

How to Identify Meaningful Work for Interns

An intern's responsibilities may vary depending on the departmental needs of the position. Students searching for internships need clear information before applying or interviewing. This includes:

- Required skills and duties
- Key projects they will complete
- Expectations for the internship experience

Providing this information helps applicants better understand the role and the field they will explore.

While routine tasks such as filing, answering phones, or assembling mailings are part of most workplaces, they should not be the intern's primary responsibilities unless the internship focuses on office support skills. Interns participate to gain experience in their chosen field. However, including some routine tasks can help provide realistic work experience.

The most important step in creating a successful internship is deciding what work and projects the intern will complete and managing that work throughout the internship. Interns want to be challenged. A common issue in unsuccessful internships is not having enough meaningful work. The best approach is to plan three types of work.

Types of Internship Work

1. Project Work

Project work should involve a structured assignment or analysis that allows interns to apply skills related to their field of study. This type of work should be meaningful and relevant to their future career goals. It is often the primary factor that attracts applicants to the position.

2. Background Work

Background work includes general tasks that are important but not time sensitive. These tasks may be less complex but still require skill and attention. They help interns remain productive during times when project work is delayed, such as when waiting for feedback or approvals.

3. Operational Support Work

Operational support work includes tasks that arise during normal business operations. This may involve assisting with urgent issues or unexpected needs. These experiences help interns understand the day-to-day responsibilities of the workplace and develop problem-solving skills.

Examples of Internship Work

Administrative and Communication Tasks

- Preparing presentations
- Attend staff meetings
- Assist with projects
- Write internal communications and reports
- Create proposals
- Plan and coordinate events or meetings
- Filing, copying, scanning, preparing packets, organizing meetings, data entry, answer phones, greeting visitors

Analytical and Research Tasks

- Collect, compile, and present data and statistics
- Conduct studies or surveys and provide recommendations
- Analyze and present survey results
- Perform benchmarking studies
- Analyze department budgets
- Develop financial forecasts

Technical and Specialized Tasks

- Create charts, graphics, spreadsheets, and other visual materials
- Create, develop and maintain databases
- Assist with website development

- Support GIS projects
- Research topics for training sessions
- Draft policies or best practices, operations manuals

Community and Organizational Engagement

- Aid to organize community hearings or meetings
- Attend Board of Supervisors, public, and staff meetings

Operational and Inventory Tasks

- Perform inventories
- Manage stock and materials
- Maintain inventory databases
- Receive and ship materials

Laboratory and Mechanical Tasks – require training and should be under supervision and performed within standard operation procedures

- Assist with mechanical repairs to equipment such as pumps and compressors and tanks
- Assist with instrumentation and electrical repairs
- Support fabrication and blueprint reading
- Prepare laboratory glassware and samples
- Perform laboratory tests
- Prepare reagents and standards
- Sample preparation, including digestion, filtration, and dilution

Guidance for High School Internships

High school interns should be assigned duties that align with their Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, interests, and career goals whenever possible. Assignments should provide opportunities to build relevant skills and explore career pathways.