

# How to Succeed in Your Summer Experience or First Post-Graduation Job

Many of you are starting something new this summer and we want you to have a phenomenal experience. Here are our tips for how you can get the most out of your internship, new job, or volunteer experience. We are open this summer, so if you want to chat about how to execute any of these ideas or if you experience hiccups along the way, [schedule an appointment](#), utilize Live Chat, or call our main line at (314) 935-5930.

## 1. Go in with goals

Take responsibility for having a successful, rewarding experience. Early on, talk to your boss about her/his expectations and goals for you. Express what you are hoping to experience & how you'd like to contribute. Be clear, professional, and determined about communicating how you'd like your experience to be a growth opportunity that will be mutually beneficial.

## 2. Regularly communicate with your manager (and make her/him look good)

If a regular meeting isn't an option, send a concise weekly summary of the things you're working on and your accomplishments. Get support from your supervisor before getting involved in projects elsewhere in the office. Make your manager look good by offering solutions, not just problems. Be available and supportive, keep her/him informed, and help her/him be efficient and productive. Your manager's word will carry a lot of weight when the time comes to evaluate your performance, consider you for a full-time role, or give you a reference for another job.

## 3. Adopt the right attitudes

Whether it's a good experience or a bad one, you'll learn something about yourself and about the world. And that's the ultimate goal.

- *Confidence & humility:* It's important to feel confident about the leadership and success you bring to the table, but you'll want to balance that with the recognition that this opportunity is a learning experience.
- *Readiness to learn:* They already know you are smart, so you don't have to prove that at this stage. Take training seriously, ask questions, and show you want to learn and grow. Accept criticism and feedback well.
- *Readiness to change:* Your experience may end up being different than you expected. Prepare to be flexible and adaptable.
- *Respect:* The organization is the way it is and does things the way it does for some reason, and it's important to respect those processes before you criticize them. Once you've played by their rules and done things as requested for a while, it may be absolutely appropriate for you to respectfully share your ideas about new ways of trying something. In fact, it may help you stand out! But if you do that too early, it will seem presumptive and you may meet resistance. On the other hand, if you feel that you are encountering harassment, discrimination or other inappropriate behavior, you have resources. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has information on what to do here.
- *Work ethic:* College schedules are demanding, but in a different way than being on the job for 8-9 solid hours a day. It can be exhausting. But the last thing you want is to be nodding off in a meeting, showing up late or taking long lunches. It will hurt your reputation.

## 4. Be noticeably awesome

Be valuable & reliable. Complete all projects on time with an eye for detail, give input (when appropriate) during brainstorming or meetings, and go above and beyond for each assignment. If you're asked to do something, send a brief email when it is complete, so others are updated and can check it off their list. Take notes in meetings so you can refer to them later. Ask questions. Being valuable doesn't mean already knowing everything. Asking questions shows you are motivated and invested.

Be kind. The people who stand out work hard and are respectful to everyone, regardless of their role in the office. This doesn't mean you need to be a people pleaser or a pushover. Treating others with kindness can go a long way.



## **5. Get to know everyone and learn from them**

Make it a point to meet with as many people as you can at the beginning of your experience. Set up short half-hour meetings or coffee breaks, and use this time to learn about people's roles and how they got there. People will want to learn about your background, too, so make sure you have your elevator pitch prepared. Ask if you can connect with them on LinkedIn and then send a note thanking them for taking time with you. Talk to your manager about shadowing people in other parts of the office or business. You can also ask co-workers for advice on how to best secure a full-time position or move forward with your own goals. Asking for advice has the dual benefit of you receiving some helpful nuggets of wisdom and letting people know you hope to stay with the company. Also take advantage of professional and social opportunities. For example, go to company picnics and industry happy hours, and invite other interns and low-level full time employees to lunch.

## **6. Talk the talk & walk the walk**

Demonstrate your professionalism and manage the impressions you make. Get to know the organization and industry—read what the professionals are reading, learn the lingo, follow news and social media related to your work, and learn about your organization's history and competitors. Be able to comment on hot topics and current events. Make people forget that you're a college student (or recent grad) by dressing a notch nicer than seems necessary, erring on the conservative side when speaking up in meetings, and resisting gossip. Show that you're listening and growing during your time in the office and that you're ready to take on a permanent position.

## **7. Identify a go-to person**

This might be your supervisor, or it could be a previous intern or someone in an entry-level role. Your goal is to find someone accessible, friendly, empathetic and willing to answer your questions about culture, politics, and protocol. For example, how to handle the fact that someone hasn't responded to your email, what to wear for a particular meeting or event with clients, and questions about social norms or behavioral expectations. This person might also help identify good people for informational chats.

## **8. Embrace the mundane & people watch**

You are going to have to do tasks that are boring. You don't have the context or experience to take over and revolutionize the joint in 8 weeks. Embrace it. Email etiquette, learning how to use software, answering phones, entering data, compiling press kits... these are all valuable skills that future employers will be glad you have under your belt. You NEED to do those things to be a good candidate for future roles. When you are compiling research or making copies, think of it as an apprenticeship program and learn about the industry from the details. Remember that the "grunt work" you're doing is contributing to the big picture. Your willingness to pitch in with a good attitude on small tasks will make people more likely to think of you for more substantial projects.

In meetings, watch how people discuss touchy topics. Take note of how your supervisor problem solves. Determine who runs the best meetings and what you think makes them effective. Who impresses you and who doesn't? Decide that you want to learn from watching these people and think about how you'll handle similar situations later in your career.

## **9. Take initiative & stay busy (rather than trying to look busy)**

Even in well-run internship programs, you may have down time. This is when you should volunteer yourself to do things. Don't just wait to be assigned things. The last thing people want to do is have to take time away from their crazy-busy jobs to babysit you and make sure you're busy enough. And having downtime is a slippery slope. Motivation dwindles quickly when you're not being challenged. So create your own work.

- If you're in a meeting where some next steps are being decided, offer to get things started.
- If you notice someone is particularly busy, identify tasks you can take on to lighten their load.
- Come to meetings having done previous research and/or getting up to speed about the project.
- Ask around and see if there are some side projects people have been meaning to do, but haven't gotten around to. Make sure to frame it as "I'd love to help..." rather than "I have nothing better to do, so..."

## 10. Seek out opportunities

Especially if you will not be in an established, formal internship program, there may not be a ton of structure. So, take control of your situation and do what you can to reach your summer learning goals. Ask to sit in on meetings, attend brainstorming sessions, or participate in the company's core work. Propose ideas. Ask to attend speakers or take advantage of professional development opportunities.

## 11. End on a high note

- *Build a portfolio:* A week or so prior to your end date, talk to your supervisor about building a portfolio. Ask which documents or projects you can include (yes, you may have worked on all of them, but they still belong to the company—and in some cases, might be confidential), as well as any advice she has on pulling together the best samples of your work. This shows your commitment to your career advancement, but also reminds everyone just how much awesome work you've done.
- *Ask for a review:* Ask for the opportunity to sit down and discuss your time with the company. Get specific feedback on the areas in which you've excelled, as well as where those where you can grow and improve. This is also an opportunity for you to ask about next steps. Express your interest in future opportunities, and ask about how to strengthen your application.
- *Tie things up:* Make sure your projects are completed or passed on to someone else, and plan to meet with your supervisor before you leave to tie up any loose ends. Making the transition easier on the team will only increase your chances of leaving a great impression and getting awesome references afterward.
- *Say goodbye:* Send a brief email to the entire team, thanking them for their time and guidance. Give everyone your contact information and connect with them on LinkedIn. For anyone you worked closely with, send a separate email or more personalized thank you note. You can also politely ask if they would be comfortable being listed as a reference, or if they could provide you with a LinkedIn recommendation. Both can be your ticket to a future full-time gig. Say a friendly, face-to-face goodbye to everyone before leaving.

## 12. Stay in touch

Even once your experience is officially over, don't be afraid to follow up with the people you worked closely with. Send an article you think your former manager would like. Tell them when you put something you learned at the office to use for a big project. Congratulate them on the launch/end of a project. Reach out to wish people a happy birthday. Nurture relationships with mentors; if you connected with someone at the company particularly well, reach out and ask for her advice from time to time.

## 13. Pay it forward

[Share your Success Story](#). Make your hard work, talent, and accomplishments known by sharing your summer experience with your fellow students. Share how you found your internship opportunity, what you learned, and advice you want to share with other WashU students. Consider joining WashU CNX to connect with students for mentoring or networking discussions.

## 14. Remember that we are here as a resource

This is an important one. If you encounter any situations you don't know how to handle, big or small, reach out to us via Live Chat or at (314) 935-5930. We'll be happy to help you problem-solve or point you toward other helpful resources.