspot for industry leaders.
 - If going overseas, will they assist with airfare and/or housing?
 - If not, you need to be able to absorb the costs.
 - If one of your goals is to improve your foreign business language skills, will you be able to utilize and practice your speaking and writing?
 - Hopefully, you do not want to sit in an office all day with no social interaction.
 - Can you speak to former or current interns to ask their opinions?
 - If so, ask about their experiences of the internship. What do they like and don't like about it? What opportunities have opened up for them as a result? Are the interns treated as valuable members of the organization? Also, be sure to ask the previous questions as well.

Once you gather this information, it is up to you to weigh the pros and cons of each internship. A Fortune 500 company may look good, but a smaller and less prestigious company may give you a more enriching experience. Also, the personality of the people working there may influence you. Don't forget, part of the internship's value is the ability to network. Friendly co-workers will more likely introduce you to important people (if they know any at all).

One mistake is to give a paying internship more weight than the one that doesn't. Pay should be considered as the icing on the cake and should not influence your decision. True, you need to eat, but it's better to wait tables by night and have a great internship by day than getting seven dollars an hour to serve coffee at Microsoft.

With this guide, hopefully you will choose the right internship for you, but you don't get off that easy yet. Once you've chosen a great company or organization, the responsibility lies on you most of all to make it a successful internship. Even if you find you've chosen a bad environment to work in, make the best of it by making contacts and doing your best to learn the ins and outs of the industry. Hopefully, even if you choose the perfect internship, you will still hustle to make the best of the experience and maybe you too can be one of the fortunate 55 percent to be offered a prominent career.

This article was written by Lance Agena, Communications Specialist at JAIME. Founded by Fujitsu Ltd., JAIME is a private, nonprofit, institution that provides intercultural management education and executive development. Through their Intercultural Management Program and Japan and China-focused MBA programs, JAIME sends students to internships in Japan, China, and the U.S. every year. Learn more at <http://www.jaims.org> or contact info@jaims.org for more information.