

How to Create a Successful Experience in an Internship, Externship or Field Practicum

So, you have secured an opportunity and now want to create a successful experience for both you and your employer. The following guidelines may help you to create the kind of experience you are looking for. Remember, if you will be receiving departmental credit (letter grade or credit/no credit), you will have to pay for each credit hour of work. Additional paperwork may be required by your department and in most cases approval for the experience must be approved in advance. Consult your department early in your search process.

A. Put Together a Learning Contract or Statement of Goals – A contract or goals statement should contain a clear list of your overall goals. What do you hope to achieve through this internship? How will you measure your outcome(s)? Will you be completing a final project, maintaining a daily journal, providing a work evaluation and/or writing a final paper? You should also include a detailed job description including the number of hours per week you will be working and the length of your internship (semester, six months, or year). Will your experience involve working in an office environment behind a desk or will you be out in the field? Where does your work take place? Who will you report to? Will you meet with this person on a regular basis? If receiving credit, who is your faculty contact person?

The information you write down should be reviewed by all parties involved and signatures obtained. While the contract or statement may not be a binding agreement, it can be used to help keep your experience on track. For instance, if you find yourself at the copy machine day in and day out and you are not completing or working on agreed upon tasks/duties, you can revisit this information as a way to get back on track. Consult with your supervisor in a friendly manner and involve your faculty mentor as needed.

B. Surviving the Work Environment – Navigating the political waters of the actual work environment can sometimes be a challenging task. Use the following guidelines to help you through the process.

- 1. Dress Appropriately** – Do you need to wear a suit and tie each day or can you dress more casually? Take a look at the overall work environment. What are the other people you will be working with wearing? If you are unsure about what to wear, talk with your supervisor.
- 2. Be On Time** – If you are scheduled to be at work at a certain time, be there on time. Arrive 5 to 10 minutes early if possible. Reporting to work on time demonstrates your commitment to the opportunity being provided to you and your eagerness to learn. Timeliness is even important if you are not receiving any form of payment.
- 3. Make No Excuses** – If you have a deadline, meet it. Set up a schedule for yourself of when you will complete certain tasks. This will help keep you on track and allow you a little extra time if needed. If you cannot make the deadline, take responsibility for it. Talk to your supervisor in advance. Communication is key.
- 4. Burn No Bridges** – You are representing not only yourself but also your family and WMU. If you obtained the position through a family friend or acquaintance, you also have an obligation to that individual(s). Do not talk poorly of the experience. If you have valid issues, talk to your supervisor. Show up on time and follow company rules and practices. Watch who you talk to and what you talk to them about. Do not hold conversations that could be interpreted as bashing or complaining in public spaces. If needed, consult with someone outside of the organization and vent your frustrations. He/she may be able to help give you perspective or offer some creative solutions.
- 5. Communicate with Your Supervisor** – Be sure to meet and stay in touch with your supervisor on a regular basis. Give him/her an update on your progress. What are your challenges? What are your accomplishments?

6. **Read the Company Handbook** – Be sure to review company policies and practices even if you are volunteering for the opportunity. You can learn a lot about the organization you are work for and their expectations.
7. **Talk to Your Faculty Mentor** – Stay in touch with your faculty mentor throughout your experience. This person can be a great resource if you are having difficulty navigating the work environment. They are also a good resource for helping you find or think of ways to go above and beyond in your experience.
8. **Keep a Weekly Journal** – Write down the tasks completed each week. Make note of the things you found challenging or difficult to grasp. Make note of what you find to be your biggest accomplishments. Write down the names of people you came in contact with and their areas of expertise. Information in your journal can help you complete your final project or paper for your faculty member if receiving departmental credit. Even if you do not receive a grade, the information may be useful to you as you begin the process of locating employment upon graduation.

C. Completing Your Internship – Take the time to wrap up any loose ends upon the completion of your internship. Some of the things for you to consider are as follows:

1. **Meet with Your Supervisor** – Get a final evaluation from your supervisor. What does your supervisor see as your particular strengths or areas of growth? Review your proposal with them in person. Did you meet your outcomes as planned? Why or why not? What suggestions does your supervisor have for you? Would they hire you for another opportunity? Ask if you can utilize information obtained in the experience for your portfolio. Some projects may be sensitive in nature and not available for public knowledge. You may need to consult with your supervisor on what you can or cannot use.
2. **Request a Reference** – Before leaving the experience and perhaps in your final meeting with your supervisor, make a request to use him/her as a reference for future opportunities if appropriate.

- 3. Show Your Appreciation** – Write a thank you note or send a gift basket to your supervisor. Thank him/her for providing you with a valuable experience. You may even consider a small gift for an entire work group.
- 4. Stay in Contact** – Keep in touch with your supervisor. Let him/her know how your academic career is progressing. This person may be helpful to you in securing future employment.
- 5. Meet with Faculty Mentor** – Turn in any final paperwork or assignments to your faculty mentor by the deadline provided in your proposal in order to receive your final grade.