

From internship to dream job
By: Randall Heldermon

You wake up before the alarm clock rings. Too nervous to eat breakfast, you fix your hair, brush your teeth and put on your new business suit. As you check your appearance in the mirror one last time, you say to yourself, "This is it." And so begins your first day at the internship that could influence your life in ways you never expected.

Depending on their major, students in the Oklahoma State University College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources are either required or encouraged to complete an internship before they graduate, and these positions often turn into jobs.

This is exactly what happened to OSU alumna Amy Brooks London. While majoring in landscape architecture at OSU, London completed an internship with Kimley-Horn and Associates Inc. After a successful experience, she was offered a full-time position with the company before she had graduated from college.

"It was awesome," said London of having a job nailed down. "It took a lot of pressure off my last year of school."

Finding your internship

The first thing you have to do is find an internship that suits your interests and career goals. To do this, you need to understand what is involved in an internship.

An internship is supervised, provides hands-on experience and is educational, said Amy Gazaway, career development coordinator for CASNR career services.

Beyond those commonalities are a lot of variables. Internships can last for two days or two years, be for undergraduates or graduates, be for credit or not for credit, and even be paid or unpaid.

The next problem is where to look. The Internet is a popular place to search, but if not used correctly, it can leave you looking in the wrong places. One good place to search for government internships is the Office of Personnel Management's Web site.

"It is 'the' place to look if you want a government job, but if you are looking for something else, you won't find it there," said Gazaway.

If you are looking for an internship within a specific organization but are not sure if it has an internship program, you usually can find out by going to its Web site. If the company has a structured internship program, there is usually a link for it, said Gazaway.

"I learned about my internship online through the American Society of Landscape Architects' Web site," said London. "I searched companies in Texas and Colorado who had an emphasis in land development. Kimley-Horn had offices in both states. I am currently working in our Dallas office."

Don't give up if the company does not have an internship program. There may still be an opportunity, but you will just have to dig a little more. You can contact the organization's human resources department. You also should use your networking skills to help you get in touch with the right person.

Candi Latta, an agricultural economics senior, used her networking contacts to find an internship.

"We had grown chickens for Tyson for several years," said Latta. "Our technical adviser recommended me for an internship with the company. It feels good knowing I have a job, and I have time to see if I can find something better."

A number of resources are available to students at OSU.

"Talk to faculty, career services staff and alumni," said Gazaway. "Give all of them a copy of your résumé."

Another place to find an internship is at a career fair. Prospective employers come to these events to hire students for jobs and internships. They realize most college career fair attendees will have limited experience and will be seeking entry-level positions. These employers are not looking for an immediate chief executive officer, but they are looking for a hard-working person with confidence and an eagerness to learn.

Agricultural communications senior Missy Nilan found this out firsthand. She was required to go to a career fair for a class in fall 2004.

"While I was there I just began talking with the people at some of the booths," she said.

Before she knew it, she was scheduled to interview for a marketing and sales internship with John Deere. A few weeks later, she was selected for the position. She is now considering a position with the company.

"I recommend the career fair for anyone, even if you think there isn't a job for you," said Nilan. "They are looking for employees anyway, so you're not bothering them by asking if they have anything for you."

Applying for your internship

Typically, when you apply for an internship, you send a cover letter and a résumé and follow up with a phone call. "Hand-delivering is an option for students who are using networking contacts in close proximity, but since it is not the norm, I would hesitate to recommend it," said Gazaway.

A résumé should be one page long and should list important things about you and your abilities: your education, relevant experiences, employment history, skills and references. You don't need to write in sentence form, but try to keep it clean and easy to read. Bullets help as long as they are not distracting.

Your cover letter should be addressed to the person involved in the hiring process and should express your interest in the job, connecting your experiences and skills on your résumé to what the employer is seeking.

Interviewing for the internship

This is your chance to show what sets you apart from the other applicants.

"The most important thing to do in an interview is to be yourself," said Nilan.

It helps interviewees be more comfortable with the situation.

"The interview is a two-way communication," said Gazaway. "The employer is trying to figure out if you are right for the company, and you have to figure out if the company is right for you. If you aren't yourself, you don't get a genuine feel about how you fit with the company."

You want to be in control of as many factors as possible during the interview:

- Arrive early, 10 to 15 minutes.
- Leave your phone in the car; it will be a distraction if you take it.
- Have names and numbers if you have trouble and are going to be late, but don't be late.
- Dress appropriately.

"If you are in doubt about what to wear, it is OK to ask," said Gazaway. "For example, if you are interviewing on-site at a hog farm, you may be out of place in a suit and tie."

You also should take a portfolio to show some of your work samples, regardless of your major.

"Writing samples are good to include because you have to be able to write in any position," said Gazaway. "You should include a few samples of your best work and a few extra copies of your résumé in your portfolio."

Look for an opportunity to show your portfolio during the interview. The interviewer most likely will not ask to see it, but it will not do you any good if he or she only gets to see you have a folder with a nice cover. Put the portfolio in the person's hands and explain what specific piece of your work is being viewed. It is OK to pause and let the person look at an item, especially if it is a writing sample. It is a good idea to have copies of everything as part of an electronic portfolio to leave so it can be viewed again at a later time.

"Small talk can help put you and the interviewer at ease," said Gazaway.

After the interview, you should follow up. Within 24 hours, you should send a thank-you note to everyone with whom you interviewed.

"This is an important and often overlooked step," said Gazaway. "It shows you are willing to do a little extra work to get what you are after and puts your name in front of the potential employer one more time."

Gaining from an internship

You gain experiences through an internship you could never have in the classroom. It can help you decide on your specific career path. The internship could be all you hoped it would be and could confirm you are on the correct path, or it could be something you do not enjoy.

It is better to find out through a three-month internship than to end up in a full-time position in that field, said Gazaway. If you do not like the job area, you still have time to explore different career opportunities.

"An internship sets you apart from other students because not everybody does an internship," said Gazaway.

You also get your foot in the door for future job opportunities. The contacts you will make and the contacts the organization has can go a long way in helping you find a job after graduation. Sometimes an internship can even turn into a job, meaning you do not have to spend your senior year searching.

"Not having to worry about finding a job has made my senior year a breeze," said Nilan.

Working with soil does not always have to be dirty. Starr Holtz, a plant and soil sciences graduate student, keeps her hands clean as she runs a particle size analysis on soil samples during her internship with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. (photo courtesy of Starr Holtz)

Ruth Bobbitt, an agricultural communications junior, adds her creative style to OSU's biosystems and agricultural engineering department through her internship. (photo by Randall Heldermon)