



Gaining work experience: internships and volunteering

By Sara Tusek

What can you do if you want a job in a particular field, but have no formal career experience to put on your resume? Maybe you're just entering the job market, changing careers, or reentering the market after a break to raise children. Or perhaps you want to enhance your qualifications for entry to a university or professional program of study.

You may want a job, for example, in journalism or advertising, two highly-competitive fields, but have no relevant experience. The best way to add to your resume, while learning the daily ins-and-outs of the field, is to find an internship/summer job or volunteer/community service position in the field of your interest.

Internships and career-oriented summer jobs

An internship or career-oriented summer job is a working/learning experience in which you act as a responsible employee in an organization. Many businesses and organizations have formal internship programs for students and career changers, or hire relatively inexperienced people for short-term summer jobs. Newspapers, TV broadcast studios, magazines, banks, insurance companies, manufac-

turers, government agencies and scientific laboratories all offer internships and summer jobs to people who want to "get their feet wet" in a particular job or organization. Some internships are paid, with pay ranging from a small stipend to a portion of an enter-level salary. Most summer jobs are paid, usually at minimum wage.

The best internships and summer jobs carry some real responsibilities and are evaluated periodically by a supervisor working in the organization.



An internship can give you real-life experience in a career of interest, as well as expanding your network of contacts and giving you some excellent job credentials in the form of letters of recommendation. There are extensive listings of internships on many college websites, as well as on organizational and professional websites.

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Internships & Volunteering

Volunteering and community service

The key aspect of volunteering is that you are not paid for your work; instead, you contribute freely. As in an internship or summer job, you take on specific tasks and are evaluated by a supervisor.

Volunteer and community service activities include working in a government office, hospital, school or church. Environmental groups offer volunteer vacations during which you conduct research or measure key criteria in environmental change.

Often, non-profit organizations sponsor volunteer exchange programs, many of which are country-to-country, giving you the chance to live abroad and develop your language and communication skills.

Community service is a requirement at many colleges and universities for graduation, as well as an expected part of the job in many businesses.

Adventurous service projects stretch your boundaries; possibilities are helping to rebuild a hospital destroyed by a hurricane, or conducting a survey to determine the need for a new product. You can see for yourself how you respond to events and situations “outside your comfort zone” by volunteering in another country.

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Keeping records and references

All these experiences—internship, summer job, volunteering and community service— give you a chance to explore careers of interest and develop job-related skills, allowing you to develop a personal perspective on the career you are exploring.

You need to keep a record of what you’ve done, a log or diary, so that you can show the skills and knowledge you gained when you write your resume or applications. And be sure to get a letter of reference from your supervisor, to add to your career portfolio.

Keeping in touch with the people you meet is a great way to build your professional contacts. Update them from time to time on your career by taking them for a cup of coffee or sending an email, if you’re not nearby.

To find the best opportunities for you, contact the organization where you want to work, or do a web search to find positions in your career field. The range of career-related work experiences is limited only by your imagination.

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Careers

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