

How to make the best out of an internship

A broad range of opportunities

An internship refers to a structured and supervised professional experience. The majority of international organizations offer the possibility of doing internships to graduate and post-graduate students. These usually last a few months. Thus, the offer of internships within the international organizations is extensive. The number of candidates admitted and the duration of the internship varies from one institution to another.

Duration

The length of the internship may vary from a few weeks to half a year or even longer. There is no hard rule for the duration of a placement. However *cinfo* tends to recommend a minimum of 3 to 4 months to make the experience beneficial for both the intern and the organization.

Requirements

The usual expectations are good academic results, international experience (traveling, living, volunteering or working experience abroad), knowledge of foreign languages (especially French and English), and a sincere interest in the field of activities of the organization or department concerned. In some cases, special skills (computer literacy, languages) or knowledge (of economics, trade law, environmental law, Human Rights, etc) are required.

Advantages of completing an internship

Internships can offer the intern the opportunity to:

- acquire a certain familiarity with the milieu of the international organizations
- gain professional experience
- get continual practice in a foreign language
- develop self-understanding, self-discipline and confidence in own abilities
- develop networking relationships (this can be a significant advantage)
- learn more about a chosen field
- evaluate potential career choices
- investigate organizational culture

From the above, you can see that internships constitute an initial opportunity to start to develop your skills in many different ways and to accumulate the work experience that will be needed later in seeking a regular position. Moreover, completing an internship is always a great opportunity to meet with professionals and build up a network that could lead to job openings. Such an experience could certainly be a first step toward longer-term employment in an international organization.

Constraints and disadvantages of completing an internship

This type of training does, however, have some disadvantages and constraints. The main one is the fact that most of the internships are unpaid: travel and living expenses are borne entirely by the intern. Moreover, completing one or more internships does not grant any privilege over other prospective interns in gaining access to other internships, nor does it imply any obligation on the part of the international organization to extend the period of collaboration or to transmute the internship into a job.

Find a good internship

Undertaking an internship is therefore a big investment in terms of time, energy and financial resources. Thus, if you decide to do an internship, you should be aware that the benefits you will get out of it depend mainly on the content and the nature of the work that you will do.

So, when you are looking for an internship, you should pay particular attention to the choice of the organization in which you will find yourself performing, and to the kind of tasks you will be doing. That is why looking for an internship can be difficult and time consuming. Generally, one can say that finding an interesting internship is dependent on your own enthusiasm, qualities and interests. The same goes for finding the necessary financial means.

Find or create your own internship

Many international organizations may be willing to offer an internship, but do not have a formal program. Using your research and networking skills, and some assertiveness, you may be able to create your «dream» internship. Of course, pursuing your ideal internship can be intimidating, but can lead to great success. The basic steps to creating your internship include:

- Research and identify the international organizations that may be professionally interesting to you. More information is usually available on the official website of the organization (see useful links), as well as on the websites of the country offices.
- The mentioned internships are usually part of an organized and pre-existing program. But in some cases you may be able to arrange your own internship. Those interested can apply directly to the organization or the country offices they are interested in, by sending a CV and a letter of introduction.
- If you prefer a phone contact, prepare a 20-second script to introduce yourself and to let them know why you are calling. Don't ask, «Do you have any internships available?». Do ask, «I'd like to talk with you about the possibility of doing an internship with your organization».
- If possible, when you contact an organization, try to use your network to identify a key player in this organization.
- Know yourself: assess and understand your interests, skills, values and preferences for which type of work environment.

Tips for a successful Internship

Communication

Initially, meet with your supervisor to review the goals and expectations for your internship. Ask questions in order to identify «who» does «what», clarify timelines and expectations of who you will work with, how you will gather information and what you are expected to produce. Think about how your assignments fit in to the larger goals and projects of the organization. As you step into a new environment you will have an outsider's perspective. Be diplomatic and professional. Avoid suggestions and sharing criticism about your workplace or co-workers, before you are fully aware of the workings of the organization. Ask for regular and specific feedback on your performance.

Understanding your role

You can expect a certain amount of «cheap» work to be a part of any internship. However, even the most menial tasks can help you learn about the organization. Learn everything you can about the documents you are filing, faxing or collating. Demonstrate the quality of your work and interest by paying close attention to details.

Take initiative

If you are not given enough work, be resourceful. Suggest projects that you can complete from beginning to end. Ask if you can attend staff meetings, conferences and lectures to get further

insight into the issues paramount to your organization. Ask co-workers for an opportunity to talk to them about their profession. Take training opportunities seriously and take good notes.

Networking

Take time to get to know your co-workers. Ask if you can have lunch with them and attend office functions. Do not just interact with other interns. Identify colleagues whose work interests you and actively seek their advice and guidance. Ask them to introduce you to people and organizations related to your field of interest. Record who you meet. You might use the back of a contact's card to note where you met the person and the highlights of your conversation.

Career Development

Keep notes about your involvement in projects during your internship. These notes will be very helpful when updating your resume and may also help you to summarize your achievements for your supervisor at the conclusion of your internship.

Evaluation

At the conclusion of your internship, you might be evaluated or be required to make a presentation to the staff. Use this as an opportunity to reflect on your strengths and accomplishments.

Identify the strengths of the internship and what you felt you got from it. Be diplomatic and tactful in your feedback about improving the quality of the internship for future interns. Make specific practical suggestions of tasks rather than general comments or critiques of individuals.

Before departure

Ask for references from your supervisor for your reference file. Talk with your supervisor and co-workers about opportunities for future work with the organization or within the field. Provide your supervisor with a record of your key tasks and accomplishments. This can be used as a reference if they are asked to provide a phone reference in the future.

Resume

Update your resume with your new set of skills and experiences while they are still fresh in your mind. Think about how you would describe the experience to a potential new employer: what did you learn, positives and negatives, what you might have changed about the way you approached the internship.