

Internships: How to Get Experience When You Have No Experience

A resource developed by the AAG's EDGE Project (www.aag.org/edge)

What is an internship?

Internships take many different forms, but they generally provide a short-term work opportunity with an organization or company. The time frame can range from weeks to months, and the position might be paid or voluntary. Some geography programs require majors to participate in at least one internship to graduate, while others might or might not offer options to earn academic credit for internships. Internships are also valuable for job seekers who are reentering the workforce, changing fields, or looking to transition from one sector to another.

Why pursue an internship?

- **To build your resume**
Recruiters and employers typically assume that students from the same major receive roughly the same background knowledge and training, and they frequently perceive that undergraduate coursework is similar across majors. In many cases, they consider internships, part-time employment, and leadership positions in university organizations to be better indicators of employability than classroom experiences alone.
- **To get a "foot in the door" with a potential employer**
According to 2008 statistics compiled by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, organizations that use internships as a recruitment tool will, on average, draw 40 percent of their full-time hires from their pool of interns.
- **To decide which career is right for you**
An internship is a chance to assess whether a long-term career with your internship employer or industry is a good fit for your interests and abilities. Internships also give employers the chance to observe potential job candidates before extending long-term offers.
- **To build your professional network**
Internships help you to make contacts through your relationships with your internship supervisor and co-workers, opportunities to attend functions and conferences within your industry, and the people you meet in the course of your work.

Finding an internship that's right for you

- **Search widely**
Because geography is such a vast field, the range of possible internships for geographers is large. However, the number of internships that might include the word "geography" or a related term is decidedly limited.
- **Be prepared to put yourself out there**
Find your courage, put on your thick skin, and prepare to be insistent and patient at the same time. Many internships are not formally advertised and, instead, are filled through informal networks.
- **Assess the fit**
Begin by asking yourself whether the internship is related to your career goals. Then, consider the sorts of tasks and activities you'd be assigned, mentoring and supervisory arrangements, and the office environment and working conditions. Appropriate mentoring at the internship site and some variety in duties will maximize your educational and professional development.

Making the most of your internship experience

- **Understand what's expected of you**

Get a clear idea of your internship duties and performance standards. Written internship descriptions may be vague or general, so make every effort to clarify expectations.

- **Check your ego at the door**

Be prepared to start at the bottom or in a different role than you might envision, as it could become a stepping stone to future possibilities. Even with an advanced degree and prior work experience, entering a new sector, industry, or organization usually requires "paying your dues" at first.

- **Take your work seriously**

Treat your internship as if it were a permanent placement, even if you're working for free. Be punctual, polite, responsible, and diligent in order to cultivate a positive professional reputation and to secure favorable employment references.

- **Remain open to unexpected opportunities**

Trust the judgment of experienced personnel to help find your best fit within an organization. Don't shy away from trying new roles and tasks -- these learning opportunities can help you to discover new aptitudes and interests and will demonstrate your willingness to adapt to changing circumstances.

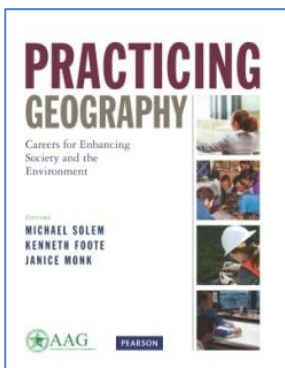
- **Develop your transferable skills**

Your internship will be more satisfying and meaningful if you spend time developing your skills in teamwork, project management, leadership, and communication, in addition to your technical practice.

- **Evaluate, document, and reflect on your experience**

Regularly log your work tasks, accomplishments, and other tangible evidence of success. Retain copies of maps, graphics, reports, planning documents, or other products in a portfolio so that you can evaluate and reflect upon how your experience has fostered your professional development. Your portfolio can be used to provide prospective employers with tangible evidence of the work you performed during the internship.

Internships are not universally available, and they might not be feasible for your personal circumstances. Competition for both paid and unpaid openings is increasing. Fortunately, part-time employment, service-learning courses, volunteering, and even travel can also provide experiences that will enhance your resume, meet the demands of certain employers, and help you determine the career path that's right for you. Whether you're just starting out or looking to make a change, any opportunity to apply your skills and become more familiar with working environments, organizational cultures, and performance expectations can enhance your professional qualifications and your personal growth.



Material adapted from: *Practicing Geography: Careers for Enhancing Society and the Environment*, eds. Michael Solem, Ken Foote, and Jan Monk. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2012.

- Chapter Two, "Geography education and career readiness," by Joy K. Adams, Niem Tu Huynh, Joseph J. Kerski, and G. Brent Hall
- Chapter Four, "The value of an internship experience for early career geographers," by R. Denise Blanchard, Mark L. Carter, Robert B. Kent, and Christopher A. Badurek.

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