



## Making the Most of Your Internship Experience

by Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D. • Adapted for The Journey

Career counselors, employers and others have long touted the importance for college students to work one or more internships during their college years, and a recent study released by the Vault.com shows that college students are listening: almost 9 out of 10 (86 percent) college graduates reported completing at least one internship, and more than two-thirds (69 percent) reported completing two or more internships. So, knowing that you will have one or more internships during college, what are the keys to making the most of your internship? What follows are the 12 keys to internship success. Follow these guidelines and you should be well on your way not only to a successful internship, but to a successful career.

1. **Set Personal Goals.** While some internships are very structured, others are not, so you need to spend some time before you start the internship setting goals that you want to accomplish. Maybe it's deciding on what area within youth work that you want to specialize, or learning new skills, or building your network. Whatever your goals, you will feel a greater sense of accomplishment once you achieve them. Hint: Setting unrealistic goals could make even a good internship seem bad, so make sure your goals are realistic and attainable in your internship.
2. **Have Regular Meetings with your Supervisor(s).** Sound obvious? Well, maybe, but you may get a supervisor who never schedules meetings with you or travels quite a bit, so you have to make sure to have regular meetings where you can share experiences and lessons learned -- both good and bad -- as well as give progress reports. Hint: While you want to keep your supervisor abreast of your accomplishments, remember to also be a good listener and learn as much as you can during these meetings.
3. **Tackle all Tasks with Enthusiasm and a Positive Attitude.** In just about every organization, the intern is going to have to "pay his or her dues." You will undoubtedly be given some grunt work to do, such as making photocopies, but the key is to complete all your work assignments with the same level of enthusiasm and professionalism. Hint: You might also consider working extra hours (beyond the required number for the internship) to show your work ethic to your supervisor(s).
4. **Avoid Negativity.** The quickest way to kill a good internship is being negative. So, avoid complaining, being rude, disrespecting coworkers, arriving late, leaving early, being closed-minded, missing deadlines, appearing arrogant, wearing improper attire, acting unprofessionally, appearing inflexible, and taking part in office politics. Hint: A common mistake among interns and new hires is treating secretaries and clerks as being beneath them -- avoid this behavior at all costs.
5. **Never Shun a Chance to Learn More About the Organization or Field.** Take every opportunity presented to you to attend organizational or community meetings, conferences, and events; participate in training workshops; and read all organizational materials. Hint: Meetings may appear (and actually be) boring to you, but they can often offer a good chance to increase your knowledge, network, and build relationships.



6. **Get as Much Exposure as Possible.** Some of the best internships rotate you among departments and supervisors, but if yours doesn't, don't let that stop you from tackling new tasks, meeting people outside your department, and attending organizational social events. The more you are exposed to new ideas and new people, the more you'll learn. Hint: Joining the organizational softball team (or other informal group) is a great opportunity to meet new people in a relaxed and informal environment.
7. **Don't be Afraid to Ask Questions.** Always remember that an internship is a learning experience for you. While the employer expects to get a certain level of work from you, you are not expected to know everything. Seek advice and raise questions whenever you encounter something that is not familiar to you. Be open-minded about new ideas and procedures -- remember that you don't know everything and that your professors didn't teach you everything. Hint: Smart people know that there really is no such thing as a dumb question, so ask before doing.
8. **Take Initiative.** Employers love employees who dive into tackling tough problems and who think "outside the box" in finding solutions. Just make sure you work with your supervisor(s) so you don't overstep your authority -- and make sure you share successes with her. Hint: There is a fine line between taking initiative and being perceived as a "know-it-all," and for interns especially, it is best to err on the side of caution.
9. **Find a Mentor.** A mentor is someone at a higher level in the organization that looks out for you and makes sure you are learning what you need to know and accomplishing what you need to do. A mentor can also shield you from office politics and be a good sounding board for you to discuss ideas, ask questions, etc. Hint: Your supervisor could be your mentor, but it could also be another person within the organization.
10. **Network, Network, Network.** One of the key tools of job-hunting is utilizing your network to find your next career step, whether another internship or a job upon graduation (and beyond). Build professional relationships with your supervisor(s) and other managers in the organization. These people are also a good source for getting other job-hunting advice and tips from their years of experience. Hint: Even if you have a bad experience on an internship, never burn your bridges because you never know when it could come back and hurt you. Always leave on good terms.
11. **Leave with Tangible Accomplishments.** One of your goals with any internship is leaving it with some tangible results - both for your resume and your career portfolio. Maybe you developed a brochure, computerized an inventory system, organized a event or meeting, met with different groups within the organization, tracked needs of young people, etc. Hint: Keeping a journal may help you remember all the things you accomplished on your internship.
12. **Enjoy Yourself.** Most internships are great experiences, so make sure you have some fun while you're working and learning. Don't be so uptight that you are perceived as something you're not. Hint: Just make sure you don't overdo the fun -- and avoid office romances.