

Beyond the Search: How to Land the Internship that Shapes Your Career?

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Internships have evolved into more than just short-term roles in professional settings—they now serve as a cornerstone of student development and early career readiness. In today's competitive job market, graduates are not only expected to demonstrate academic knowledge but also practical competencies and adaptability to real-world work environments. Internships provide this crucial experiential link, functioning as a bridge between theoretical learning and full-time employment. As the workforce landscape continues to transform rapidly, internships offer a dynamic entry point for students to test their skills, refine their goals, and build lasting professional identities.

Aknar et al. (2023) describe internships as experiential training that allows students to integrate theoretical classroom knowledge into real-world scenarios. They emphasize the value of hands-on involvement in corporate environments, where students can gain direct exposure to industry norms, workplace ethics, and communication dynamics. Internships not only improve technical skill sets but also contribute to students' emotional and professional maturity. Through engagement in authentic tasks, students learn to solve problems under pressure, collaborate in diverse teams, and understand the expectations of various stakeholders like supervisor, teamwork, clients and communities. Tlangelani and Nekhavhambe (2024) further reinforce that effective internships contribute significantly to graduate employability by fostering cognitive, interpersonal, and behavioral competencies. These experiences help bridge the employability gap by allowing students to develop transferable skills, such as time management, adaptability, and digital fluency, skills that employers increasingly demand but are often insufficiently developed in classroom settings.

However, despite the benefits, many students select internship placements based on convenience or peer influence rather than strategy. Permana and Pradnyana (2019) argue that when students choose internship placements without evaluating their own competencies, interests, or long-term goals, the internship experience may result in a mismatch. This misalignment can manifest in various negative ways, including stress, low engagement, and lack of motivation. Interns may find themselves performing repetitive or administrative tasks with little value to their academic background or career aspirations, leading to disengagement and dissatisfaction. Shah and Jain (2025) explain that misaligned internships can have broader consequences, such as mental health challenges, commuting cost, and career stagnation. This situation is especially concerning when students are placed in environments where they are

undervalued or underutilized. Without proper mentorship or structured guidance, interns may struggle to find meaning in their tasks, which affects both performance and future employability. Therefore, being intentional about where and how to pursue internships is essential for maximizing long-term value.

The first step toward securing a high-impact internship is understanding one's own competencies. This includes not only technical skills and academic knowledge but also soft skills, interests, values, and personality traits. Competence, according to Permana and Pradnyana (2019), involves the integration of knowledge, experience, values, and attitudes that together form the foundation of employable skills. When students recognize their strengths and weaknesses, they are more equipped to seek roles that challenge them while allowing room for growth. This self-awareness also helps in tailoring resumes and interview responses to align with specific industries and job roles. Equally important is aligning the internship with one's long-term career goals. According to Jackson (2016), students who have a sense of their professional identity are more likely to engage deeply with their roles, ask critical questions, and seek meaningful feedback. Being clear about your intended career path, whether in accounting, marketing, information technology, or education enables a more targeted and purposeful internship search. Instead of accepting the first opportunity available, students should critically assess how each role supports their progression and learning objectives.

Company reputation also plays a crucial role in shaping the internship experience. It is not just about prestige or brand name, but about the company's organizational culture, training structure, supervisor engagement, and openness to learning. Majka (2024) emphasizes that students should evaluate how companies support interns, whether through formal mentorship, performance evaluations, or exposure to core projects. An organization that values its interns as potential future employees is more likely to invest in their development, provide valuable feedback, and assign meaningful responsibilities. Mentorship is another critical, yet sometimes overlooked, element of a successful internship. Research shows that interns with active mentors are more satisfied, productive, and likely to be hired post-internship (Silva et al., 2016). A good mentor not only guides task execution but also helps interns navigate workplace politics, manage expectations, and reflect on their professional development. When evaluating internship opportunities, students should inquire about supervision structures and whether mentors are formally assigned.

While financial compensation is not the sole factor, it can influence the quality of the internship experience. Hillman (2006) rightly points out that remuneration whether in the form of stipends, travel allowances, or other benefits reflects how much the company values the intern's contribution. At a practical level, compensation can ease the financial burden on students, especially those from underrepresented or economically challenged backgrounds. Although some unpaid internships offer excellent learning opportunities, students must weigh these benefits against practical costs like transportation, meals, and time. Presenting oneself professionally is key to securing competitive placements. A well-crafted resume that highlights achievements, skills, and projects can act as a powerful tool of self-promotion. As Fsaref (2025) suggested, the resume serves as a proxy for the candidate during the selection process, enabling hiring managers to evaluate the student's potential before meeting them. In today's digital era, students should also consider creating a professional LinkedIn profile, online portfolio, or personal website to further distinguish themselves.

Beyond individual effort, academic institutions also play a vital role in supporting students' internship readiness. Universities can offer career counseling, conduct resume workshops, connect students with alumni, and provide industry exposure through networking events.

Collaboration between universities and industries can also result in structured internship programs that ensure quality and equity across placements. McHugh (2017) emphasizes the importance of such institutional support, noting that structured internships result in better learning outcomes and smoother transitions into employment.

In conclusion, internship hunting should not be an afterthought but a strategic pursuit. A high-quality internship offers students the chance to test their aspirations, develop critical competencies, and build professional networks. It is an investment in one's future and should be approached with the same seriousness as a job search. By understanding their strengths, aligning with career goals, researching potential companies, and preparing professional application materials, they are able to increase their chances of securing the right internship. Ultimately, the journey may not always be straightforward, but with preparation and persistence placements that genuinely can shape their career trajectories.

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