

Tailoring your Co-op/internship Experience

Now that you've secured a co-op/internship position, the next step is creating a learning experience and taking advantage of resources on the job. Here are some tips and techniques to keep in mind as you work with your supervisor and co-workers:

- 1. Set goals and meet often with your supervisor.** Use the Employment Summary Form as a place to begin outlining goals with your supervisor—this should not only entail your professional expectations and responsibilities, but also include your personal goals from the experience. By talking with your supervisor, you will be able to set realistic goals and learn how the organization can help you take steps to meet those goals. You may also want to outline a timeline for the experience, giving yourself deadlines along the way. If regular meetings are not initiated by your supervisor, checking in and discussing your progress on a weekly or bi-weekly basis will ensure you're both on the same page.
- 2. A positive attitude and enthusiasm are a must!** While you may not enjoy every task assigned to you, handling each responsibility with professionalism and a positive attitude will be appreciated and will help you build a good reputation with the employer. Saying you have a good work ethic in your hiring process may help you gain the position, and demonstrating that same dedication to the employer and responsibilities is expected on the job. Avoid complaining, disrespecting others, arriving late, leaving early, missing deadlines, appearing arrogant, participating in office politics, etc. The way you act and work will be reflected in your ability to gain a positive reference and potential full-time employment after the co-op/internship. This advice not only applies to the way you are evaluated from a supervisor, but also the way co-workers and administrative assistants view you. If you treat everyone from the janitor to the CEO with dignity and respect, you will earn the same.
- 3. Ask questions and seek learning opportunities.** The very nature of a co-op/internship is an experience where you will be exposed to new ideas, procedures, people, and/or environments—employers expect you to ask questions throughout the learning process. Likewise, there will be resources available to you that may not be a part of your daily routine or task list, it will be your personal responsibility to read industry materials and talk with co-workers to learn more about the field, organization, and industry. While meetings may seem slow at first, take advantage of opportunities to observe decision making and processes within the company.
- 4. Find a mentor and network.** A mentor can help you learn the company culture and navigate office politics, as well as assist you in learning and growing within the organization and industry by answering questions and helping you find new learning opportunities. While in some cases your supervisor may take on a mentoring role, you may need to approach someone else within the organization to be a mentor. Additionally, your co-op/internship is an ideal time to build several professional relationships with people who can give you advice about job searching and how to navigate your field/industry. Consider everyone you meet a potential “networking” opportunity and a person who may assist you along your career path.

5. **Consider responsibilities and projects as additions to your career portfolio.** A co-op/internship is far more than a resume builder or opportunity for academic credit. The accomplishments you achieve on the job will become part of your tangible portfolio to demonstrate the skills you've acquired.
6. **Do not be “new” too long.** Take advantage of the opportunity in front of you. Ask for more responsibilities, and do not be afraid to take on new challenges. Avoid the “I do not know, I'm new here” attitude. If you don't know, find out—sieve the learning opportunity!
7. **Have fun!** Make sure you discover if the position and field are enjoyable as an intern so you learn if you would enjoy a similar opportunity as a career choice. Work hard and play hard, just remember the balance and to still stay on task and showing professionalism.

Conflict Resolution Tips

Even in the best of situations conflict can arise. Part of adapting to the professional world is learning how to tactfully and positively handle such situations. Following is some advice on how to approach conflict:

1. Assess the issue at hand, avoid taking things to a personal level if possible.
2. Write down topics you need to cover before going into the meeting for your own reference.
3. Explore and seek to understand all sides and perspectives before making a judgment call.
4. Be slow to anger, especially over petty issues. Be assertive, not aggressive.
5. Instead of telling people they are wrong, point out mistakes indirectly with evidence.
6. Look for some type of common ground as soon as possible.
7. Summarize—after the other person expresses a thought or idea, summarize the facts and emotions you heard to ensure you've interpreted what they have shared correctly.
8. Ask questions to clarify points you don't understand.
9. Acknowledge the merit of every idea.
10. If you are in the wrong, admit it.
11. Admit one of your own poor decisions before pointing out a similar error by others.
12. Don't interrupt, criticize, laugh at the other person, offer advice, or change the subject.
13. Share your concerns--use "I" statements about how you feel and perceive the situation, as well as sharing your own needs.
14. Get some distance—don't expect to resolve everything in one meeting or quickly.
15. Find a fair, win-win solution—if needed, seek out a mediator outside the situation (i.e. Human Resources or a supervisor).
16. Avoid gossiping or spreading rumors about the situation and people involved.

* Remember, your co-workers do not have to be your best friends. Respect their professional abilities and approach each person in a professional manner.

How to Receive Feedback

It is much easier to provide feedback or criticism than to receive it. The key with either is attitude and professionalism—view feedback as an opportunity for growth and development, not as a personal attack. Here are some tips to help you through constructive criticism and evaluative judgment situations:

1. Listen actively, seeking to understand accurately the criticism being presented.
Paraphrase what is shared, ask questions to gain understanding, and check out nonverbal signs/your perceptions.
2. Avoid becoming defensive—resist the tendency to dismiss criticism or retaliate personally.
3. Seek constructive changes to the behavior that prompted the criticism—have the critic help you find a solution, especially if this is your supervisor.
4. Insist on valid feedback that addresses behaviors, is timely, and is specific.
5. Communicate clearly how you feel and think about the information presented—use “I” statements when sharing.
6. Try to understand the perspective of the person giving criticism—put yourself in their shoes to gain understanding.
7. Set goals for change and take responsibility with action steps for improvement.
8. Communicate with your supervisor frequently regarding your work performance to receive regular feedback and evaluation.
9. Seek resources and networks to help you learn and do a better job.
10. Do NOT take criticism as a personal attack, recognize room for professional growth.
Remember, there is always room to grow and learn professionally.

Handling Job Stress and Company Culture

Company/Organizational culture is a set of behaviors and codes which people use to govern their interactions with each other. This includes both formal, written company policies and informal “rules of the road” that is learned with experience. Just as students must adjust from a high school to a university culture and environment, there is a transition to the world of work and from one organization to another. Any of these transitions can add stress to an already challenging time of learning new responsibilities and skills. Here are some tips to keep in mind when handling such stress and adapting to a new environment:

1. **Analyze Culture**—take time to analyze the workplace culture. You may choose to change your habits to minimize undue stress.
2. **Communication Styles**—take note of what information is delivered formally, in writing, and what is appropriate to share informally or verbally. If regular meetings have a time for sharing or problem solving, notice what kinds of issues are addressed at that time to know what you may want to contribute. Ask your supervisor when the best time might be to talk with he/she, realizing that time is valuable and respected.
3. **Hierarchy**—by learning the “chain of command” you will be able to assess who the appropriate person is to approach about different concerns or topics. It is also valuable to understand the organizational structure to assess the type of company and environment in which you would like to work after graduation. Approaching your direct supervisor and co-workers about handling the hierarchy of the organization is often helpful.
4. **Teamwork**—the way in which an organization and/or division works together or autonomously is important to learn. Notice whether projects and information are shared freely and how co-workers respond to feedback and suggestions about their work. You may want to ask your co-workers how much collaborating they prefer you engage in with them to avoid undue stress.
5. **Leadership**—discover how evaluations are handled both internally and through your co-op program, know the method and regularity of formal and informal feedback. You will discover through your experience what your supervisor’s management style and personality are through various interactions—this will help you learn the best and most timely way of approaching him/her.
6. **Appearance**—is there a dress code where you work, and is it formal/in writing? If not, you can judge from how your co-workers present themselves how you can adapt to fit the

environment. While having your own style is a good thing, varying extremely from the norm of the organization can reflect on your professionalism.

7. **Your Workspace**—some students are assigned a specific work area that they keep throughout the term, while others may rotate based on space availability. If you are dealing with confidential information, find out the procedure to maintain confidentiality in the workplace. Notice how co-workers decorate their space before bringing in your posters and streamers. Personal space is also an issue in the workplace—do you need to have an appointment before dropping by to talk with a co-worker; are doors left open or closed to convey signals?
8. **Office friendships/morale**—observe how much employees and supervisors share their personal lives in the workplace. Do not feel obligated to tell all, but notice the level of friendship or lack thereof consists—are there clicks within the office? Are there divisions based on hierarchy or job responsibilities? You may find some individuals who choose to keep their personal life completely separate from work—it is important to respect their boundaries.
9. **Mentor**—if the organization has a mentoring program in place or you find an individual within the company who shows an interest in your professional development, take advantage of the opportunity to form a mentoring relationship. Your mentor should be someone with whom you can discuss workplace culture and issues that arise. This individual should have several years experience in your field and/or the organization to provide valuable insight into your career path/field.