

Internships and work experience

Having a range of work related activities on your CV will show employers you've had the opportunity to develop your skills and understanding of the workplace.

Testing a career choice

Work experience allows you to try a job or industry to see if it suits you. You can find out what activities you enjoy, what work environments you find most comfortable and how well you work with colleagues and as part of a team. All of these should mean you're more realistic and informed about your future career choices. Even if the work experience isn't quite right for you, it can still be incredibly useful, as identifying what you don't want to do can be a valuable step in discovering what you might enjoy.

Just as work experience allows you to find out whether a job or employer is right for you, it is also a chance for employers to see whether you are right for them. If you perform well in the role, it could lead to you being offered a permanent or longer term position.

Develop skills and improve your chances

All experience in a work environment exposes you to practical situations that allow you to develop valuable skills such as teamwork, flexibility or communication. Providing employers with examples of when you have used these skills can persuade them that you have the qualities required to be effective in the role. Experience outside of university will also show you have a proactive attitude to, and an understanding of, the working world.

When choosing between potential candidates, having a strong track record of experience can make the difference as to whether you are selected. If there are jobs you want to get in to that require specific skills that you have little or no experience of, look for work experience opportunities that will allow you to develop this skill, which you can then demonstrate to employers in future applications. Many popular graduate professions, including journalism, publishing, museum work and psychology, require large amounts of relevant experience before a permanent position will be offered.

Unpaid internships

Sadly, these are now common in many sectors. If you're thinking about applying to one, consider whether you can afford to work for free, whether the opportunity offers a realistic chance of progressing to a paid position, and whether you might be able to gain similar skills from alternative, paid opportunities (see www.internaware.org for more on this.)

Different types of work experience

The terms internships and work experience are often used interchangeably, so review any opportunity carefully to see what they'll consist of. The way in which work experience operates can differ greatly depending on the sector you're applying to, so do as much research as possible to increase your knowledge, and subsequently your chances of success. It's also worth being aware that you might need to be prepared to move to different areas of the country for internships in some industries, such as science and engineering.

Internships

Large organisations in sectors such as finance, consulting and law run formal internship schemes which will give you an advantage if you're applying for permanent positions in these areas in the future. They may be advertised as early as October for the following summer, be aimed at particular year groups, and are always very competitive, so do your research and apply early. Opportunities with smaller employers are more likely to be advertised throughout the year.

Work shadowing

If an organisation cannot offer you a formal placement, you may be able to “shadow” a member of staff. This involves spending a short period of time with them (typically a morning or a couple of days) watching what their role entails and asking questions about their work. These opportunities won't be advertised, so think about the areas and organisations you're interested in, and contact them directly. Think about whether anyone in your existing networks could help you.

Volunteering

This gives you a chance to gain many of the same skills as through formal work experience, while also giving something back to an organisation or community that could benefit from your skills. Volunteering roles could encompass anything, from helping an organisation build their website or database, to designing promotional materials or a marketing campaign. Do-It (www.do-it.org) and the volunteering team at your university are good starting points.

Part time work

Many students supplement their studies with a part time job. As well as earning some extra money, it's a great way to develop some transferable skills valued by employers, such as time management and team working. These roles are typically found in the service sector rather than at a professional or graduate level.

Placements

This usually refers to work experience completed as part of your course. Not all degrees offer this, though some have it built in, so check with your department if you're interested. In some instances, they might also be able to provide assistance with finding an employer.

Advice for international students

You may be able to work in the UK but there will be restrictions, so speak with your university's international student advice service and above all, ensure you comply with your visa requirements. Many employers aren't well-educated on laws around employing international students, so make sure you are by reading sites such as www.ukcisa.org.uk.

Top tips for finding work experience

Ultimately the reality is that you often need to already have work experience in order to gain further experience, and you may find that competition for this is high, particularly for formal internships. But remember it's never too early to start building experience, which you can use to strengthen your applications in the future. Extracurricular activities such as joining societies, where you can get experience of

working as a team and take on positions of responsibility, and volunteering are a great way to start this in your first year. It's also useful to attend employer and alumni career events, to help you find out about areas of work you might be interested in.

There is no single “right” way of gaining experience, so you don't need to limit yourself to just one of the approaches listed above. Now that you understand what work experience is, use other titles in this series such as *10 ways to find a job*, *Networking* and *LinkedIn and social media* to start thinking about how you can find these opportunities.

Visit your careers department as early as possible, for help with CVs, part time work, gaining work experience and much more.

Make the most of your experience

Before you start, make sure you know what time you need to arrive and who you should report to. Plan your journey and allow extra time, so you arrive early. Decide what you are going to wear in advance and if you aren't sure of the dress code, dress smartly. If you've not done so already, look on the organisation's website to find out more about what they do and who they work with. This demonstrates your motivation and initiative, and shows you've taken time to prepare.

Approach tasks with enthusiasm and do them to the best of your ability, even if you consider them boring. Show that you are looking for opportunities to improve and take on responsibility. Don't be afraid to challenge yourself a little or ask questions if you are not sure about a task. Take the initiative to get involved as much as possible, offering to help where you can.

Talk to colleagues – it's an excellent opportunity to get insight into the sector and opportunities available. Ask your colleagues about their roles and how they got into them. You might pick up some helpful tips and discover unconventional job routes and roles that are new to you. If you speak to someone who is involved in recruiting staff, you could find out what they look for when shortlisting candidates, what kind of experience the value and how you can make your application stand out.

Ask for feedback at the end of the placement. Find out what they felt your strengths were and whether there are areas you could further develop. Ask if they are happy to provide you with a reference. Sending a note of thanks afterwards is a polite way to show your thanks and maintain contact. Staying in touch and letting them know what you are doing can be a great way to find out about future opportunities. Invite colleagues to connect with you on LinkedIn.

Don't forget to note your achievements and tasks you were involved with so you can use them as potential examples in applications and interviews