

# EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (a.k.a. Co-ops or Internships)



## EVER HEARD OF THIS?

“They want to hire someone with experience, but how can I get experience if they don’t hire me?!”

*You are just as qualified as the next person. You have a good GPA and even a marketable program. But there is one thing you don't have: **experience**. And the catch is, you need experience to get experience. Employers want good minds and talent, but they also want people with an idea of exactly what they're getting into in the workplace. That's why employers hire graduates who have gained experience through internships, volunteer experiences, and related jobs.*

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# THE INs & OUTs



## **WHAT is Experiential Learning/Internships?**

According to the National Society for Experiential Learning, experiential learning, or an internship, is a “carefully monitored work or volunteer experience in which an individual has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what he or she is learning throughout the experience. It's temporary work that gives you on-the-job training and practical experience. Internships usually last one semester, although some can be longer or shorter. Some are paid positions. Others earn you academic credit. You can intern in almost any area of study in almost any part of the country, or even abroad. Internships can get your foot in the door for your first full-time, permanent position. Employers are using internships as a way to gain a first in-depth look at prospective employees.

## **WHY do an Internship?**

- Experiential learning is the single most effective way to obtain employment after graduation. **Approximately 85% of interns receive a job offer from the parent company.**
- You get the opportunity to learn new skills, and apply the things you learned in the classroom in “real life situations.”
- It is a way to explore career options, likes and dislikes, with little investment in terms of time and money.
- You can earn academic credit, and for some internships you may even be paid!
- You can network and develop professional contacts in your field of study.
- You can increase your self-confidence and professionalism.
- You can learn more about a chosen field and gain industry knowledge.
- Accumulate evidence of your abilities – your resume will look good!
- You won't need a lot of training and hand-holding if hired.
- Find out before graduation what you'd like to do after graduation.

## **WHAT types of Internships exist?**

- Paid Internships
- Credit Internships
- Volunteer Experiences
- Summer, Fall and Spring Internships

In order to obtain credit for an internship, students must meet with their faculty advisor to establish the specific criterion that must be met.

## **WHEN is the best time to do an Internship?**

The ideal time to do an internship is after a year during a 2 year program or a semester after a 1 year program. You want a beginning understanding of your program and some time to make sure this is a commitment you can fit into your schedule.

## **WHAT should you have prepared?**

- Resume/Cover Letter
- A professional reference list. (Former and present employers, members of faculty, staff and administration. **NO FAMILY MEMBERS OR FRIENDS!!!!!!!**)

## **WHERE do you Identify/Look for Internships?**

- Positions posted on the Career Development Office job database
- Internet/Websites
- Ask your faculty members for ideas
- Visit with our Co-op Education Program Leader
- Job Fairs (many employers there also have internships to offer)
- Contact previous/present employers and/or faculty
- Contact local seasonal employers (e.g. Department of Parks and Recreation)
- Consult a phone book/yellow pages
- Alumni contacts/database

“Nothing ever becomes real until it is experienced.”

~ John Keats

“All genuine knowledge originates from direct experience.”

~ Mao Tse-tung

# SERIOUS STUFF

To get the most out of an internship or summer job, you must take it as seriously as a "real" job. Speak, act, and dress in a way that says you are professional. The employer will be evaluating you and your work. But also realize that it is a learning experience – you are not expected to know everything beforehand!

## **Keep in mind that employers look for:**

- Enthusiasm
- Professionalism
- Responsibility
- Communication Skills (written and oral)
- Good GPA (how good depends on the employer)



## Remember...

Even an internship or related job that is not in the career field you ultimately decide on can still be a very positive experience for you. It lets you know what you weren't cut out to be -- while you still have time to do something about it. It will be far less emotionally and financially expensive to make that discovery before you get your degree, not after.

# IT'S AS EASY AS 1 – 2 – 3

## 1. Take a Look at Yourself

- Personal Interests: What do you enjoy doing?
- Academic Interests: What do you most want to learn?
- Career Goals: Where do you see yourself in 1 year? 5 years?
- Work Values: What rewards do you seek? Causes do you advocate?
- Abilities: What skills/abilities do you have to offer?
- What personal criteria do you have for an internship?
  - Geographic location
  - Duration
  - Monetary Compensation
  - Academic credit

## 2. Gather Information & Make Contact

### Resources:

- Internship directories & guidebooks
- Bulletin boards
- Academic department/advisor
- Career Development library
- Fellow students/previous interns
- Professional associations
- Community agencies
- Public officials

### Narrow It Down:

- Develop a manageable list (10-15) and prioritize it.
- Review organizations in light of your goals and objectives from step 1.
- Do you meet the organization's requirements? Does the organization meet the university requirements for credit?
- Application Deadlines

### Contact Them!:

- Telephone Scripts
  - ✓ (If you have a contact name) "Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. Is \_\_\_\_\_ still the person in your office who handles the student intern program?"
  - ✓ (If you don't have a contact name) "Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. May I please speak with the person who coordinates your internships?"
  - ✓ **Be Prepared.** The intern coordinator may want to interview you on the phone during this first conversation. Be ready to describe briefly

who you are, your goals, and why you're interested in the organization.

- ✓ "Hello, (Name of person). My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a student at VHCC studying \_\_\_\_\_. I am interested in (Area of interest) and understand that (Name of organization) provides internships in this field."
- Send your credentials:
  - ✓ Cover Letter
  - ✓ Resume
  - ✓ References
  - ✓ Writing samples
  - ✓ Transcripts
  - ✓ Other materials (application forms)

### **3. YOUR FINAL DECISION**

- Helping you decide:
  - ✓ Which organization fits your personal interests/needs the best?
  - ✓ Are your abilities suited to the organization?
  - ✓ How well does the project/assignment relate to your career goals? Academic goals?
  - ✓ Do the co-workers and supervisor appear to be enthusiastic and supportive toward interns?
  - ✓ How much does the general work atmosphere (employee morale, dress) appeal to you?
  - ✓ How much responsibility will you have?
  - ✓ Will the internship offer valuable experience?
- Accepting and rejecting offers:
  - ✓ Show appreciation – either way.
  - ✓ Confirm start and end dates, intern supervisor, academic credit requirements, etc., in writing.
- **Explore Academic Credit Options**
  - ✓ See your advisor or department.
  - ✓ Get acquainted with the faculty sponsor who will oversee your credit arrangement.
  - ✓ Find out what documentation/requirements you need to make the credit arrangements.

# QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING THE INTERNSHIP INTERVIEW



Whether you're aiming for a paid or an unpaid internship, it's important to ask your prospective employer intelligent questions- these show you are enthusiastic and motivated. They also help you make the decision of where you want to interview. Listed below are questions you may want to ask:

- What are the principal duties of this internship?
- What are the principal duties of those departments?
- Are there any special programs provided for interns?
- Will I work with more than one department or division of the company?
- Will I work for more than one supervisor?
- What skills will I develop through the internship? (i.e.: Writing skills? Analytical skills?)
- What outcome do you expect my work to have? (In other words, will what I do become part of a written report or oral presentation? Will I be required to leave the office to speak to anyone?)
- How much interaction will I have with other interns? Are there special programs for interns to meet one another?
- Would there be opportunities to shadow employees?
- Would I have any interaction with top management or supervisory personnel besides my own supervisor(s)? Would the interaction be spontaneous, or at planned events?
- Is this a paid or an unpaid internship? Additionally, especially if it's an unpaid internship, will any of my expenses be paid?
- How will my performance be evaluated (on paper, orally, or both)?
- How would you describe the work climate here?
- Do you consider an internship to be a recruiting tool?

Of the last question, you can't say, "Are you going to hire me?", because nobody knows that before seeing how you perform. But you can say, "Do you consider your internship a recruiting tool?" The answer to this question may suggest how many interns eventually are hired for full-time jobs or give you other clues to possible opportunities within a company or agency.

# ADVICE for the INTERN

## Exhibit a Can-Do Attitude

- Attitude speaks loud and clear and makes a lasting impression, so make sure your's is one of your greatest assets.
- Take on any task assigned – no matter how small – with enthusiasm.
- Take the initiative to acquire new skills and ask for things to do. Make the most of your time there!
- Accept criticism graciously and maintain a sense of humor.
- Ask to attend meetings and events that interest you.
- Ask to shadow different people and talk with them about their work experiences (if time permits).

## Set Realistic Goals & Expectations

- Work with your supervisor to set up your learning agenda. It should target specific skills and competencies you wish to acquire. After all, the learning agenda is what distinguishes a short-term job from an internship.
- Maintain a journal of your activities and accomplishments in order to monitor your progress.
- Read everything you can get your hands on; talk with people in different departments as well as clients and vendors to become informed on all elements of the business.
- Seek regular reviews from your supervisor to assess your performance.

## Learn the Unwritten Rules

- Being the “new kid” is like being a freshman all over again; you will need to adapt, observe, learn, and process a large volume of information. Be patient; don't expect too much too soon.
- Buy into the mission & vision of your work place.
- Get to know your co-workers early. Office customs may not always match the formal rules...so ask questions and pay attention to how people interact with each other. Watch closely how things get done.
- Be sensitive to others...don't gossip, don't complain, and avoid internal politics.
- Be aware of people's differences (cultural, work style, management style, etc.)
- Also be receptive to the dress of your co-workers and supervisors; tailor accordingly.

## Take Your Position and Assignments Seriously

- Build a reputation for being reliable and dependable.
- Be diligent and accurate in your work.
- You may encounter a great deal of ambiguity, so seek direction when in doubt. Your supervisor knows there will be an initial learning curve and will make allowances for mistakes. Learn from your errors and move on to your next task.

## Meet Deadlines

- Always assume the responsibility to ask when an assignment is due. This will help you understand your supervisor's priorities and to manage your time accordingly.
- Be willing to accept additional work responsibilities as the position continues.
- Be prepared to work late or overtime when necessary give 110%. Your willingness to go the extra mile, especially during “crunch time,” will help you pave the way to assuming greater responsibilities.
- Alert your boss in advance if you will be unable to meet expectations....this shows respect and professional maturity.

## Communicate Respectfully

- Find out the proper way to address supervisors and co-workers, including customers. Remember their names!
- Maintain a pleasant and respectful demeanor with every person, regardless of his or her rank.
- Assume everyone else knows more than you do, but don't be afraid to present useful ideas that may save time, money, or solve problems.
- Make sure, however, that your style doesn't come across as cocky. Employers value assertiveness, not aggressiveness.

## Be a Team Player

- Learn how to follow the chain of command. Don't go over or around your supervisor to get noticed, to get ahead, or to complain. Establish and maintain good business relationships with everyone.
- Learn how your assignment fits into the grand scheme of things. In today's work environment, success is often defined by your ability to get along with and interact with others. You're a winner only if your team wins.

## Get a Mentor

- Identify at least one individual to serve as your mentor or professional guardian. It should be someone who is willing to take a personal interest in your career development and success.
- Once you know your way around, begin to network wisely and get "plugged in" by associating with seasoned employees who may share their knowledge, perspectives, and insights.
- Get noticed, because many people will have a role in determining your future.

## Have Fun!

- Last but not least, enjoy learning, sharpening your skills and developing professionally and personally.
- Participate in work-related social functions and become an active member in your work community.



As an Intern & VHCC Ambassador, you represent the College, your academic department, the faculty, and other students. Be sure you represent us well. Remember, employers will come to think of VHCC based on your relationship with them.

Learn all you can, develop your skills, develop your network,  
and have fun learning!

# Marketing Your Experience

## What To Do When Your Internship Ends



- Ask your supervisor to serve as a reference and to write a recommendation letter for you.
- Assess the knowledge, skills, and abilities that you have developed at your internship.
- Write or update your resume based upon your experiences and projects
- Make a list of what you liked and disliked about your position and use this list to explore future internship and job opportunities
- Redefine your career goals based upon your experience and clarify how your internship relates to these goals.
- Reflect upon the work environment, organizational structure, location, atmosphere – what will you look for in the future?
- Reflect upon your values and attitudes about work and how they correlate with those of the company
- Think about how specific experiences at your internship will be excellent examples to offer employers during the interviewing process.