

NEWHOUSE NEWS SERVICE

Making the Most of Internships Requires Effort on Both Sides

BY KATHERINE REYNOLDS LEWIS
c.2003 Newhouse News Service



Rachel Eisler, 20, looks forward to her upcoming summer internship, working on sports and entertainment events at the Washington, D.C., MCI Center. (Photo by Tyrone Turner)

The prospect of supervising a summer intern can send employers into spasms of delight or terror.

Oh, the joy of tapping energetic, low-cost labor for three months. Oh, the dread of answering endless questions and dreaming up tasks for a (relatively) unskilled worker.

No need to fear; those on both sides of the job say that with clear communication, an internship program can help both the organization and the student without wasting anyone's time. The company builds a relationship with potential employees, while the interns gain experience and contacts needed to land a plum job after graduation.

First, manager and student should agree on goals. Some sign a "learning contract" spelling out performance expectations and duties, as well as the level of supervision and feedback.

Employers should give interns meaningful work and explain how it fits into the overall aims of the organization, recommended Ann Barkey, human resources director at the New York law firm Proskauer Rose. An initial orientation is helpful to introduce the newbie to co-workers and other managers. So is a mid-summer evaluation.

Rachel Eisler, 20, faced the common pitfall of having too little to do in a recent internship with a trade association in Washington. Her manager would give her some filing or other clerical work and then be at a loss when Eisler finished the chores promptly. Eventually, she said, she got tired of bugging her supervisors for interesting duties and started doing her homework or surfing the Internet at the office.

"I was counting hours to leave from the time I got there," said the American University senior. "A good internship program involves a lot more. It involves letting the intern shadow a lot of different people or sit in on a conference call."

She has higher hopes for an upcoming summer stint with Washington Sports and Entertainment, the organization that operates Washington's main sports and concert arena, the MCI Center.

Students who find themselves in a situation like Eisler's should learn more about the department they're in and look for ways to make its work easier, Barkey said. They could offer to update a filing or expense report system, for instance.

"Pick a person who seems more amenable than your own boss and volunteer to assist," Barkey said. "Create projects; talk to your colleagues even if you're the low person on the totem pole."

Employers who spend time training a student will be rewarded, promised Joyce Gioia, president of the Herman Group, a Greensboro, N.C., management consulting firm.

"It's like having a whole staff of unpaid employees who are dedicated," said Gioia, who this summer will offer interns weekly classes on everything from leadership to writing a press release.

Good interns are responsible, organized and enthusiastic, able to juggle assignments and work independently. They act professionally and build relationships while resisting the lure of office gossip.

Not all of them fit that description. The Herman Group has had problems with interns who reported to work late -- if at all. "Eventually we had to give them a creative career redirection opportunity," Gioia said.

An internship is a test drive both for the student to gauge whether to pursue a particular career and for a company to evaluate a potential employee's weaknesses or strengths, said Barbara Reinhold, director of career development at Smith College in Northampton, Mass.

"The biggest single problem is mistaken expectations," Reinhold said. "The horror stories primarily have to do with supervisors who expected their interns to be servants."

The success stories come from interns tackling a concrete project: creating a Web site, revamping a database or doing outreach.

Several Smith students recently interned with a Chicago-area organization for at-risk youth and their mothers. They did the publicity, created a system of records and conducted focus groups with families.

"They accomplished more than anyone dreamed a couple of kids could do," Reinhold said.

For some, an internship leads to a career better suited to their interests.

Ingrid St. Villier, 22, wanted to be a lawyer until she took an internship with a Washington agency that provides pretrial services to drug addicts. She got to make presentations in court, a nerve-racking but valuable experience.

"This opened my eyes to a new path," said St. Villier. After graduating from American University this year, she hopes to land a job within the criminal justice system.

"To be successful in the internships, ask questions, be nice, don't act like you own the place," she advised. "These are people that you want to build relationships and networking opportunities with, so you don't want to come across as snotty."

It's easy to be overwhelmed when you're the youngest person in the office. Jessica Frazier, 22, faced an extra layer of intimidation in her summer internship at the National Ground Intelligence Center in Charlottesville, Va. -- being supervised by military personnel in uniform and armed guards.

"If you don't have confidence you're not going to get through that environment," Frazier said. "You need to carry yourself as well as you can and try to be as personable as you can be, and become part of the team."

Interns who work hard, communicate with their supervisors and convey enthusiasm for the job may be as fortunate as Frazier -- she's starting a full-time job with the center after graduating from James Madison University.

It's also important to be flexible and creative. Ellee Walker learned this when she sought internship experience in malaria prevention

and volunteered to work in rural Kenya. It turned out the villagers needed basic help with nutrition, education and family planning, so that's what she spent three months doing.

"You have to go in with an open mind as to what they really need," said Walker, 24, a 2001 Harvard University graduate.

"I realized in the short time I was going to be there, there wasn't time to realize malaria prevention and there were more pressing issues."

On a day when she planned to visit a local school, she offered to teach a lesson to one class, expecting to address about 30 students. Instead, the entire school of 250 children crowded around as she explained basic nutrition, and the boys all peppered her with questions.

That experience grew into a project to draw out the girl students, who rarely spoke in public. Walker launched a speech contest among six schools that is now an annual event, and is credited with encouraging girls to continue in school longer.

"It really made me ready for anything," she said. "I've always wanted a career that is challenging, interesting and worthwhile, and the experience was a 10 on all of those levels."

* * *

Tips for employers:

- Provide an opportunity for training, development and networking with senior managers.
- Communicate goals of the internship early and often. If possible, give students a discrete project to work on for the summer.
- Only assign an intern to managers who are willing to invest the energy in supervising one.

Tips for interns:

- Be professional in dress and manner. Arrive on time or early. Do the absolute best job you can.
- Ask questions and take notes. Understand the organization's goals and how your department or project fits in.
- Cultivate relationships with your supervisor and other workers; you never know who might be willing to give you a reference. Avoid indulging in office gossip.

-- Keep samples of your work and consider starting a journal so you'll remember what you accomplished.

(Katherine Reynolds Lewis can be contacted at katherine.lewis@newhouse.com)