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Getting Started: Making the Most of an Internship


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Today's college kids are well aware of the job market that awaits them upon graduation. With an economy still on the mend and unemployment rates still high, college students across the country know that their post-graduation dream job is no guarantee.

As daunting as entering the job market amidst the ongoing economic woes might seem, college students or even recent graduates can take steps to make themselves more attractive to prospective employers. Perhaps no such step has been more popular over the years

than securing an internship. Internships are designed to give current students or recent graduates an entry into a field that interests them, providing an opportunity to gain hands-on experience and pad their resumes in the meantime.

As valuable as a good internship can be, it can also prove a lost opportunity for those students who don't recognize the opportunity at hand. To make the most of an internship, students or recent graduates should consider the following suggestions:

* Find one that's the right fit. Some students accept an internship simply because it looks good on a resume. While it's true an internship stands out to hiring managers or other human resources personnel, students must find the right fit to make the experience truly valuable.

For example, students who accept an internship outside of their major might not approach it with the same work ethic they would if they were to find an internship in a field they want to work in. That indifference, coupled with the lack of financial compensation commonplace with most internships, might lead to a less inspired effort, which won't lead to a strong recommendation from bosses down the road. The recommendation could prove as important as the internship itself when it comes time to look for full-time work. So when seeking an internship, students should not simply settle on one because it's offered. Rather, students should choose an internship that's in a field they're genuinely interested in.

* Routinely meet with supervisors. Because most internships are during the summer, interns have a way of getting lost in the shuffle while their supervisors are away on vacation. Interns should meet, or at least discuss via the telephone or e-mail, regularly with supervisors to review their performance. This exhibits enthusiasm and a willingness to learn, while also putting interns in a position to get the most out of their internships.

* Treat the internship like a lucrative full-time position. At times, being an intern can prove pretty awful. Most interns don't get paid, despite working long hours and wearing many hats for their employers. As difficult as it may seem at times, interns should treat their internships as if they're getting paid lots of money. That means showing up on time, working hard, staying late if necessary, and most of all, not complaining. Negative attitudes have ruined many an intern. Interns must remember that an internship is not a right, but a privilege, one that can lay the

foundation for a successful career. Treating an internship like a lucrative position helps interns stay focused and work hard, even when it's tempting to kiss that nonexistent paycheck and long hours goodbye.

* Don't be pigeon-holed. Some internships are better than others, and the best ones often rotate interns throughout several departments. That enables interns to learn more than one aspect of the business, possibly helping them choose the area they like most and the area they would prefer to avoid when it comes time to job hunt.

Even if a company does not rotate its interns, that doesn't mean it's impossible for an intern to learn more than his or her job entails. Before going it alone, interns should discuss with their immediate supervisor if it's possible to learn additional aspects of the business. Offer to come in on off days or stay late to see how the whole operation works. This also allows interns to meet more people, which can only help when the time comes to find full-time work.

* Remember it's only temporary. Some interns love their internships and don't mind working free for long hours. Others are not so lucky and fight the urge to quit on a daily basis. For the latter, the best advice is to remember an internship is only temporary. As hard as it can be to get out of bed and go work for no pay all day, it's imperative interns keep a positive attitude regardless of how little they like their internship. Internships last roughly three months, so even the worst one with the worst boss will be over soon and students will still be able to make a valuable addition to their resume.

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