What Do Students Really Want From a Summer Internship?

by Jessica Koers

This past summer, employer Booz Allen Hamilton was joined by a summer intern, Gabrielle Gaeta, from the University of Michigan. While she was working she answered some questions about what students are looking for in an internship program and what kind of professional development resources they look for on campus.

Tell me about your internship search and what you were looking for in an internship program.
Searching for an internship is a double edged-sword—it’s exciting to learn about the high-tech products companies are developing or the important causes they’re advocating for, but at the same time, it’s a downright stressful experience since I know how competitive the most desired programs are.

This past year I was able to get some help in my internship search through the University of Michigan’s Public Service Internship Program (PSIP). This is a year-long professional development program run by our career center whose mission is to arm students with the skills they need to get summer internships in Washington, D.C. In the fall, PSIP sent us a spreadsheet listing hundreds of companies in the D.C. metro area, which helped me focus my internship search. This resource is actually how I found out about Booz Allen in the first place!

As I browsed this spreadsheet and various online job boards, there were four main criteria I used to evaluate each company’s internship program:

1. The quality of the work experience
2. The company’s culture
3. Professional development opportunities
4. Company benefits

Above anything else, the quality and value of the experience I’d gain from an internship was the most important thing for me to consider. I wanted to learn as much as possible during the summer, so I didn’t want to spend my time cooped up in an office doing stereotypical intern work—making copies, answering phone calls, filing documents, etc. I wanted to be working on real, meaningful projects that would challenge me and help me develop new skills. At the end of the summer, I wanted to have tangible results that I would be able to share with recruiters in my next round of job interviews.

A company’s culture and work environment were also a huge consideration for me. I was looking for an organization whose employees love coming into the office every day and would be excited to talk to me about the work they’re doing. I was also interested in companies that encourage collaboration; I hoped to work with fellow interns as well as more senior leaders of an organization.

Professional development opportunities were also really important aspects of an internship program. I looked for companies that match their interns with mentors and provide interns with regular feedback from their managers and co-workers. Again, I wanted to learn as much as I could during the summer, so receiving constructive criticism and career advice was a must for me.

Finally, company perks and benefits were important to me. If a company paid their interns, I was much more likely to accept an offer from them.
**Why do you think more students don't use their career services office regularly?**

A lot of my peers and I would rather receive advice directly from employers since the future of our careers lies in their hands.

Also, I think there are a number of students who simply don’t know about all of the resources their career services office provides. We’re told about these services at freshmen orientation, but I’d venture to guess that most of this information is lost on first-year students who can barely even find their way around campus. I think career services offices need to market themselves more effectively throughout the school year—especially to older students—and encourage professors to direct their students to these resources.

**What else could career services offices do to increase student involvement?**

Bring in the companies! Since recruiters have the power to determine if you’ll have a future with their company, I think it’s invaluable to receive feedback directly from them on how to improve your professional presentation. I’d also like if my career center hosted industry-specific alumni panels so my peers and I could network with alumni who are established in their career fields while also learning about the various places our degrees can take us after graduation.

**What do you think Booz Allen does that all internship programs would benefit from?**

Booz Allen makes its senior leaders as accessible as possible to interns, which I’ve found really incredible. Between networking events and panel discussions organized specially for interns, I’ve been able to have one-on-one conversations with leaders who have been with the firm for 20-plus years. I’ve found it really helpful to hear their stories and learn about their journeys from entry-level workers to senior executives. It’s encouraging to know that if you stick with Booz Allen, the company will invest in you and help you create the kind of career you want. If companies value their interns and hope that they will return as full-time employees after graduation, I think it’s important that interns feel recognized and important. Having senior leaders take the time to talk to interns is a great way to show them your company cares.

**What has your experience as a Booz Allen intern taught you?**

My summer at Booz Allen has really shown me the value in communication. At first, I was a little hesitant to reach out to employees outside of my team, but I quickly learned how eager members of the firm are to help you succeed. Whether it was to provide me with information for a project, to teach me how to use certain technology, or to give me mentoring and career advice, all of the people I’ve connected with at the firm have been more than willing to take time out of their days to talk to me. All I had to do was establish that line of communication with them. Between e-mailing people in various departments, introducing myself to employees at company events, and even starting conversations while waiting for the elevator, I’ve been able to create a Booz Allen network that has guided me throughout my summer here, and will hopefully help me find new and exciting opportunities in the future. If I could give all students one piece of advice based on what I’ve learned, it would be: don’t be afraid to make a connection with employees in your company or professors and alumni from your school. More often than not, they’ll want to give you advice and help you succeed in your endeavors.

Jessica Koers works with Booz Allen Hamilton’s University and Veteran Recruiting team. She plans and develops all of their social media and virtual outreach engagement strategies.

Gabrielle Gaeta is a student at the University of Michigan studying computer science and economics. During the summer of 2015, she worked as an intern at Booz Allen Hamilton. During her time with the company, she supported the University and Military Recruiting teams, researching new ways for the firm to engage with STEM students at universities across the country.

Courtesy of the National Association of Colleges and Employers.