

## Good, Bad and Unexpected of Internships: 4 Takeaways from our Interns

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Every summer, Alliance Data hires interns in many of our offices, including our corporate office in Plano, TX. Internships are an incredible opportunity not only for students, but for our company as well. In recognition of that, we aim to make the most of every intern's time. In their brief stint with us, each intern takes part in Leader Meet & Greets, enrichment courses, social events, and philanthropic events. They are also assigned a special project pertaining to their area to solve a specific business problem or discovery.

This summer, Alliance Data's Corporate office hired 11 interns to work across several departments – HR, Corporate Affairs, Audit, Finance, Accounting, and IT. We asked them to share with us their thoughts on their experience, including the good, the bad, and the unexpected. Here are the four biggest takeaways they wanted to share with future interns, as well as companies looking to hire interns:

### 1. Take On Real Responsibilities

*Varun Parameswaran, Treasury & Capital Markets Intern, Junior at University of Texas at Austin: "The best part of my internship has been the opportunity to take on real responsibilities and add value to my department and the rest of the company. I love how I am learning by doing, having the freedom to make mistakes, and understanding how my activities impact the entire company. This internship has been perfect in terms of the depth and breadth of work I've gotten the opportunity to contribute to."*

No one wants to spend their entire summer fetching coffee or mastering the art of photocopying. Although an internship will involve some work that might not be fun, but is essential to keeping a team on track, college students should ask during the interview process about the kind of tasks they can expect to work on, and whether there will be opportunities for them to flex their muscles and take on more challenging projects with their team as they learn. It's also important for the students to look around for more challenging opportunities themselves during their internship and raise their hands or inquire about projects that they are interested in participating in. An internship will only be as interesting and challenging as the intern chooses to make it. Never be afraid to raise your hand and volunteer for opportunities.

Companies should create a formal process for their internship program, while also having conversations with departments who want to hire an intern to ensure expectations from the team and the intern are compatible. It's particularly important for teams to remember that taking on an intern will require some dedication and time in order to ensure the proper training and guidance is given to the intern. Spending the time to train an intern properly will give them the opportunity to stretch their knowledge and gain new skills during the weeks they will spend in that department, while giving the team another pair of capable hands to help with the workload.

### 2. Ask Questions (Lots of Them!)

*Marissa Mathews, Corporate Affairs Intern, Senior at Southern Methodist University: "The best part of my internship this summer has been getting the flexibility to work on a variety of projects while working with associates who are so kind and helpful, especially when I have questions. I have never felt afraid to get help when I need it, and I get the opportunity to learn from different people."*

An internship is about getting your feet wet, learning about the career you may take on after you graduate. Take advantage of working with people who understand the business, industry, or job path you are interested in. Ask questions, lots of them! The more questions you ask, the more you'll learn during your internship and confirm to the team members around you that you are interested, committed and that you understand that you don't have all the answers.

Companies with a culture where all employees are encouraged to ask questions, cross-pollinate with other teams will naturally help interns feel right at home quickly and help them learn as much as possible during their time. For companies with a more stringent culture, it might be helpful for interns to be assigned a mentor, to ensure that they have someone they feel comfortable going to with questions and concerns.

### 3. Don't Be Afraid to Interact With Executives

*Marcus Peters, Human Resources Intern, Senior at University of Texas at Dallas: "Alliance Data's open environment creates so many opportunities for interns to purposely interact with managers, senior directors, and even executives. The amount of knowledge that can be gained in one summer is incredible. Besides making friends with executives, the work that is available for interns is expansive. There seems to be no limit as to what interns can work on while at Alliance Data. Other interns have had their work shown to the CFO!"*

This is the time to learn as much as possible about the corporate world. Don't limit yourself to just your team! Ask for opportunities to be involved in meetings with executives when it's appropriate, if those opportunities aren't being offered to you. Reach out to executives across the company and ask if you could have even 15 minutes of their time to learn more about their career path, their job and see what advice they might have for you. This can only help you build your network, which will help you once you graduate, as well as help you make a solid impression at the company, so that you can hopefully work there as a full-time employee in the future.

Companies that provide a transparent experience for their interns and help them make feel welcomed and appreciated across the entire hierarchy can help ensure that they build a pipeline of strong candidates who already know the company, its culture and environment. If an intern is smart, hardworking and capable, why wouldn't you want them to leave at the end of the summer with the goal to work full-time for you when they graduate?

### 4. Look for an environment where interns are treated just like any other employee.

*Iqra Ali, IT Intern, Senior at University of Texas at Dallas: "The most surprising aspect to my internship was how little school and classroom knowledge helped. I have learned that school can give you a basic foundation of knowledge but it is important to be willing to learn, especially on your own through resources like training manuals that are provided. I wish I could be able to contribute more in my team. Everyone on the PeopleSoft team has at least 10 years of experience and so it is difficult to assign work that is challenging but within the experience level of an intern still in school."*

Although college is undoubtedly an essential step for many of the positions in Fortune 500 companies, an internship can often open the eyes of

students and make them realize just how much outside-of-textbooks knowledge is involved for many jobs. Many jobs actually depend on job experience, which only highlights the importance of internships in helping to build that knowledge and skill set prior to graduation.

In turn, companies can help their interns by ensuring they provide the training and tools they need, while ensuring that they have opportunities for growth and the confidence to tackle tasks. A mentor with experience in the job can also help an intern feel like they can ask questions without feeling intimidated.

The end of the summer is quickly approaching, which means that our interns will soon be on their way back to their respective schools. On behalf of all of us at Alliance Data, thank you to all of our interns for choosing to spend your summer with us. We wish you a great school year, and hope to see your smiling faces in our halls again some day!

For another perspective, check out '[Tips for Evaluating an Employer](#)' by Marisabelle Porro, a product marketing intern at Epsilon, where she shares her perspective on how to evaluate employers on Epsilon's '[A Brand New View](#)' blog.

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