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Post-College Interns Can Explore Careers, Get a Jump on Jobs

By Erin White

From [The Wall Street Journal Online](#)

As she finished her senior year at Connecticut College two years ago, Beth Landes wasn't sure what sort of job she might like. So the philosophy major pursued an internship instead.

Post-college internships can be a good way for employers and recent graduates to test each other out, career coaches say. Many employers are happy to hire cheap and eager recent grads as interns. At the same time, some college seniors see internships as a low-risk way to try a career, or to get their foot in the door of a super-competitive field.

Of course, internships often pay less than permanent jobs and some employers use interns as a source of cheap labor without any intent to hire them, coaches warn. Steven Rothberg, president of CollegeRecruiter.com, a career Web site based in Minneapolis, urges would-be interns to ask employers about their track record of hiring interns. Most post-college interns receive job offers, he estimates.

To convert an internship into a regular job, coaches advise several tactics, starting with hard work and networking. Interns should meet as many managers at the firm as possible, they say, including those in other departments. Ask supervisors to make introductions, if necessary. Look for personal connections around common academic backgrounds or hobbies, then try to learn about the other person's career and job.

Another way to develop contacts is to volunteer for the company's community projects, Mr. Rothberg says.

"If you go and volunteer an afternoon on Saturday to work for Habitat for Humanity with your co-workers from across the company, you're going to meet a ton of people," he notes.



Laurie Kahn, chief executive of All About Careers, a Chicago career-coaching firm, reminds interns to also seek out people in the human-resources department, who may know about more openings across the company than individual managers. Interns should express enthusiasm for the company and a willingness to work in different locations, Ms. Kahn says.



Ms. Landes, the Connecticut College graduate, had planned to apply to law school. But the ice hockey player spent much of her final semester recovering from postconcussive syndrome after two bad concussions. She couldn't study for the LSAT. Once she had recovered, she knew law school would be at least another year off. For the interim, "I just didn't know what I was interested in," she says.

She circulated her resume, and it ended up at a Washington nonprofit called the Partnership for Public Service, which aims to revitalize the federal civil service. She interviewed and landed a four-month paid internship in the group's research department in September 2004. To save money, she commuted from her parents' home in suburban Maryland.

She treated it like a real job. When full-time staffers stayed late to meet project deadlines, she did, too. She made appointments to meet with executives outside her department. She told them she wanted to learn more about their careers. Before the meetings, she rigorously researched their career paths. She asked them why they made certain job choices and what motivated their decisions. She explained her own interests and sought advice on what she might do with her career.

Her hard work and networking paid off. At the end of her internship, she got a job offer from the group's consulting service, which connects corporate managers with government leaders seeking management advice. Her pay more than doubled.

Now, she has been a permanent employee for a year and a half, and won a promotion about two months ago. Taking the internship, she says "turned into a great choice for me." She is still considering law school, but would want her studies to center on her new interests in public policy and management practices.

Elissa Favero, 23, landed an internship at a museum in Washington after graduating from Williams College last year. An art-history major, she applied only to internships because she wanted to test out a museum career and didn't think she could snag a full-time museum job right out of college. She spent the summer helping to compile information for a database of artists. She believes she impressed her supervisor with thorough research and attention to detail.

By the time her three-month internship neared an end, her supervisor was lobbying a colleague to help get Ms. Favero a full-time job. She arranged for Ms. Favero to meet the museum's education and outreach director. Ms. Favero prepared by reviewing her summer work and thinking about how she would present it. The meeting went well. In September, she took a temporary position in the museum's education and outreach group; in October, she got a permanent job in the same unit.

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-- June 29, 2006

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