

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATIONS INTERNSHIP GUIDELINES

Six Point Formula for a Successful Internship

Many factors go into making an internship successful—an interesting office, a conscientious supervisor, substantive work assignments. However, the key factor is you—your attitude, abilities and ingenuity. Two students can go to the same office, one will have a very good experience, while the other is disappointed. Compare the following comments:

Intern #1

This internship did not require a great deal of skill, nor did it challenge me or offer a diversity of things to do. I did a lot of copying, moving boxes around for office staff, copying, *The New York Times* and digesting (condensing) media data.

Intern #2

Excellent! Very much communications oriented. Gained a knowledge of the communications field on all levels. Assisted in the duties of the office, Ran errands, answered phones, prepared exhibits and attended lectures.

Both interns worked in the same office, but as you can see, #2 had a far better experience than #1. Why? As much as anything it was a question of attitude and ingenuity. Although your office will play an essential role, YOU must assume responsibility for making your internship a success or a failure.

Use the following six point formula as a guide in making your internship a success.

1. ADAPT TO YOUR OFFICE

The work environment you will enter on your internship may be completely different than anything you have experienced up to now. It is important to learn all the office policies, written and unwritten, and adapt to them quickly. Your first day or two on the job may consist of tours to the supply closet, photocopier, secretarial pool, etc. Pay close attention, it may seem like pretty mundane stuff, but understanding the layout and basic flow of the office can make your life a lot easier. The following are some of the areas you should be certain to understand by the end of the first week. If the office policy regarding them is not explicitly stated to you, be certain to ask.

Dress conservatively. Especially on the first day. It is much better to be overdressed and dress down later than to give a bad first impression. Professional people generally dress up for most occasions and especially for work, depending on the office. Business casual is safest for the first day. Observe what others wear and if you have any questions ask your supervisor. You might even ask your supervisor prior to working your first day. On some days it may be alright to be less well dressed, while on others you will need to dress up. It might be best to ask when you talk with the person making the offer about what the office attire is so that you're prepared.

Know the office routine. This will take a little time, but you should be able to master it within the first week or so. Most offices are very "touchy" about this and can be thrown into disarray when someone steps outside the routine. Get to know the following:

Work area. While you may be fortunate enough to have your own desk, it is more likely you will share a table with one or more people. Keep it neat. Also, learn where you can and cannot sit. Some people object strongly to others sitting at their desks. A good rule of thumb is not to sit at anyone's work area unless invited and, of course, never touch anything on another person's desk.

Office supplies. Never use office supplies for personal business, particularly stationery or envelopes. Find out what supplies you are free to use and which ones require permission from a superior. Do not use photocopy machines for personal materials.

Filing system. No two offices will have the same filing system and nearly everyone thinks theirs is the best. Learn your office's system and follow it carefully. Few things will cause as much trouble as misfiling something so that staff is unable to retrieve it.

Correspondence. Never send letters out over your own signature unless you have been instructed to do so. Learn the style and format your office uses. If there is a signature machine, find out how and when to use it.

Greeting guests. Most offices are very sensitive about this. Always be helpful and courteous. Find out what the policy is on allowing guests in the work area and whether or not they should be left alone while waiting for an appointment. Never ignore someone who is alone—always ask if they have been helped.

Telephone. Many offices do not object to employees making personal calls, while others do; be certain to ask before making the first call. Find out what lines you may use and which ones are reserved for certain members of the staff. Always use good phone manners—never leave someone on hold for more than a few minutes. Also learn what the office's standard phone greeting is. Take good messages, be certain to get the caller's name, phone number and purpose for calling. Repeat it back to make sure you have it correctly. Nothing is more maddening than to get a phone message that has been written down incorrectly. If your office has a WATTS line, find out whether or not it is all right to use it for personal calls. In most offices, if personal calls are allowed, they can only be made after business hours.

Lunch hours and breaks. If you have an hour for lunch, that means you can be gone for 60, not 90 minutes. Some offices are very sensitive about the length of lunch hours and breaks. Even though your office may not object to you taking a little longer lunch, you will be more highly thought of if you are always back on time. Be certain to know the office policy about checking in and out; even for short breaks (such as to visit the rest-room). Many offices require you to indicate when you leave, where you are going, and when you will return. Use the lunch hour to make professional contacts when possible.

Addressing the boss. It may be alright to use his or her first name, but don't take a chance until you know for certain. Ask your supervisor if you are in doubt.

Refrigerator and snacks. Many offices will have soft drinks and snacks available for the staff to purchase. Learn the rules.

Time off or calling in sick. You are not to ask for time off unless you are ill. Make certain to ask during your orientation about the proper procedures for calling in sick or if there is a family emergency.

Don't participate in office gossip. Never pass along bits of gossip or stories that could be potentially embarrassing to someone with whom you work. Share what you are learning with other students, but keep idle gossip to yourself.

Don't participate in office pranks. The boss may enjoy engaging in a practical joke now and then, but you are likely to get burned if you do so. If such things take place in the office, stay an outside observer; that moment of humor may result in someone being offended and you being discredited.

2. BE ASSERTIVE BUT NOT OVERLY AGGRESSIVE

Remember your primary objective is to learn, not to change the course of history. The success and value of your experience is directly proportional to how open you are to suggestions and your ability to find learning opportunities. Keep yourself and your internship in perspective. Too many students overestimate their abilities and importance, and then are disappointed when those around them fail to give them the esteem they think they deserve. It all boils down to attitude. Think over each of the following questions.

Are your expectations realistic? The most common pitfall for every intern is unrealistic expectations. Students easily forget they are still in training and not ready to perform the same tasks as professionals who are out of school and well along in their careers. Often your assignments will be routine and occasionally uninteresting. If you are grateful just for the opportunity to observe

what is happening and to learn a bit more about the professional world, you will have a worthwhile experience. Some common mistaken expectations students have are:

I'll see the boss all the time.
 Every minute is going to be a new and exciting experience.
 I'll have my own desk and be able to pick my activities.
 I will be involved in all aspects of the office routine.
 A secretary will do all my typing, so I won't have to bother with it.
 I'm going to really impress the office with my abilities.
 The office staff will help me any time I want.
 My supervisor won't care if I make a few mistakes.
 I'll get to participate in important office meetings.
 No one will care if I take time off now and then to do some things I want to do.
 Everyone will like me and I will be accepted as a regular member of the staff.
 Because I am volunteering my time, there will be little or no clerical work assigned to me.

Am I willing to prove myself in little ways before being given more significant responsibility?

In most internships the first two weeks are the worst. No office is going to turn the ship over to you the first day. Be prepared for a testing period in which you will be asked to do a lot of menial jobs, such as running errands, photocopying, filing and answering the phone. Often the degree to which you perform these tasks well, with a cheerful attitude, will determine how substantive your later assignments will be.

Can I ask for help? Don't be too shy or too proud to admit your ignorance. It's better for someone in the office to think you are naive or a slow learner than to make a mistake that could cause you trouble.

Do I pick-up on corrective cues? Be sensitive to hints you have done something incorrectly. Usually these will be subtle, but a returned project needing revision or questions about a phone message you took are dead giveaways that you didn't perform to their level of expectation.

Can I take criticism cheerfully? You are there to learn and you will make mistakes as part of that process. Don't be offended if someone gives you suggestions or even tells you that you performed poorly on an assignment. Be grateful for their help and do better next time. If no one is giving you feedback, ask for it and be ready to accept their criticism if it comes.

Am I flexible? The ability to adjust your way of doing things and adapt to new situations is a sign of maturity and intelligence. Follow office procedure and you will usually succeed.

3. RESOLVE YOUR OWN PROBLEMS

Every internship has its own set of problems to be overcome—some more than others. The important thing is to deal with them in a mature and professional manner. You will be part of the professional world and cannot expect someone else to come to your rescue.

Some common intern problems:

The staff treats me like a second class citizen. Recognize that in a way you are a second class citizen. You are the newcomer and, although you will likely be warmly welcomed, some people may see you as an intruder. The best way to deal with this is to learn the routine and fit in as much as possible. If someone is particularly nasty to you, make an extra effort to be helpful and friendly. If that doesn't work, then just stay out of his/her way.

All I've been doing is menial work, like stuffing envelopes and sorting mail. There may be several reasons for this. Your supervisor isn't used to working with interns or is very busy and forgets to give you more substantive assignments. If this is the case, a polite discussion of the problem will likely resolve the matter. However, it may be the staff doesn't feel you can handle more substantive work. If you have turned in some projects late or poorly done, this may be your supervisor's way of letting you know you need to improve. Again, a polite discussion may help, but more likely you will need to prove yourself. Take some initiative and look for substantive things to do. Offer to help. Keep a cheerful attitude and do a good job with the menial work. Once that is done, try to generate your own projects. Don't forget that the staff may be testing your abilities and attitude to see if you can handle more significant tasks.

It is my first day and the staff has overwhelmed me with work. Where do I start? Decide what is the most urgent task assigned by your immediate supervisor and tackle it first. Explain to the other staff members what kind of work load you have and work out varying deadlines with them. If there is a conflict between work assigned by your supervisor and other staff members, have the jobs put into priority status by your supervisor. Also, find out about useful resources in the office that will help when completing assignments. For example, locate those reference works in the office library that can give you phone numbers and information quickly, particularly look for guides to other office staff and organizations. Often much of the information you will need can be obtained by a phone call or two. Check out the company handbook. If necessary, ask your supervisor to suggest a good starting point.

Serious problems:

If after a week or two you are still having SERIOUS problems, follow these guidelines.

Discuss the matter with your supervisor. Be candid and try to get him to be candid with you about the problem. It may be that just bringing the situation to his attention will be enough to resolve the problem. Ninety percent of all problems interns have can be satisfactorily resolved at this point. Never go over his head and talk to someone else in the office. Keep your faculty adviser informed of the situation in your weekly reports.

After you have THOROUGHLY DISCUSSED the matter with your supervisor, and it persists, **then, and only then**, get the internship director to intervene.

Have the faculty adviser and/or the BYU Comms internship director discuss the problem with your supervisor. Make certain both are fully informed of the history of the situation and what you have done to resolve it. They can then meet with your supervisor and discuss the situation. Nearly all major internship problems can be resolved after such a meeting. The director and faculty adviser will discuss with you what they have learned and make suggestions for ways in which the situation can be improved.

4. VOLUNTEER

Keep your eyes open for opportunities to assist the office staff in ways that are not part of your regular duties. Be willing to do the unpleasant tasks in the office that no one likes, such as cleaning out the refrigerator or making the coffee. If someone needs an errand run, be the first one to volunteer to do it. If there is a rush job that has to be out, volunteer to stay late and help with it. You will be amazed at how this will impress the staff and help you get interesting work and opportunities to become involved in meaningful things.

5. BE RELIABLE AND CREATIVE

Do every assignment you are give well and follow it through to its conclusion. Success will come through small achievements and dependability. Don't just file, excel at it. Give your supervisor the best photocopies he or she has ever seen.

Know what the deadlines are and meet them. A report that is turned in an hour late may be of no use at all. It will only take one or two projects turned in late to get you relegated to being the office courier or photocopier for the rest of your internship.

Never be late. Always get to work on time. Never be late for appointments.

Ask questions when necessary, but don't expect to have your hand held. Everyone in your office is busy and has problems of their own. Be resourceful and try to figure things out for yourself. Personal attention given to interns varies from office to office. Don't constantly pester your supervisor with questions and requests for help. When given an assignment, ask enough questions to get clear what you are to do and where to start, then work the rest out for yourself. If your supervisor has to walk you through every step, he might as well have done it himself.

Listen carefully to instructions and WRITE THEM DOWN. Get into the habit of carrying a small notebook with you and taking notes on the instructions you are given. Don't make anyone have to tell you twice about an assignment.

6. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES

Read everything you can. Be as informed as possible about current issues, particularly those affecting the office in which you are interning.

Become an expert on some topic. Select some issue that is important to your office and become an expert on it. The opportunity may arise when you can put your expertise to work and be of major assistance on some project.

Use all available training materials. Some organizations have new employee or intern training classes. Take them if at all possible.

Turn routine tasks into windows of opportunity. Look for ways to make the best of every situation. An errand to another office might give you the chance to meet new people and broadening your contact network. Skim through some of those papers you are given to file; you will be surprised at the insights you can learn about the organization. A little ingenuity can help make the most tedious task beneficial.

Advice from past interns:

"Be eager to ask questions and take on responsibility as soon as you can."

"Be willing to take the responsibility for the success of your internship."

"Avoid the gossip circle."

"Be prepared to dig in and ask questions, otherwise you will miss out."

"Patience and perseverance plus a good attitude will pay off. The work does vary a lot and you may very well end up with little substantive work, but any work will get you involved."

"Be determined to do your best and to learn something new. If you have culture shock, don't give up. Show your curiosity and find out what you want to know—people don't always realize what is new to you."

“Be prepared not to get much feedback on your work.”

“Push for things to do because they won’t just come your way.”

“Have a very professional attitude. Learn all that you can during your internship.”

“Much of your success will come from fitting in with the social system in the office. Be confident; others will only take you as seriously as you take yourself.”

“Act like you are a part of the staff from day one. Get to know everyone, including the people in the mail room. If the staff stays late, stay late and offer to help. They will start recognizing your commitment level and treating you like part of the team.”