

Making the Most of Your Internship or Co-op

“I tell you and you forget. I show you and you remember. I involve you and you understand.”

— Eric Butterworth

Juliette McDonald

Many students make the mistake of assuming that all they have to do is show up for work, sit back, and relax. It’s just an internship or co-op, it’s not a real job. Right?

This is far from the reality of today’s student work experiences. Your presence at the work site is more important and meaningful to employers than you might think. Employers in many instances rely on the additional resources and energy gleaned from student employees. They look forward to your arrival.

As an intern, this is your opportunity to absorb as much as possible from this experience. Keep in mind this opportunity could provide practical, hands-on experience in your major/field of study, open the door to future employment, and serve as a future job reference. This can be a win-win situation for you and the employer, but you must do your part in making this a reality.

You’ve heard the old cliché, “You only get out of it what you put into it.” To that end, the practical tips that follow will assist you in making the most of your internship or co-op work experience, when you land your first entry-level position after graduation, and throughout your professional career.



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Practical Tips for Success

Before You Start

- Contact your supervisor to confirm your starting date, the hours you are scheduled to work, and where to report.
- Ask for directions if necessary, and where to park if you are driving to the site.
- Confirm the office dress code, and if you need proper identification for security purposes.

First Two Weeks on the Job

- **Be responsible.** Arrive a few minutes before your scheduled time. Make a habit of arriving a few minutes early daily.
- **Observe your new environment.** As a new student employee, you'll be unfamiliar with the systems, norms, and culture of your workplace. Make mental notes on the office culture in terms of how people address each other, how they dress, the interactions between co-workers, and between supervisors and employees. What is your supervisor's management style? Will you be working with other interns/co-ops or be assigned a mentor? The more you observe and understand, the more you'll learn what is expected and how to conduct yourself to fit in and to feel comfortable.
- **Discuss details.** Meet with your supervisor within the first two weeks to confirm when your workday begins and ends, lunch break, the number of workdays per week, etc. If applicable, discuss any pre-planned dates that require you to take time off. It is suggested you keep these types of requests to a minimum. Ask about anything else that is unclear at this point.
- **Define or clarify job expectations.** Meet with your supervisor to review your job description, what type of projects and responsibilities you will perform, and his/her general expectations of you during this experience. Also talk about what you hope to learn. Determine if your goals are realistic and within the scope of the experience. Ask how you will be evaluated and how feedback is given. A good way to ensure that you and your supervisor have mutual expectations is to write learning objectives or a learning contract.

Seven Strategies to Get the Most from Your Experience

- **Be Professional**
Arrive at work on time (preferably a few minutes early) and resist the temptation to leave early. Respect the employer's dress code. If you have doubt or hesitation about an outfit, then it is probably inappropriate for the workplace. Be mindful of your place as an intern.
- **Show Enthusiasm**
It has been said, "Attitude determines your altitude." Interns are highly valued by the work team when they are upbeat, enthusiastic, courteous, flexible, willing to pitch in, and willing to learn new things. Be aware that the emphasis on attitude differs in the work and academic settings. In a work setting, attitude plays a greater role in how you are judged. If you do good work, but you have a negative attitude, you will not succeed.
- **Immerse Yourself**
Learn as much as you can about the industry or organization. Read training manuals, contracts, letters, memos, press releases, trade publications, and business newspapers. Interact with people in different departments as time permits. Absorb yourself into your assignments. Use your time efficiently, limit socializing with other co-workers, minimize breaks and lunch hours, and avoid gossip and office politics. Doing so will go a long way toward proving your integrity and worth. Go above and beyond what is expected.
- **Always Do Your Best Work**
During those occasions when you are asked to do clerical or repetitive tasks, do so without murmuring or complaining. Keep in mind that supervisors need to know that you are capable of small things before they can trust you with more important tasks. Your performance on the menial tasks will be noted and can earn you more responsibility down the road. This is especially true for co-op positions, as you will return for a second work experience.

- **Take Initiative**

Seek out opportunities to learn. Volunteer to help with a project that interests you. Ask questions and try to sit in on department meetings. Look for a mentor who is willing to show you the ropes. If you are not finding enough guidance or direction, discuss your concerns with your supervisor.

- **Network! Network! Network!**

This is an excellent opportunity to develop a professional network. You are in a prime position to meet people at all levels of your organization and to learn about their experiences and career paths. Focus on quality rather than quantity of people you meet. A relatively non-threatening way to network is to ask a few people to grant you a brief informational interview (no more than 20 minutes). As a young professional, your primary interest at this point is to meet people who can teach you about your future profession or career area.

- **Build Your Portfolio**

Your internship or co-op can be more than just a new entry for your resume. As you progress, begin gathering “portfolio fillers.” Get permission from your supervisor to collect any relevant projects, papers, presentations, and other supportive tasks/assignments in which you were involved to become part of your Career Portfolio. You also may want to include any positive performance reviews, supervisor feedback, new skills acquired, and letters of recommendation. Building your Career Portfolio now will offer great advantages during your future job search. To start your Career Portfolio, go to www.portfolio.fsu.edu.

Internship and Co-op Dos and Don'ts

Do

- Dress professionally and appropriately for the position.
- Be on time.
- Be friendly.
- Fully understand tasks. Ask questions!
- Pay attention to detail. Follow through on all projects and assignments.
- Work hard and efficiently.
- Take initiative!
- Be positive, enthusiastic, and supportive.
- Be considerate and respect others.
- Exercise basic office etiquette.

Don't

- Dress like a college student (e.g., caps, shorts, flip-flops, etc.).
- Be late. If you must be late or not able to come for any reason, please call in, prior to your reporting time.
- Be afraid to ask questions or get clarification when you are unsure or unclear about anything.
- Sit idle. Seek out opportunities to learn.
- Gripe about “grunt” work. There's always something to learn.
- Be overly assertive or be a know-it-all.
- Gossip. Keep personal information to yourself.
- Be lazy in your work.
- Take extended lunches or breaks.
- Terminate your position without officially notifying your work supervisor and your university's Co-op/Internship Office.

Get Recognition for Your Experience

At Florida State, you have five options for earning recognition of your internship/co-op experience.

- You may be able to earn course credit through your academic department. It is your responsibility to contact the appropriate department in advance to determine if credit is available and comply with the policies and procedures required. Note, credit is granted at the discretion of individual departments. Therefore, it is possible it may not be available.
- Academic credit may be earned for the experience if taken under Directed Independent Study (DIS). The amount of credit is arranged by the student through a faculty sponsor or academic advisor.
- You may be eligible to receive recognition (notation) on your transcript in the form of a S/U grade (zero (0) credit hours) through the FSU Career Center's University Recognition Program. You must first notify the Career Center's internship and co-op program for approval to register, and then complete all required paperwork by pre-established deadlines. Recognition does not impact your grade point average. Call 850-644-9775 or visit www.career.fsu.edu/ceo/urpform.cfm for more on this option.
- You may be eligible to participate in the Career Internship Certification Program (CICP). If you have completed an internship within the last academic year, you may meet the program requirements. For more information, visit www.career.fsu.edu/cicp.
- Document your experience by participating in the Garnet and Gold Scholar Society. Please see garnetandgoldscholar.fsu.edu for more information.

Leave on a Positive Note!

- A week before you leave, meet with your supervisor to personally thank him/her for the opportunity to be part of the organization.
- Discuss any pending projects you were assigned or assisted with that need additional attention.
- Complete any paperwork required by the employer.
- The day you leave, return any company property that was issued to you (e.g., keys, security identification, laptops, cell phones, etc.).
- Be sure to leave your contact information.
- Don't slack off or skip out early just because your time is coming to an end.
- Send a formal thank you letter reiterating important concepts you learned and expressing your appreciation of the experience.

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