

10 tips to making the most of your internship

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Internships allow graduates the short-term opportunity to test and apply their structured learnings experientially in a real-life business.



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This workplace learning is just part of a series of developmental experiences that contribute to the lifetime success and earning the potential of the youth of our country.

I could have written a list of 50 tips, but here are the 10 I thought would be most helpful for now:

1. Manage your expectations

I'm sure you're going to achieve whatever it is you desire to, whether that be launching your own start-up, becoming an executive creative director or directing the next award-winning commercial. But, unless you're a prodigy, you're not there yet.

It takes time and patience to earn respect in the workplace. Don't go in pretending like you know everything. Don't discount the value and learnings you can extract from those more experienced.

Go in with a hunger for knowledge and curiosity, but most importantly, humility.

2. Set goals and discuss these with your supervisor

You'll be able to make the most of the few weeks or months if you have an honest conversation with your supervisor upfront. They may not initiate this, but you shouldn't be shy to ask to set up a meeting to discuss.

Ask what they expect of you; tell them what you expect of them.

Ask what you can do to make the most of this opportunity, how they'll measure your success and how you will get feedback from them for improvement.

Get it out the way and you'll feel far more secure and in the loop during the internship.

3. Be prepared, punctual and professional

Prepared – know the company you are going to. Research the work they do, the clients they represent or serve, the people in the team. Write down a list of questions in advance that you might want to ask when meeting certain people.

Punctual – because it's respectful and the right thing to do. You may live in Cape Town where it's semi-normal, but tardiness is not something appreciated in the workplace. Respect one's time as you would expect them to respect yours.

Professional – goes without saying, one would think, but we're saying it. If you haven't learnt yet, building a career and business will largely be dependent on the relationships you forge. Take the time to start planting the seeds and watering them now – they'll pay off greatly in the long term (and pay-off aside, it'll help you be a good human).

4. Meet people and ask questions. Lots of them.

Some of the purposes the internship are for you to learn:

- Is this an industry I enjoy?
- Do I perform best in a small or large team?
- Do I operate best in a structured corporate or a flexi start-up?
- Am I designed to be at an agency working on multiple brands, or client side with a focus on theirs?
- Can I keep up with the pace of a start-up?
- Do I want to specialise in a specific area of what I studied and if so, what?

The only way you'll learn this is by engaging and seeking answers. Spark up conversations with people who have been at the company longer than you. Find out more about their journey in an effort to broaden your understanding of the workplace. This will arm you with more data to make informed decisions.

5. Take initiative and lean in

The internship or workplace learning programme won't always be perfectly designed to keep you busy all the time. And the nature of a business is that it's a living organism and things will change. When this happens, do your best to adapt to the environment.

If you finish a project early or there's a roadblock preventing you from progressing, don't browse through Instagram

or watch YouTube videos.

Lean in and find something else to do. Initiative and proactivity are sought-after soft skills that companies look out for when hiring.

6. Respect your elders, youngers and other cultures

I'm not telling you this because I'm trying to sound like your parents. I'm telling you this because, at any given time, there can be FOUR generations and however many cultures working in one team. Each of these generations and cultural groups had their own upbringings and styles of learning and work, each of them has a different 'language' of professional communication and they all have different perspectives on life.

As you grow within a company or grow your own company, you are going to encounter people from different upbringings to you. You need to know how to engage with them in the manner most conducive to shared success. Also, you can learn a surprising amount from them and their experience, but not if you won't engage or listen.

If you're going to engage in debate, great! Just do so constructively.

7. Collect as much data as you possibly can

This may be the 'first' real life work experience you get. You also might do a number of internships before settling into what really drives you.

At the end of the day, those with the best data are those who make the best decisions. So before going into your internship, develop a 'list' of things that are important to you: office environment, type of work, team vibe, leadership styles, growth opportunities, the calibre of clients, anything.

Take detailed notes on the above, preferably with a weighting and rating system so you can easily compare one experience vs. another. This will also help when you have a review meeting with your supervisor.

8. Take every opportunity to learn, learn and learn some more

Whether it's learning the communication guidelines of Slack, best practices for using Trello, professional jargon used in the workplace or when not to CC someone in an email, learn it all and learn it daily.

Your success in life will largely be the culmination of your lifelong learning – take it seriously. It all adds up.

9. Make the most of every relationship you build

The relationships you build now are the relationships that will follow you through your career.

Find out what the other employees do, discuss their learning and career progressions, add them on LinkedIn, send them a thank you emails after you finish the internship, ask them for reference letters, volunteer to work on their passion projects or side hustles. Do everything you can.

Trust me, relationships add so much value to your existing talent and intelligence. They'll increase your probability of success a hundredfold.

10. Reflect on the experience and debrief with anyone you can

Reflect and take stock of your learnings and experience as regularly as you can (preferably at the beginning or the end of every day), but at the very least, do this in detail at the end of the internship.

Hopefully the company you intern at will have a formal review process where you can get constructive criticism on your time there, share your learnings, discuss future opportunities, get a reference or testimonial, etc.

Use this data to update your CV, portfolio, LinkedIn profile, etc.

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