

Internships and work experience

You may wonder why you should be spending your precious spare hours working when you are already studying full time - you'll need your rest and holidays, right? These days, however, experience is preferred by the majority of employers, and is an expectation for many careers at entry level.

Here are some of the benefits of gaining experience on the job:

- get an insight into working in that industry or that particular role
- learn the skills, knowledge and training you need to get into a specific career
- lets you know if a job 'fits', or if you want to work in that industry, or career, anymore
- make important contacts who could help you into a job when you graduate
- looks good on your CV and helps you stand out from the crowd
- earn some money on the way - maybe!

Work experience and internships come in many shapes and forms; it can be a year in industry as part of an on course placement or it can be a summer spent working in a business.

Some employers, such as the BBC and finance companies, run recruitment schemes offering work experience and internships, although they are generally highly competitive.

Internships

Internships are formal placements of working in a particular role, where you learn the right skills in the right job. They are usually offered by large companies or organisations and can last between one week to a year. Some internships can take place abroad.

There are two types - student and graduate. Student internships usually take place in the second last year of your studies. These can be paid or unpaid, although normally on an organised placement, you should receive the national minimum wage.

In some careers, such as media and marketing, you are expected to take on an internship, and in many cases this can lead on to a graduate job. However, getting an internship can be very competitive, especially in certain career areas. Getting a place is like applying for a job; filling out an application form and attending an interview. It can also be a lengthy process, so prepare early and arrange the placement well in advance of when you need to start.

Work experience

This is usually a shorter term placement, with the exception of degrees that include a sandwich placement, which can last anything between three days to a month or more.

Work experience placements vary greatly, and may be relevant or irrelevant to the job you finally want. Most work experience is beneficial as it helps you assess what skills you already have and what ones you need for your preferred line of work.

Here are some of the more common types of experience you can get.

Work placements while at school usually last up to one week, or could follow a pattern such as half a day a week for the school year. You attend a place of business to get a taste of the world of work and to get some insight into a career that you might be interested in. You can even get accreditation for your work placement, for example the SQA Work Placement Unit (SCQF Levels 3 - 5).

Work placements as part of a higher education course may last a part of a semester or it may be a year spent in industry, and built in as part of your course (known as a sandwich placement). This is normally between your second and final year, and are typical to science and engineering courses.

Unpaid or voluntary work provides a bit more freedom of choice, since an employer, especially a small company who usually can't afford a paid placement, will offer free experience for a short spell. Public authority employers such as the heritage sector are more likely to offer unpaid work experience placements, which they view as compulsory as entry to their careers. You can approach an employer directly as work experience placements are usually only advertised when required.

Temporary or temp work, which can range from working in a supermarket to filing in an office, can be valuable work experience even if it is not related to your studies. As well as earning cash, you will still learn valuable transferable skills that employers want, which could also be indirectly relevant to your chosen career. You usually have to register with a recruitment agency to get such work.

Work shadowing usually lasts only a few days. You're not actually doing any work, but as the name suggests, you watch a professional work to see what a typical day in their job entails. You should research and look for the person you would prefer to shadow for maximum benefit. The added bonus is you can find out as much information as you want and can assess whether it is for you or not. But you won't get paid anything for shadowing.

Before arranging any work experience yourself, you should think about your requirements first of all, especially before accepting a place. This would include how much time can you spend working during term time, or more importantly, what skills you want or need to develop. Ideally, a good placement should fulfill these requirements to help you work towards getting the job you want in the future.