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THE ARTHUR J. KANIA SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

Tailoring Your Internship

When George Clooney needs a new suit, what are the chances he walks into a store and buys one off the rack? Pretty slim. That's because, as a man of discerning style, he knows he'll look best in a suit tailor-made to his measurements, with the type and color of fabric he desires.

Customizing something to fit your needs is a task that can also be translated into your career. A tailored internship—one specially made according to the contours of your career goals—carries tremendous potential. Because you have the ability to mold it to the shape you want, a customized internship can turn a career step into a career leap. “The primary advantage of creating an internship is it helps you get into a position you know is more likely to be perfectly suited for your interests,” says Fred Hoskins, director of central co-ops at Northeastern University.¹

It can also be a lot of work. Because you'll have to “sell” the concept of your internship, you'll be expected to perform above and beyond the average intern. But the rewards—very focused experience, a perfect complement to your skill set—are great.

Select Your Functional Area and Industry

Before you start researching specific companies, you'll need to have a clear idea of what you want to do—and in which industry you can do it.

Selecting the functional area in which you want to work is fundamental to your career. For example, students entering B-school will often concentrate on one of several disciplines, such as finance, marketing, operations, or management—and then apply for internships filling particular roles.

In some cases, your career goals may lead you to a very specific industry. For example, being a sports broadcaster will clearly limit your search to organizations in the media industry. But many students have expertise that is practical for multiple industries; an accounting student can find plenty of internships outside of the Big Four to better complement their individual aspirations. “If an accounting major has a personal interest in something like the environment, they can scout out finance departments at sustainability companies,” says Hoskins.

Without this focus, your message will be loose, your direction vague, your enthusiasm likely diluted. Once you've selected your key area of concentration, your pitch is more likely to be tight and targeted, your enthusiasm genuine, and your goals more realistic.

Select Your Employer

Finding the right employer is often the result of careful research and savvy networking. Try searching LinkedIn, joining professional associations, reaching out to alumni, or networking with your parents' friends. Sometimes a simple Google search will yield employers that are up your alley.

Once you've scoped out potential employers, you should research whether they have existing internships. Creating a custom internship can work with almost any employer, but your chances are far better with employers who do not already have a formal internship program. However, don't give up on employers with formal internship programs if that's where your interests lie. Many of these existing internships are coordinated by a regional or national headquarters. Some branch offices might not take part in their corporate offices' programs and just as likely use some additional help for particular projects.

Make a Connection

Once you've identified potential employers, the next step is to establish a connection. If you heard about the company from someone who works there, that's your in. If Google led you there, you'll need to reach the manager of the department you're interested in, and introduce yourself and your intentions. And get over cold-calling cold feet. You're not going through the traditional channels, so you're going to need to be savvy and work around multiple gatekeepers.

If you're making contact with companies who have structured internships, be prepared to get shuffled back into their generic recruiting pipeline. If they try to redirect you, tell them you want to create a unique experience that wouldn't be available through an existing program, and that you prefer to trade some compensation in return for gaining more control over the work you will do.

A good way to get your pitch heard is to request an informational interview. "You should ask a contact for a half hour to learn more about who they are and what they do," says Alexandra Levit, author of *New Job, New You*. "Tell them what you're trying to accomplish in your career as a whole, and wait to see if they offer an internship or other opportunity first. If not, then casually mention it at the end of the call."

Convince Your Target

Once you have the ear of the appropriate hiring manager, discuss projects they may have sitting on the shelf, or initiatives they haven't had the staffing for. After delving into their needs, interject with some of the things you'd like to do and see if the two can be integrated. This way, you're solving the employer's problem and yours.

You should also be prepared with your own ideas for projects. “Identify what you can do for the organization,” says Suzanne Helbig, career counselor at UC Berkeley. “The company may not have the time or energy to do that for you, so don’t be vague. At the same time, go in with the willingness to be flexible and accommodate what the organization needs.”

You might also want to cover the details of the proposed internship, suggesting short and long-term goals of the project, work hours, and weekly progress meetings. Your consideration will be based on the strength of your ideas and the passion with which you convey them. The more prepared you are with your pitch, the easier it will be to warm the employer to the idea of a custom internship.

ⁱ <http://www.wetfeet.com/articles/custom-fit-tailoring-your-internship>