



## SUMMER INTERNSHIPS: PUTTING YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD

In the summer of 2011, I arrived in Washington DC as a fresh-faced and eager 20-year-old, ready to start my first ever internship. Coming from Little Rock, AR, I was so excited to experience a summer away from home in the 'big city', surrounded by fellow students

looking to gain experience within the federal government. I interned in the Criminal Intelligence Branch of the U.S. Marshals Service and absolutely loved my time there. I learned so much (both personally and professionally), met tons of different people, and fell in love with the city. Looking back at that summer, there are certainly things I wish I would have done differently. In my current role, I have recruited and supervised interns and it has been interesting to wear the shoe on the other foot. Taking both perspectives into account - intern versus intern supervisor - here are the top five pieces of advice I would give anyone wishing to capitalize on their summer internships.

This tip is well-known, but I can't stress it enough: dressing for the role you want speaks volumes! It is better to show up on your first day overdressed and form a positive first impression in someone's mind than to show up underdressed and leave a lackluster impression. When building your first-day outfit, consider the sector you're working in: are you in a corporate office, a nonprofit setting, or a government agency? Regardless, take care of how you present yourself, especially in the first few days of your internship while you are dipping your toe into the pool of your new office culture. If you're unsure of what to wear on your first day, just ask your supervisor beforehand! Your supervisor would probably appreciate your interest in adhering to organizational policies regarding dress code. I remember a colleague who had to have a very awkward conversation with one of her interns who wore midriff baring tops on more than one occasion. Save yourself from that uncomfortable situation and be sure to observe what your colleagues are wearing to get a better sense of what is or is not acceptable in your office.

## DRESS FOR SUCCESS 1



Remember: Don't be afraid to express yourself through your wardrobe choices but do focus on keeping it professional.

## 2 LISTEN FIRST. ASK QUESTIONS SECOND

One of the best ways to learn at your new internship (and in life generally) is to listen. Just listen. In your internship, listening is the primary way to get better acquainted

with your colleagues, understand the values and mission of your organization, and comprehend the projects you are tasked with. Having the self-awareness and discipline to listen to others before jumping in to give your two cents will demonstrate to your supervisor and colleagues that you are an effective communicator and are willing to take direction. Listening to how your colleagues speak in meetings, how they give you instructions, and how they address each other will also give you insight into how your team operates. After you have a better understanding of the way your team works, you will have a better idea of the kinds of questions you can ask to help you complete your tasks, build better working relationships with your supervisor and coworkers, and advance your personal interests in the organization. Mastering these skills at an early stage in your career will be incredibly beneficial to you as you progress to higher level positions. And hey, even your personal relationships could benefit from better listening skills!

During my time at the U.S. Marshals, my cohort was lucky to have an internship structure that regularly allowed us to meet with and learn from staff members in different departments.

We were even able to travel offsite to visit the training facilities for members of other federal law enforcement agencies, including bomb sniffing dogs! It was a wonderful opportunity to get a more holistic view of the agency and to exchange business cards with professionals with whom I wanted to follow up. Unfortunately, not all internships have this built-in structure. In your own internship, aim to venture outside of your immediate team if you can. When possible, ask your supervisor to introduce you to other members of the organization so you can learn about the different kinds of people and roles that make your organization function effectively. Through this process, you might even learn about a particular role that speaks to your skills and abilities and that interests you more than you thought it would! As an intern supervisor, I always encouraged my interns to let me know if there was anyone I could introduce them to or if there were events they wanted to attend.

## NETWORK WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION 3

## 4 TAKE INITIATIVE

In any internship (and job for that matter!), there will be lulls in your workload. Oftentimes, there will be weeks of what feel like never-ending projects and deadlines that will keep you busy and make your days fly by. However, there will also be times when you don't have quite as much to do and you're left staring at the clock counting down the minutes until 5 o'clock. During these slower periods, do your best to reach out to your supervisor to ask what you can help with. The best interns I supervised were those who would email me directly to let me know they had the bandwidth to take a few tasks off my plate. Not only did they help me finish work, they left a great impression because I knew they were enthusiastic about helping out and learning about my job functions. If you reach out to your supervisor and they don't have any tasks to give you, reach out to other team members or even to folks outside of your team! This is a great way to continue meeting other people within your organization and to expand your skillset by working on tasks you might not otherwise have worked on.

I cannot stress enough the importance of showing up to your internship with a positive attitude and an adaptable spirit. Going to

your internship every day with enthusiasm, a pleasant disposition, and a helpful attitude will build trust and goodwill among your colleagues. Exhibiting that you are interested and ready-to-learn, particularly during a summer internship where you will only be at your organization for a few short months, will help you get the most out of your time. Perhaps more importantly, it will help you build internal resilience when times are tough in the office and beyond. There will be times in any position you hold where circumstances outside of your control force you to be flexible and problem-solve at the drop of a hat. Keeping a positive attitude and having the ability to pivot will help you prevent unnecessary stress and stay focused on the task at hand.

**ATTITUDE AND ADAPTABILITY  
ARE EVERYTHING!**

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