

Getting Your Foot in the Door

On internships, scribes, and work experience



For this edition of GYFD, I would like to provide some background information about internships, including the history of the term and answers to some frequently asked questions about it. The objective is to provide a better overview of internship that goes beyond preconceptions based on White House scandals, college students' nightmares, and reality TV.

How did internships originate?

I am delighted to report that *internship* has a very honourable history. It has close ties to Europe, and the term itself is linked to medicine. According to some, internships can trace their roots to the European apprenticeship system in the Middle Ages.^{1,2} The term *apprenticeship* meant "to bind to a master for instruction in his craft" in the 1630s.³ Under this system, children as young as 11 would start vocational training under a master craftsman to learn a trade. Skills and know-how during this time were transferred to the apprentice by shadowing the master. At the end of about seven years, the apprentice should be fully qualified to practise the profession he or she trained for. Nowadays, the apprenticeship system,

though of shorter duration, is still very much practised in the Europe, strictly regulated by labour and education authorities.^{1,2}

The term *intern* comes from the French word *interne* which means "assistant doctor."³ It was supposedly coined during World War I to refer to someone who has a medical degree but does not have the licence to practise medicine.¹ During internship, the intern gets hands-on training in the field of medicine under the supervision of a licensed practitioner and eventually becomes a fully trained, qualified physician. Today, the same qualification pathway exists in many countries as medical doctors go from internship to residency before obtaining a full attending position.

I personally think – though I am no historian – that internships or apprenticeships go back even earlier. What comes to my mind are the scribes of ancient Egypt. These highly trained professionals were sent to a special school at an early age to learn reading and writing of hieroglyphs under a master scribe. At the end of many years of training, scribes took on a highly specialised profession in a predominantly illiterate society.⁵ It was always thought that only boys

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SECTION EDITOR



Raquel Billiones

RBilliones@clinipace.com

were qualified to become scribes. However, there are records of female scribes who had to achieve literacy to practise their professions as priests or as physicians. Even in ancient Egypt, doctors, male or female, had to be able to read medical documents.^{5,6}

What is the purpose of modern internships?

Nowadays, the term *internship* covers all forms of professional careers that require high level of qualifications⁴ and the journey to full qualifications is not as Hogwarts-like as it used to be. In addition to internship and apprenticeship, the terms *traineeship*, *volunteership*, *placement*, and *job shadowing* are interchangeably used when referring to on-the-job training programmes that last for a few months. The distinctions between these terms are not very clearly defined and vary from company to company, from country to country. However, regardless of the term used, it is clear that there are two main purposes for this type of training activity:^{1,2}

To get a leg up: One gains work experience that can pave the way to an entry level position.

To get to test drive: From the intern's perspective, one gets to try out one's hand in a certain field if one is not sure of the career path to take. From the company perspective, one gets to check out the "job fit" before making a job offer.

Does an intern get paid?

In the old European system, apprentices lived with their masters and in many cases worked for their board and keep. Nowadays, the monetary conditions vary a lot and we often come across the terms "paid" and "unpaid" internships. Again the rules governing compensation would depend on the company and the country labour legislations. In the UK, the British government provides very useful guidance for both interns and institutions on this matter on their website.⁴

Is internship considered work experience even if it is unpaid?

The term *work experience* generally refers to a period of time that a person spends in a company,

business, or institution outside the classroom environment. Regardless of the compensation arrangements, it is assumed that the intern learns something about working life in general and specific aspects of a profession. It is only appropriate that interns can put this activity down in their resumé/CV as part of their work experience. However, internships, especially unpaid ones, would not necessarily qualify as employment, hence, may not be listed under employment history.

What are the qualifications required for a medical writing internship and how does it work?

In previous editions of the GYFD, we had two medical communications agencies^{7,8} share with us information on their internship programmes. I still have to find a pharmaceutical company who can provide information about their medical

There are two main purposes to internship: To get a leg up and to get to test drive.

writing internships. Recently, I came across an advertisement for a regulatory writing internship position for a big pharmaceutical company. With permission from the company, I am sharing an excerpt of the job advertisement in Box 1 below, though the role has already been filled. This job posting gives us a peek into the world of regulatory writing internships.

Closing remarks

Does your company have an internship programme? Have you done an internship yourself? We'd love to hear from you. Please share your experiences with the GYFD community.

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Box 1. Excerpt from an internship advertisement

"This [internship] position offers candidates with a scientific background at an undergraduate/ recently graduated level exposure to a key role within clinical drug development... Successful applicants will provide support to experienced associates... In order to get as broad an experience as possible, you will work with multiple associates... on a variety of different... projects. You will also have opportunities to interact with colleagues in [other countries] as well as [job] shadow members of the team. Along with providing project management, support, writing parts of documents, and liaising with key team members, you will start to develop important transferrable skills, including effective communication and negotiation, time management, problem solving, and matrix team working. Training and 1:1 coaching will be provided."

Required qualifications and skills are "good English written skills, developed interpersonal skills and a positive work ethic... and life science, physical science or clinical background."

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