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How to be a savvy intern. (Originated from Knight-Ridder Newspapers) Mark HuLL

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SAN JOSE, Calif - Doron Ohel admits he wasn't too excited when he first considered taking an internship at the State Department. The program looked unglamorous and constraining, with plenty of predetermined limitations of what interns could do.

"It wasn't highly developed," recalled the former international relations student at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

After a few days on the job, however, he realized the tepid description didn't do the internship justice.

The job turned out to be a perfect window for him to witness officials shaping foreign policies. Ohel spent hours in meetings with the State Department spokesman. A day's work included attending press briefings on the latest developments in Chechnya or Rwanda. After a short time, Ohel was writing a few paragraphs for the spokesman's daily briefings.

Ohel took an active role in his work, seeking out every possible opportunity. In spare moments, he researched his thesis by interviewing policymakers. He even organized a reception with the secretary of state simply because it was something he wanted to experience.

"It's up to you to make the most of the situation" he said. "Getting a position at the State Department was the culmination of what I was studying. I could take all of the positive aspects of my education and apply it every day to the internship."

As summer nears, thousands of interns like Ohel will migrate into the work force for a taste of "the real world" and a chance to apply what they have learned in the classroom. An internship can involve a variety of opportunities, from running errands to running ideas past the CEO. It's a chance to make mistakes - and learn from them. But how much you ultimately squeeze out of your internship is up to you.
"If they come in and think of themselves as an intern, they'll be treated like an intern," said Mike Foster, Intel Corp.'s corporate college-recruiting manager. "If they want to act like an engineer, they'll be treated like an engineer."

Despite the plethora of job vacancies among Silicon-Valley companies, recruiters and career counselors agree internships still play an important role in professional development and in getting that first job.

Interns get the chance to join the working world and hone their professional skills. They can get hands-on experience, take notes from talented veterans, soak up and compare office cultures even learn how to cope with office curmudgeons. And, of course, companies get the opportunity to scout out new talent.

However internships are not always filled with press briefings on Chechnya and brainstorming on top-level projects. Interns should expect to do their share of coffee-fetching and code-crunching, just like everyone else in the organization.

"It's a little inevitable that they'll be doing some of the grunt work," said Kathy Campbell, a Stanford University career counselor.

Not all companies have structured internship programs, either. Some look more like a part-time job than an enriching college internship. That means much of your success depends on you - and how wisely you plot a strategy for making the most of your time.

Luis Rodriguez did everything right during his internship at Xerox Palo Alto (Calif) Research Center, according to one of his supervisors. But you could say his success started long before he was offered the position.

With a software-engineering internship at Hewlett-Packard under his belt, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology student determined that he wanted an internship where he could do more research, engage his mind and meet a lot of different scientists.

While searching for his internship, Rodriguez made it a point to meet the people he might work with and to look for opportunities that would challenge and stretch his talents. Rodriguez decided on PARC, where he worked closely with scientists on research projects.

"It's really important to find someone you like, to find a company that has a culture you like and to find a good project that will let you grow and learn and won't let you waste your summer," he said.

Don't expect to change the world on the first day. It's good to have high expectations, but make sure those expectations are reasonable. Before you
create a development plan, spend a few days learning about the company and how you can contribute.

While you might be the hardest, smartest worker you know, there's something to be said for subtlety.

Bill Skinner, PARC's human resources manager, has seen his share of brilliant budding scientists through PARC's internship program and through his work as president of the National Physical Science Consortium, which provides graduate-level fellowships in the sciences.

"You run into the know-it-alls who think they've been there, done that when they haven't been there or done anything," he said. "They think that because they've got six years of college under their belts that they are really knowledgeable, when, in fact, they haven't had time to learn certain aspects."

Whether you're a grizzled veteran or a newbie intern find a mentor or adviser who can offer insights about the company's culture and guide you as you pursue your goals.

At Intel, interns are encouraged to have one-on-one sessions with their bosses. Interns have gotten into trouble when they didn't seek out crucial feedback from those advisers.

"The interns thought they were doing OK, and a month went by, and a critical part of a project was missed. They didn't realize they were off track," Intel's Foster said.

For Giovana Miller, an industrial and systems engineering student at San Jose State University, constant communication with her adviser was a means of survival. During an internship at 3Com, Miller was assigned to a big project that was certain to take longer than her internship.

Lacking a time line or guide to complete the daunting project, Miller gave written and oral updates every week on what she had accomplished, the problems she was encountering and her plan of action.

"Every week I was behind in this project ... but I got extensions," she said. "As long as you explain what you're doing, you shouldn't run into any bigger kinds of problems."

While some companies might assign mentors to interns, that doesn't mean the mentor is always trained and excited about giving feedback. If you're stuck with an unwilling mentor, learn to work through the situation. After all, in the real world, you don't always work with people you like.

"You'll be learning the politics of the environment," said June Lim, assistant director for San Jose State's career center. "Ask yourself how to work around
That might mean getting feedback from other co-workers and supervisors. If the entire work environment makes you uncomfortable and other employees aren't helpful, evaluate whether you're wasting your time.

Don't limit your networking to your immediate supervisor or mentor. An internship is a perfect time to make contacts and friends with people in your field - people who will be helpful when you begin your job search.

"It's really good to develop relationships with co-interns and co-workers, Rodriguez said. "Toward the end of your undergraduate years, grades and achievements aren't all that matter. Contacts and reputations are more important."

Don't forget that those people have jobs to do, too. Strike a balance in your approach by being inquisitive yet nonobtrusive.

Curbing your ambition and prioritizing your time are two tough lessons. Jeff Lee, who completed an engineering internship at Cadence Design Systems, knows from experience.

"In the beginning, I think I underestimated the time and energy it took to finish a project and probably bit off a little more than I could chew," said Lee, who later landed a full-time job at Silicon Graphics.

At the same time, it's good to challenge yourself with tough projects. Learn to manage your time wisely. Discuss with co-workers how much time a project will take and evaluate how much you realistically can complete.

It's up to you to decide what you want to get out of the internship. Get involved in the things that interest you.

During his internship in Washington, Ohel took charge of organizing a reception with the secretary of state. There is always a reception for summer interns, Ohel said, but not for winter interns. Ohel didn't want to miss the opportunity to hobnob with the secretary and to celebrate finishing the internship.

"I wanted the reception, so that led to a lot of work on my part," said Ohel, who organized the reception after clearing the idea with his supervisors. "They understood the fact that I wanted to do this, and they were very helpful. It took about six weeks of paperwork on my part, but it happened."

Don't expect to parlay an internship into a full-time permanent job.

If you have long-term interests in the company, make sure to let your supervisor and the hiring manager know. Consider applying for another internship or a
co-op position (essentially a longer-term internship).

Last year, Intel brought back about two-thirds of its interns from the year before. When PARC has openings, the company often taps into its pool of former interns.

At the very least, if you've established good rapport, the company will be an excellent reference for other internships, graduate-level programs or jobs.

"Be invited back to a company - that says something to anyone, who is looking at you for full-time employment," said PARC's Skinner. "Make yourself so desirable you're going to get invited back."

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