

Interning - Preparing for a Smooth Transition

First Big Decision—Start Date

If you have flexibility in determining your start date, consider asking these questions: Will there be other interns? When are their start dates? You should try to synchronize start dates with the other interns or start prior to them. Some schools get let out especially early, so you may have little control over coordinating with the other interns. If you end up starting later than them, talk with your boss about what projects you can expect and get to know others right away when you get there.

Beware: Do think twice about when you plan a vacation! I went on a family vacation prior to the start of my first summer internship. If I hadn't traveled, I would have started work on the same day as most of the other interns. They were received with a formal orientation and introduction to everyone and greeted with the projects that were described to me. When I arrived, I had no formal welcome, except for a less exciting project than those that initially caught my interest about the internship.

The lesson that I learned from this situation was that I should have asked for a commitment from my boss that I would get the project described to me even if I went on vacation. At the time, I also was not proactive enough to make friends with everyone in the department on my own. Now, I would know better and introduce myself to new people if my boss did not do a good job at making the rounds.

Note that you should be aware of how much wiggle room you have in going on vacation that summer. Employers want to get as much time out of you as possible, and they may not appreciate your taking time away even if they grant you permission. Some employers will not even consider you for the job unless they are sure to get a time commitment from you, while others have official start dates. The reasons for these policies are that it takes a lot of effort to setup an internship and there is a period of "handholding" before you are able to perform on your own. If you shorten the internship by too much, your employer will be annoyed that they spent the bulk of the time just helping you feel comfortable.

Internship Program Structure

If you were hired into a formal program, chances are you will be working with a couple hundred other interns, and you will have several intern events lined up for you throughout the summer. You should clear with your boss before you start work or during the first week if he or she would mind if you attended these events during work hours granted you meet the deadlines for your work. I would encourage you to participate actively in the intern events. My second internship was on the East Coast. Though I wasn't pleased with my work experience, I made several good friends whom I visit on occasion. The other interns made my summer more pleasurable than if I had gone it alone.

The Pre-Conversation

Your search may be over once you've accepted the job, but your work has just begun. Find out to whom you will be reporting. You should talk with your manager-to-be before you accept a position if you have more than one offer. If you just have that one offer, you should take it, but

make sure you contact your boss before your first day at work. Ask him or her about his or her managerial style (structured or more laidback). Does he or she have an open door policy if you have questions? Has he or she dealt with interns in the past? Will you be assigned a big buddy? If not and you want one, ask your boss for one. Are there intramural sports? What does your department do for fun? My department at Merck did a Habitat for Humanity project for a day as a team building activity. It was one of the more memorable days of my internship.

What will you be working on over the summer? If they say, “We’ll wait till you get here”, explain that it is important to you that you have a sense of what you will be doing before you get there. Explain that you want to do good work for them, and you need to be aware of what is expected of you upfront. At all times, however, don’t be too demanding. Your conversations with your boss before you start work will set the tone of future dialogue. You want to be polite and diplomatic in what you say while getting the information you need and the projects you want. If you know what kind of project you want to work on, you can request to be put on a project in a specific area or get exposure to a particular area of interest.

Most of my peers never bothered with the pre-conversation. Indeed, I did not either during my first two internships, but I learned by the third time. I was disappointed by my mediocre reviews at the end of the summer. I had worked very hard all summer and strongly believed that I contributed high quality work. However, my evaluations did not reflect this. Perhaps, my managers were right and I should have done better, or perhaps they had other issues. Regardless of their motivation for giving me just an okay review, I did not want to get burned again. That is why, you should make sure that you and your evaluator are clear on what the expectations are for you from the get go. Sometimes, when you are applying for jobs, potential employers will ask for references from your previous employer. You are in a strong position if you are confident that your old boss will put in a good word on your behalf. Still other times, for reasons outside of your control, you may not get a strong review. In this case, refer to the section on “What to Do If You Left on Not So Good Terms”.

What to Request

To reap the most learning out of your summer experience, you should have an end of summer presentation and performance appraisal. I would recommend a midterm appraisal as well. Most structured internships usually ask you to make a presentation on your summer project, but you should request one if they don’t have one setup for you. I offer tips on making a presentation in the Appendix. A performance appraisal keeps you in check. It tells you whether your boss perceives your work the same way you perceive your work. A midsummer appraisal lets you gauge how you are doing and gives you the opportunity to improve on any weak areas so that the final appraisal doesn’t come as a shock. My second manager talked me out of doing the optional midsummer evaluation because she didn’t get a project to me until a month into my internship. We had scheduled the evaluation a week later. What I wish I had done was to request a three-quarters evaluation because I found the evaluation that ultimately arrived rather unreasonable.

Caution If You Come from a Prestigious University

Unless you landed a position with a company local to your school or a prestigious consulting or investment-banking firm, do not expect to find many fellow alumni. Most companies fill their job openings with candidates from local schools, which likely are not as highly ranked as yours.

You should take care not to let your “good schooling” go to your head. Just like you don’t need perfect grades, you don’t need to attend a prestigious school in order to enter the workforce and succeed in the real world. Your employer is concerned with the work that you do, not your academic background. You’ll make more friends too if you don’t flaunt a superiority complex.