

A Few Fundamental Work Habits

An internship may be your first professional job. Based on the experience of hundreds of international interns, there are a host of fundamental work habits that you will need to master in order to succeed.

- **International work is all about communication:** International work environments tend to be more formal, and there is greater emphasis placed on good writing. There's also the added complexity of having fellow employees from all corners of the world who may communicate in ways different from your own. It's essential that international interns exhibit good communication skills. There are two spheres of communication in the workplace: firstly, interpersonal communication with colleagues (develop your people skills), and, secondly, the technical/procedural communications you design to help you plan and organize work.
- **Always maintain a well-organized to-do list:** When a task comes to mind, write it down immediately; when your manager asks you to do something, he or she wants to see you writing it down. There are two types of to-do lists: one is the general to-do list (this should not be a series of papers with scribe notes or a wall of post-it notes), and the second is for organizing various projects. The second system is comprised of lists that itemize projects in a detailed way. Always have a method for flagging or prioritizing important items.
- **When organizing a meeting, always write an agenda ahead of time:** Make two copies; one for yourself and one for the colleague with whom you are meeting. Group similar items together under separate headings and sort items from most to least important. Number each item and sub-item to promote clearer discussion.
- **Be sure your writing is error-free:** Learn to write grammatically perfect e-mails, letters, and reports. Determine who the top writers in your workplace are and emulate their writing styles. Learn when to send an e-mail (to communicate facts) and when to pick up the phone (to communicate an opinion, provide feedback, and negotiate).
- **Get organized and create systems to manage work:** At least ten per cent of your day should be devoted to filing and organizing hard-copy files, to-do lists, agendas, project plans, and status reports. Learn how to organize your pending e-mails and completed e-mails. Develop and adhere to a consistent electronic file-naming procedure. Stay on top of paper filing. Develop audit tables to track the progress of your work. Look for repetitive processes and document them. Seek out formal methodologies and let these guide your work. Write and adhere to procedures manuals. Write evaluation/closing reports on all mid-sized and large projects.
- **Become familiar with project planning techniques:** For all your projects, whether they are two hours or two months, write project plans before they become active. Have the plan pre-approved by your manager. There is nothing more impressive than when an intern follows up after an initial project discussion with a short project plan broken down into phases.
- **Learn to make effective phone calls and answer the phone politely:** Learn how to place someone on hold politely, to answer two calls at the same time, or to ask who is calling before transferring the call to your manager. Similar skills are required for short-wave radio communications, which may be an element of some international jobs. Learn to devise a strategy before making calls: write down the points you want to make and the specific outcome you want to achieve.
- **Your people skills are the most important of all your skills:** Many university graduates learn a hard lesson in their first full-time salaried position. The most common reason for losing your first job is failure to deal with office politics. Natural enthusiasm and hard work only take you so far. You must focus on learning people skills *first*. Be respectful of your supervisor's position and responsibilities. Practice tact at meetings, and find ways to recognize the accomplishments of co-workers. Master the imprecise art of listening, as well as taking and giving constructive criticism. Understand the value of compromise, work to build consensus, learn to mediate, and practice motivating others. In

cross-cultural work, as in many other fields, good people skills are at least as important as your technical knowledge and personal ambition.

- **Manage your time with the boss:** Ask questions, but organize them first. Tell your boss when you successfully finish a project. If you must absolutely be late for a deadline, let your boss know well ahead of time.
- **Thank your boss and colleagues regularly:** Many managers are reluctant to accept interns because of the time it takes to train them, and then the investment evaporates when the intern leaves. No matter how you feel about your internship (and no internship is without its problems), you should regularly take the time to thank your boss and colleagues.

A Few Specific Lessons From the Field

Search out past interns who have gone abroad. They have experienced the excitement and challenge of working in a cross-cultural work environment. Here are some lessons that many interns learn on the job:

- **Learning to work within large international organizations:** Interns who are successful in large organizations quickly learn that it is futile trying to beat or change the bureaucratic system. Although you may find the bureaucracy frustrating, old fashioned, or hierarchical, and may be shocked that colleagues do not necessarily share your humanitarian ideals, understand that your job is to make the system work. Successful interns learn the system and take delight in making it work for them. Recognize that there is such a thing as a "good bureaucrat"—someone who knows the ins and outs and understands politics. Seek out these people as coaches and mentors.
- **Many international interns are given wide latitude in choosing projects:** Interns come with fresh ideas, and quickly identify many areas that can be improved. But be careful, your enthusiasm may lead you to promise too much at the start. Choose small projects and finish them professionally rather than over-promising and under-delivering.
- **Be patient in your analysis, especially when you first arrive at a placement:** Don't let your enthusiasm overtake you or jump to conclusions about what you first observe.
- **Take time to socialize; it is not all about work:** Interns who spend personal time with work colleagues, learn a bit of the local language, and share in local food, are much appreciated. North Americans are very *results-oriented* but most of the world is *process-oriented*. While we often measure our success with *what* we accomplish, we often give little regard for *how* we accomplished it. Take time to ensure that people are an important part of the equation in your new workplace.
- **Expect problems:** International internships are fraught with a series of small and large challenges. Your host organization may not measure up to your expectations. Your sponsoring organization back home will not always provide adequate support. The work you are given may be boring and job descriptions may change. You may feel justified in lashing out; in reality, this rarely helps the situation. You will be much better off if you expend your energies in finding solutions, being flexible, and rolling with the punches. If an internship is really not working, then negotiate a transfer. Generally, however, do not analyze work issues solely in terms of how you are affected—your manager will appreciate it if you see your role as a small part in a larger picture.

A Last Word

International internships can provide fascinating professional experiences and are an excellent means of launching your international career. Take your internship seriously, but also keep a good sense of humour—no internship is perfect. Think of your placement as a "real job" that carries importance for the organization you're serving. The value you place on your internship will translate into value placed on your skills by your sponsoring organization—and could even lead to an offer of paid employment. Don't be overwhelmed by the many suggestions found in this document. Choose a few, and make a professional go at it. Good luck, and enjoy your internship.

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