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How to Land an Internship

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We've all heard it. If you want to get a great job, you've got to have experience. But how do you get experience until you get a job? The answer is, of course, get an internship. Internships are invaluable. You've gotta have one.

When I first started thinking about getting my internship, I didn't take it seriously. I thought about it, put it off, thought about it, put it off, etc. I didn't realize how much this experience would change my life. Everything that had been so abstract was finally clear. I finally understood what my major really was about and became much more confident in my abilities.

The number-one reason to get an internship is to find out if you are truly going to enjoy working in your chosen field. Abby Rudolph, senior in management information systems and marketing, says her co-op at Pella Corporation in Pella, Ia., is reaffirming that her major is right for her. "With MIS as a new field, I was pretty unsure if I could do it, and if I could do it, would I like it. I realize I love what I do."

Internships are also a great way to get a head start on a job search. Many companies that hire interns are looking at the process as a way to get new employees. Kathy Wieland, experiential learning coordinator for the College of Business and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, says internships are now part of the recruitment process for companies. It will make you more marketable. "There is data that shows that people who intern get higher salaries." She also says that people who've completed internships often get jobs quicker than those who haven't.

Rudolph says often times seniors can relax in their final semester if they know a job is waiting for them where they completed an internship. "If everything else is working in the business, they often offer you a job during the internship or shortly after."

So we know we need them. How do we get them?

Start early. Don't wait until spring semester for a summer internship like I did. It makes your semester a little too scary.

Wieland suggests internship-seekers "at least dabble in it" during the fall of the year you want a summer internship. Most students do their internships between their junior and senior years in college, but you can do an internship at any time. Anymore, many people do more than one.

When crunch time actually comes, the first and most important thing you need to prepare is your résumé and cover letter. A résumé is not complete unless you have a cover letter to go with it. When Jayne Sykora, senior in journalism and English, decided she wanted to get a national internship in the entertainment field, she worked hard on her cover letter and résumé in the fall. Then, when she sent them out, she tailored them to the specific shows. She landed an internship at "The Late Show with David Letterman." Only sixteen applicants were hired from 700 résumés.

Another step to consider is registering with the career services of your college. They can help students perfect their résumés, cover letters, and interviewing skills. They also can help with the job search.

Before you start sending out résumés, sit down and think about the goals you have for the internship. Do you want to live around here or live elsewhere? Does it have to be paid? Research the companies you're interested in and talk to interns who have worked there before to see if they had a good experience.

Sykora's dream internship at the Letterman show was unpaid, but she wouldn't have reconsidered for anything. "How can you put a price on experience? It's an investment in your future," she says.

After you set your goals, Wieland suggests setting up a database of the places you want to apply. Then you can get a plan in place of when you'll send out the résumés and when you'll call each place back.

"Expect a five to 10 percent return rate," Wieland says. "If you send 100 résumés out, you'll get five to 10 contacts back."

Wes Gray, senior in marketing, did his internship last summer at BT Funds Management in Sydney, Australia. He says selling yourself when you get to the interview stage of the process is essential. "Give the interviewer/employer the impression that you have a lot to offer, which you do. Make it sound like you're there to enhance the goals of the company instead of stating your personal goals or what you want."

Genelle Nissen is a senior in journalism. She interned at Meredith Corporation last summer, if you were interested.