

WORK IN PROGRESS: THE AIGA MINNESOTA GUIDE TO INTERNS AND INTERNSHIPS

Internships aren't exactly a job; they aren't exactly a classroom. They're something in between. Think of internships as a two-way street—an active, forward-moving experience with a defined beginning and endpoint. Along the way, both interns and employers have something to gain from—as well as give to—the experience. You become exposed to the pace and flow of the workplace, gain an understanding of how things get done and develop your skills in a real-world forum. Companies can scout out promising talent, while getting needed assistance with design, production and office duties with no strings attached—all with the knowledge that they're giving something back to the design community in turn.

The benefits of interning

Why are internships valuable? An internship will provide you with something no academic environment can: hands-on, you-are-there, in-the-thick-of-it experience. You'll be both observer and participant. You'll see what really goes on day-to-day in a design agency environment, and you'll contribute in a real way to a company's ongoing operations. Beyond that, an internship will make you a more desirable candidate on the job market, provide you with valuable contacts who can help you find opportunities down the road and, in many cases, help you add to your portfolio with actual examples for real-world clients.

What should I hope to receive from an internship program? Each person's idea of the perfect internship will vary, but fundamentally, it's an opportunity to get a different kind of experience from the one you're getting on campus. Approach an internship with an open mind, but before you start interviewing, think about what kinds of things you want to do and accomplish—work with more experienced designers, get a feel for the business side of design, obtain credits toward graduation, spend more time with computers or add professional pieces to your portfolio.

Timing

How long does an internship last? Typically, from three to six months. Check out your school's guidelines first. Some companies offer fixed internship periods that never vary, while others are willing to be flexible. In general, full-time internships are three to four months long; part-time internships—which allow you to continue taking classes—may last longer.

When is the best time to intern? During your junior or senior year of school is ideal. Most companies will not hire interns before they've reached their junior year. While it's possible to intern after graduation, most students want to use their time in the field to help count towards their graduation requirements.

Can I decide when and how much I'll work? Will I have to work overtime? It depends on the company. Some will want to be able to count on you for a set schedule of hours; others may not need that kind of commitment. Make any limitations on your part known up front and be sure to ask about a prospective employer's expectations.

Can I continue going to school at the same time? Check with your school about their guidelines first. However, if you're interning part time, you can probably continue to take classes part time as well. But to get the most out of your internship, don't overload yourself with too many responsibilities at once.

Should I try to intern during the school year or during the summer? There is no "best" time to intern; internships are generally available year-round, so it just depends on what your goals and priorities are. Summer internships, if you're not attending classes, can be more intensive, especially if you're able to work full time. Spring and fall tend to be the busiest times for design businesses, but that's not always the case. Identify the time slot that best suits your overall timetable and go from there.

How far in advance should I start looking for an internship? Give yourself at least three months for the researching and interviewing process. Most companies will be doing the same, identifying prospective interns for a month or so, interviewing for another month, with another month to wrap up the details once a candidate is chosen. So, for example, if you're looking to intern June through August, identify your objectives and potential companies in March, send your portfolio and schedule interviews in April, and make a final decision in May.

Compensation and credit

Are internships typically paid or unpaid? How much? Most, but not all, internships offer some form of compensation. While learning is the primary objective of any internship, most employers recognize that it is helpful if there is some level of compensation to help defray the cost of tuition and living expenses. The amount varies depending on the number of hours you'll be working and the sponsoring firm's resources. An hourly rate of \$10 to \$20 an hour is typical, or monthly stipends of anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000 or more at some large firms.

How important is the money? The concept of being paid is more important than the amount. By paying interns, an employer demonstrates a respect for the real work that the intern will accomplish. By the same token, money isn't the reason you're interning. Think of any compensation not as a "salary," but as a bonus that you can use to offset tuition for credits or other expenses.

Is the money negotiable? Generally not, though some expenses or perks, like a paid parking spot or access to the company computers, may be.

Will I receive credits toward my degree? Will I have to pay for these credits? Every school is different. Most schools do award credits for internships that are completed according to the school's guidelines; how many credits and whether or not you must pay for these credits varies. Check with your school's internship or curriculum office for specific details.

What about benefits? Interns are not employees in a legal sense, and are, by definition, temporary workers. Traditional employee benefits like health plans and 401k plans are not available to interns.

What tax and legal issues should I be aware of? You will need to claim internship compensation on your individual tax return, as you would any other income; however, you can also offset all or part of the tax burden with tuition or other expenses incurred as a student. Check with a tax preparer or your school's internship office for more information.

Application process and portfolio

What do prospective employers look for in a portfolio? Most employers will look for a well-rounded portfolio that shows how you've approached a variety of assignments. Include pieces that demonstrate problem-solving abilities, creative execution and your proficiency with various media including, but not limited to, computer skills. You may also want to supplement your portfolio with a resumé detailing classwork, seminars or workshops, personal projects and any outside experience you may have, including jobs you've held or projects you've designed for a neighborhood business, for example.

What if I don't have actual printed examples? Is it okay to use class projects? Absolutely. Potential employers know that most students won't have actual produced work in their portfolios. Classwork is an equally valid way to show your efforts. Provide a brief description of the assignment, how you approached the project and why you feel the result was successful.

How should it be organized? Neatness counts. Whatever else your portfolio is, it should be easy to access and well crafted. Organizing by subject is logical and showcases your experience while providing contrast. Remember, you may not be there to explain each piece, so make it simple for a prospective employer to grasp your unique qualities and strengths on their own. Annotating each item or group of items is helpful.

Should I send a portfolio with my application? Companies with established internship programs usually specify exactly what they want to see and when; typically, portfolios are called for during a specific time period. Some companies may request nonreturnable samples (these could be photographs of your work) in advance of a full portfolio review, so you may want to prepare for this ahead of time and keep such samples on hand. If you're in doubt, call and ask.

How many places should I apply to? It's just like applying for school or a job. If you really want an internship, apply for as many as interest you; you'll have a better chance of landing one. Of course, do your homework up front, and don't waste time applying to a company where you don't think you'd want to work.

Structure and responsibilities

Will I get to do design work? What other kinds of work will I do? The answer depends on a lot of things, some of which not even your prospective employer can say for sure, including size of the company, current workload and the schedules of other employees. Still, most design internships do offer some hands-on design projects, lots of production work and a wide variety of miscellaneous tasks, from answering the phone to trafficking jobs to sweeping the floor. Most employers will see that you get to do a number of different things, though you should certainly ask this question when interviewing.

Will I have any control over the things I'll be asked to do? As an intern, you're jumping into the middle of an existing design business and participating in whatever the company is involved in doing—so you should expect to blend in and participate in whatever way you're asked. But it's important to talk about what you'll be doing at the interview stage. By discussing the nature of the work up-front, you should be able to circumvent any big surprises later. Of course, if what's asked of you differs substantially from what was presented, you should talk with your supervisor or faculty advisor.

Who establishes the learning objectives? Generally, it's a collaboration between you, the school and internship site. You'll probably be asked to draft a set of objectives before beginning the internship that meshes with both your school's expectations, the needs of the design company and the kinds of work you'll be doing there. Most schools will then approve the objectives and make them available to your employer so that everyone involved understands what you want to accomplish during the internship. If your school does not establish objectives, you may want to work with a faculty member or adviser to create your own.

Who monitors my progress, the school or the company? Generally, a combination of the two. Schools typically ask for a written review by your immediate supervisor at least twice, halfway through the internship and again at the end. This review is usually made available to you and becomes part of your academic record. Your school adviser may meet with you at regular intervals throughout the internship to ask for feedback and assess your progress.

Expectations

Which is better: a large company or a smaller one? It's pomegranates and guavas. Large companies can offer experiences that a smaller company simply can't match—and vice versa. For pros and cons, ask your adviser and talk to anyone you know who's interned. Some quick guidelines: larger companies often have larger, more visible clients, bigger budgets and better computer systems; however, they also tend to put interns in a niche, and it's harder to stand out or find a mentor. Smaller companies typically offer a more personal environment and a wider range of experiences, but are often subject to inconsistent work schedules—crazy one week, slow the next—and fewer resources.

What if I don't like the internship once I've started? It's always an adjustment, and rarely easy, to step into a new work environment without at least a few surprises and/or misgivings. Give it a fair chance and remember, it won't last forever. In fact, it will be over all too soon. If you really find the situation difficult, determine what makes it that way for you, and talk to your supervisor or school adviser about changing it. Most situations can be worked out to the satisfaction of everyone involved.

Will I be offered a job at the end? Not all internships lead to a job offer, but many do. Internships are set up to be temporary, and even if your employer finds you to be a gift from the design gods, it's unlikely that the end of your term would correspond with the exact moment the company felt it needed to hire an additional employee. Then again, many companies like to use internships as a "try-out" period and do go on to hire successful interns after graduation. Think of the internship as great experience and a valuable connection to the larger design world, not as a means to an end in itself.

Can I ask for recommendations from my internship boss? If things went well, by all means ask for recommendations. Word of mouth, as they say, is the best form of advertising, and a few well-chosen words from an enthusiastic employer will sell you far more convincingly than any resume or portfolio ever could.

Finding an internship

How do I find out about internships in my area? Contact your school's internship or placement office first. They can save you time by letting you in on what they already know. Beyond that, AIGA, groups like Ad Fed and Art Directors/Copywriters Club, and even local libraries are all great places to network. Many design firm and agency websites have job listings or internship bulletin boards. Finally, if there's somewhere you want to intern, and you haven't seen them listed anywhere else, call them. Most people will be happy to talk to you with a little advance notice, and just because they don't have an intern program in place doesn't mean they're not interested. Maybe they're just too busy—a perfect reason to hire an intern. Like you.

How do I make the first contact? Firms with established programs also have established guidelines: follow them. For others, a phone call to the human resources person or office administrator will usually tell you what you need to know about next steps. Communicate with your school's internship program at each step to make sure the company you want to intern for meets their criteria as well.

This article is a portion of a resource commissioned by AIGA Minnesota. Look for internship listings on AIGA's website at www.aiga.org/designjobs; once on this search page, select the opportunity type "Internship" from the pull-down menu.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE ENTERING THE WORKPLACE

Internships are a great way to explore the real world of design offices. I was one of the students that never did an internship. I started, worked through and finished my studies in a design college without ever having seen the interior of a design office. Today I regret this fact, since it surely would have given me a different perspective of things. I sometimes would love to know how things are handled in other studios. How do they write their proposals? How do they show their work? How do they handle client's wishes/visions/corrections?

Interns have told me that their experience was of great value to them. In the work environment, one can make the most of one's experience by trying to clarify thinking about one's current duties and future goals. I advise every student to tackle the following questions before making a final decision for their first job:

About the daily work/life

What is the daily work I am responsible for within the company?
Who do I work with and how do I communicate with them?

About career issues

In what position do I start and where do I want to be in 10 years?
Do I want to open my own business or do I feel better working for a larger company?
How much can I charge? Am I going to be a rich designer?

About the company

What are the crucial processes within the company?
What do client presentations look like?
What do clients expect?

About yourself

What is my position within the design studio?
Do I feel good within this position?
Am I a team player or is it better for me to work by myself?
What are my strengths? Am I a great creative talent? Am I a good communicator? Am I a computer-technology wizard?
How much can I handle? Am I stress resistant?
Am I fast? Could I be faster and still keep up with my high quality standards?

The answers to the above questions are very helpful in defining a future position in a company, maybe defining a whole career. Some things might turn out to be a little less glorious than one would hope. But in general, one will get a clearer view of what the upcoming years look like knowing the ups and downs of the design field from an insider's perspective.

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