



# Planning a work placement or internship\*

## – Comprehensive Checklist –

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*\* In English-speaking countries, the terms 'work placement' and 'internship' are sometimes used synonymously but often differ in meaning depending on the duration of the work-experience period or when it is undertaken. For the sake of readability, the term 'internship' will be used in this document for all such periods of work experience.*

## Step 1: Define your hopes, expectations and goals

The first step to a successful internship is to formulate what your goals and expectations are and what you would personally like to achieve during your work-experience period. Start by asking yourself what your main objectives are:

- Career orientation: getting to know more about a new field, sector or country
- Qualification: acquiring specific additional skills
- Specialization: deepening your understanding of a specific field
- Networking: establishing contact to potential future employers

You will probably have more than one main objective, but this first step will help you get a clearer picture of what you want to achieve. Once you have a better idea of your main objectives, think about other important aspects of your internship. Do you want to...

- develop and strengthen specific skills?
- get a better idea about what it's like to work in a particular profession or career?
- learn about a new field that you think you might later like to work in?
- get to know potential future employers?
- use your internship to deepen your knowledge about another country, its culture and its language?
- acquire additional qualifications?
- take a break from your studies by gaining practical work experience (possibly for a period significantly longer than the 3–6 months typically required in many degree programmes)?

Once you have defined your main objectives and what you hope to achieve, try to formulate a few specific personal goals:

- When you think about your future internship, how do you imagine it?
- Are there specific areas or skills you would like to develop or improve during your internship?
- Are there any completely new areas or skills that you'd like to acquire during your internship? If so, which ones?
- Are there specific tasks or activities that you'd like to undertake during your internship?
- What experiences would you like to gain on a personal level?
- Which sector do you want to do your internship in?
- Would you prefer a large or a small company?
- How will your internship tie in with the content of your degree programme?
- How might your internship influence your further studies?
- How do you think your internship might affect your intended career path?
- What will you add to your CV after completing the internship?

## Step 2: Finding the right internship – The application and interview process

Now that you have a clearer idea about your expectations and objectives for your internship, you need to find a company or organization that can offer what you're looking for. One possible starting point is Saarland University's career portal or you might try contacting companies or organizations whose websites suggest they might be a good fit. Recruitment and job search websites are also a good place to look for internship positions. To learn some of the basics and get useful advice about job applications and job interviews, why not sign up for one of the training courses offered by the Career Center. You'll find the dates in the current calendar of Career Center events.

## Step 3: The internship

Once a company has agreed to take you on as an intern, you should ask about an internship agreement. Drawing up a formal internship agreement will be automatic in some companies, but not in all. Before you sign the agreement, read through it carefully. If you are unsure about any aspect of the agreement, address these issues with your supervisor at the host company or organization. Treat signing the agreement as the first stage of your internship.

When working as an intern try to find a healthy balance between wanting to make a good impression and being overeager. Don't get ahead of yourself and don't ignore what your supervisor and colleagues tell you. But, at the same time, you should show initiative and that you're keen to learn. Most companies want their interns to show initiative, and asking relevant questions about the work and the company will generally leave a good impression.

If you're not sure what to wear on the first day, think back to the day of your interview and try to remember what your interviewers were wearing. If you're still unsure, simply ask your supervisor.

No matter how hard you try to do everything right, you're probably going to make a mistake at some point. But that's not a bad thing. After all, internships are all about learning. If you do make a mistake, don't try and cover it up; be honest and talk to your supervisor about it. And if your supervisor or a colleague corrects your work or points something out to you, don't take it personally. Accepting criticism isn't always easy, but it can help you learn new and better ways of working. It's also important that you're punctual and that you keep to the agreed number of working hours. If after a few days you realize that this is not the right internship for you, speak to your supervisor about ending your internship; don't simply stop turning up.

And once you've completed your period as an intern, don't just disappear without a word. The last impression you make can be just as important as the first. Who knows, the company that hosted you may be your future employer. We recommend sending a nicely worded thank-you email to the

team you've been working with. And don't forget to ask your employer for a document certifying that you worked at the company as an intern. While you're at the company, think about the follow-up activities you'll be required to complete. Nearly all students at Saarland University who undertake a compulsory internship are required to write a report. Even if you completed a voluntary internship, writing a report can be a good way to document and reflect on your work as an intern and what you learned while at the company. It is a good idea to keep a 'diary' that covers the period before and during your internship where you jot down brief notes about your main activities as an intern. Keeping notes in this way can make it a lot easier to compile an internship report that meets the requirements of your study programme.

## Step 4: Reviewing and reflecting on your internship

After completing your internship, you should review and take stock of the experience. What have you learned? Have you acquired new skills? Were there any shortcomings? Have you identified areas where you want to improve? One useful approach is to look back at your original objectives and see how they compare with the results achieved. To help you reflect on your internship, try answering the following questions:

- In what way did the internship meet your expectations?
- How would you describe your relationship with your internship supervisor (professionally and personally)?
- How would you describe the internship onboarding process (professionally and personally)?
- How often did you have follow-up or debriefing sessions?
- What issues were discussed in these meetings?
- Were you able to accept criticism and act on the advice given?
- What sort of feedback did you get from your colleagues?
- Which personal strengths and weaknesses have you been able to identify?
- What surprised you about the internship?
- What did you particularly enjoy or dislike?
- Was anything particularly difficult or challenging?
- What was your greatest achievement?
- What knowledge or which skills previously acquired during your degree programme provided particularly useful during your internship?
- Have you identified any knowledge or skills gaps (e.g. IT, languages, other key skills) that you want to address in your future studies?
- What will you be focusing on when you return to academic study?

- Could or should you look to acquire skills outside of your degree programme in order to be better qualified for a particular profession or to enhance your career prospects?
- Did the internship make you feel more or less secure about your intended career path?
- How would you rate your internship overall? What did you like? What did you dislike?
- Did your internship open up opportunities for future collaborations? Were you able to expand your network of contacts? If so, how do you intend to make use of these new contacts?

Please note: In Germany, you are entitled to an **employment reference letter** for any job or internship that lasts at least eight weeks. A letter of reference contains a statement of the tasks/assignments that you undertook, information on how you work and an assessment of your performance, your professional skills and your motivation and social intelligence. Employment references are enclosed with your other documents when you apply for another position. However, as not all companies issue reference letters automatically when employees or interns leave, it's a good idea to speak to your supervisor at the host company about a reference.

If you have any questions, please email us at [career@uni-saarland.de](mailto:career@uni-saarland.de).