

How to Apply for an International Internship Without Ever Having Traveled Abroad

Imagine yourself as an international intern, working at your first professional job abroad — perhaps with UNEP in Nairobi, with a human rights organization in Montenegro, or with an AIDS clinic in Cameroon. All of these are possible. Just Google “international internships” and thousands of opportunities pop up on your computer screen. It’s easy to find out where to apply for internships, but what about the bigger question: how do you compete with hundreds of other university students, and how do you show your international skills when you have never been abroad? Here’s the inside scoop!

Your International IQ

Recruiters want to know that you have a high International IQ. Many personality types adapt well to life abroad (and yes, even shy or awkward people succeed), but they all have a common set of skills and characteristics. To convince recruiters that you have the right stuff, you will need to know and sell your International IQ level. Make sure that your resume, cover letter, and interviews reflect that you have actively developed the following skills and characteristics:

- **Knowledge of world politics, economics, and geography:** Learn about the world’s major religions. Study and learn to identify the 194 countries in the world. Read up on world news. Take internationally-focused courses at school.
- **Basic knowledge of the professional aspects of your field of work:** Speak to someone who has worked abroad or read up on volunteers who have gone before you. Show that you have some knowledge of professional life abroad in your field of expertise.
- **Personal coping and adapting skills:** Do you enjoy change? (This is the BIG question —so give it some thought.) Do you have a sense of adventure, an open mind, and curiosity? Can you deal with personal stress? Can you laugh at yourself? Have you read up on culture shock? Show examples of these coping skills in your resume.
- **Cross-cultural knowledge and skills:** Can you explain some of the challenges when communicating across cultures? Are you an attentive listener and observer when meeting someone new? Can you demonstrate tolerance, sensitivity, and self-knowledge? Can you list your own cultural traits? (Yes, this is a big part of being international!) Show these off in your resume — and don’t forget language skills.

Home Country Experience That Counts

International internship recruiters do not always expect you to have previous experience abroad, but they do expect you to have international interests. There are many things you can do while at university in your home country to prove that you will be a top international intern:

- **Study something international either in your field or in a completely separate field:** Having two or three internationally focused university courses looks great on a resume.
- **Target foreign students for friendship:** Meet for drinks with them regularly and you will learn much about their cultural habits. You will also be surprised when you find yourself leaning about your own culture. Consider joining multi-ethnic student project work teams in order to gain valuable cross-cultural work experience.
- **Join international clubs:** Gain awareness of the workings of international organizations. Take on positions of leadership with internationally-focused student groups on campus. Volunteer for international conferences and for multicultural gatherings.
- **Network internationally:** Professionals can open doors for you. Associate yourself with professors doing international research. For your next semester, plan to write an essay that requires you to engage in conversations with an NGO manager or federal civil servant working internationally in your field.
- **Learn a foreign language:** Develop a multitude of cross-cultural skills. If possible, get a “total immersion” experience by studying French in New

Brunswick, Canada, or Spanish in Quito, Ecuador. Every international person needs a second language.

- **Live or work in a region away from your normal support network of friends and family:** By adapting to a new environment, even if you are just moving to an adjacent state/province or working in the wilderness tree-planting, you will be able to show international recruiters that you can deal with the challenges of adapting to a new environment.

Sell Your International Skills Based on Home Country Experience

Don’t expect recruiters to laboriously search for your International IQ skills. You will need to be bold and clearly highlight your international skills and traits on your resume, in your cover letter, and during interviews. By clearly stating the international skills you have, you show the recruiter that you know what it takes to be international, even without having traveled abroad. Here are a few tactics to help you:

- **Have a two-paragraph professional description of yourself:** Always be prepared for the question, “*Tell me about yourself.*” Your answer should be carefully planned, it should be short, and it should reveal your cross-cultural skills and international interests. Here is one sentence that might form part of your answer: “*As part of working towards my life-long goal to travel and meet people from other cultures, I have enrolled in a couple of international business courses, I am a volunteer mentor with the Foreign Students Office, and I am learning Spanish.*”
- **On your resume, write the Education section like a job description:** Add a number of bullets to highlight your international experience and your insights on cross-cultural understanding. Here are some of the things you can say to help the recruiter identify your international skills: “*Consistently sought out multi-ethnic student work teams to gain cross-cultural work experience.*” “*Developed volunteer position to act as city tour guide for visiting foreign dignitaries hosted by the Engineering department.*” “*Befriended numerous foreign students and became an orientation counsellor and English tutor to many.*”
- **On your resume, write job descriptions to include cross-cultural coping and adaptation skills:** A domestic job can help your application for an international internship if you include at least one sentence that shows you possess some of the coping and adaptation skills required for international living. For example, the following sentences show that you have the ability to deal with change, can work in stressful situations, and can work in a cross-cultural environment: “*Readily adopted a new computerized inventory system mid-way through summer co-op term.*” “*Worked productively and amicably with both co-workers and senior managers, despite a work-to-rule campaign and other on-going strike actions.*” “*Communicated effectively within a multiethnic and new-immigrant work environment in the warehouse.*”
- **During interviews, showcase career stories to make your point:** Develop career stories that show how your domestic work experiences make you suitable for interning in a foreign land. You can bring out an international angle or skill in most jobs. Examples: “As someone who was brought up in a small rural community, I am proud about having adjusted so quickly and effectively to living in a large and fast-paced urban environment”. “Whenever I have moved for summer work or study, I have always enjoyed the challenge of getting settled and making new friends.” “In my last job as a field researcher, my supervisor commended me for my interpersonal skills because I always took time to get to know the client before launching into our survey questionnaire.”

A Last Word

International internship recruiters recognize that people who succeed abroad have a specific set of skills and traits -- a high International IQ. If you develop these skills and traits, and if you showcase them in your resume, in your cover letter, and in your conversations with recruiters, you will win the game --and bravo, you will be recruited to go abroad! Good luck with this task. Don’t miss the opportunity to live and work overseas while you are in your twenties. It is a valuable, life-changing experience. So go forth and have fun interning abroad!

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