

Internships in the United States: a first-hand experience

di Elvira C. Bianco

In the United States, internships are quite popular among companies and organizations, and have been for a number of years. They seem to be a common part of a person's path towards a successful career. In recent years, the request for internship experience is increasing among employers and an increasing number of university or graduated students are considering it a mandatory part of their résumé (curriculum vitae).

Internships used to be the beginning stage of a job in a company; the formation and training needed for the "intern" to eventually work for that same company or organization they interned for. It was almost certain that once accepted as an intern, if the work period went well, one would get a job offering from that same company. For the company heads, the internship period was also used to observe a candidate in order to determine if they were suited for the company. Today, this does remain a main characteristic or function of an internship, but things have also evolved quite a bit.

I personally know only one person that from his internship experience gained success and now has a good paying job with that same company. He interned for the company two summers in a row during his undergraduate years. His internship was paid quite well and that is what made him interested in it, in the first place. He wanted to start paying off his college debts so he applied for, what was for him, a simple computer science internship with this company that now employs him fulltime. I am sure that there are many more people that have had internship experience that gave positive results. An observation that I have made, that can be taken as advice, is that more secure opportunities are always with government, or government affiliated organizations.

I myself am considering only the U.S. Government or International Organizations for a paid internship since I must do one for credit for my degree program. If it was not required I would not care to do an internship at all. Since the process for an internship is just like a regular job interview, I can say that I was picked and I have "gotten" three internship offers so far, but I refused all of them.

There were logical evaluations that brought me to my decisions. I got two internships in university offices. One was unpaid and I had to drive some forty minutes to get there five times a week. Three months like this, economically was not worth it. The other one was paid but unfortunately I was told very late after the application and I had already plans of being out of the country for studies. The third internship that I got seemed like a very good opportunity because they paid well and I would be traveling to France. It was difficult to refuse, but for several circumstances was more inconvenient than beneficial. In an expensive city like Paris, what I considered a good internship pay was just enough to pay for rent and the period that I would be working (which was unknown to me before) happened to overlap with my college exams period. At this point I realized I would fall behind with my semester and I preferred to stay on track with my studies.

I spend months at a time only studying and it's not easy to support myself, so when I have those time slots in the year where I am free to do other things, instead of applying for internships I prefer taking on part-time jobs. I have done things from tutoring and translating to waitressing and working in retail. Like this I earn the money I need to support myself and I gain a variety of experiences. These fields are not related to the field in which I want to build my future career, but I feel accomplished because it always adds to my "baggage of knowledge" and I improve my communicative and relational skills, which will be necessary. This past summer I worked three months as a waitress; I became good enough

that the owner wanted me to manage when she wasn't there. In just those three months I made enough money to support myself the following four months, in an expensive country like Japan, for a study abroad program. I did much thinking on this experience of mine and came to the conclusion that this turned out better than if I would have done an unpaid internship. If I had the luck to get a paid internship, it would probably have been better for me, experience wise, because I would have applied for something related to my field of study, but I found that part-time job very easily, while getting a paid internship would have been more competitive and required a longer interview process. Looking back now, that was not the time to attempt and find out if it would have been worth it or not, so I am very much satisfied of how things ended up.

There are many factors that need to be considered when applying for an internship. An internship is like an extension of one's studies, so should be an addition to that specific path. In fact, the required length of an internship is equivalent to that of a university semester. I believe the most important thing one needs to evaluate is whether a certain experience will be beneficial for his/her career aspirations. I have done some research on internships and from what I have seen, internships are useful in some fields more than others, some are an actual learning experience, while others are just times spent doing odd jobs for the employees of a company which is then a title to add to your resume. I've had many friends, who interned for big companies, but all they did was photocopy, bring the coffee, organize documents and such things not really connected with their field of study or to the aimed position. It might be hard to judge whether an internship is worth undertaking or not, but I firmly take position that unpaid internships are not right. It's understanding that sometimes these employers take young people just out of university with no experience, and maybe with very little to offer, so instead of paying them they give them an experience that can help them build a résumé, but I don't believe that to have a good résumé a person needs to volunteer so much time and often effort without being helped at least a bit economically. Some people really put efforts into their interning job. A lot of people move away from their home to get this experience and to find out that they are spending so much money for living and other related expenses, for something like this, can be quite a burden. There are important causes to volunteer for, why should we volunteer our time to employers that most of the time can afford to pay us minimum wage (if they can't afford it, it might not be the best name to want on your resume in the first place)? Even just a small monthly contribution for living really helps out. A college student or recent graduate (for they are the ones who mainly apply for internships) has already enough debts.

People are becoming so convinced that internships are necessary and they are becoming a requisite for everyone's résumé that it's becoming easier for employers to take advantage of the situation. More companies are offering internships, more internships are unpaid, and so more employers are getting work done for free. They just switch person every three months or so. Just this past year I saw the first ads for internships in restaurants. I found that absurd. Having been a waitress I do believe that the job is not easy and some people are more trained than others, but the excuse of needing trained employees and so adding an internship position is going too far. Just because it can be an exhausting job a person needs to be paid like the others. There is always a training time (generally 2 weeks), which should be sufficient and a person will then get better in time. There was a time when there weren't all these problems over being trained; many just jumped into positions and learned on the way.

My observations and research have brought me to form such mentioned opinions on the system and the mechanism behind internships. I don't believe they should be banned and I don't believe they should necessarily be frowned upon. I think that the economy and society has pushed for certain changes and with employers that are taking more advantage of it young, career aspiring people need to be more cautious and reflective. Some internships opportunities can very well be overrated.

Elvira C. Bianco
Università per Stranieri di Perugia