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CS 1900 – Internship

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Final Paper

Last summer I had a very clear goal. I had gone home the previous three summers and worked as a server at restaurants in my hometown. The money was great, it was fun, and I was able to live at home, but it was just very unfulfilling. I found myself craving programming projects, so I collaborated with friends from school and read textbooks while I wasn't working. I find that I get anxious if I'm not moving forward, working on some sort of project or just trying to improve myself as a person. So I decided that it was time to leave the restaurant business and never look back, and dive into my first programming internship. My goal was simple: get a summer internship in Pittsburgh where I would apply my programming knowledge.

I found a fantastic opportunity to be a Summer Associate (don't call them interns!) with UPMC. I was very excited for what my summer would bring, as the recruiting process was spectacular. I initially interviewed with an HR representative, then with a panel of potential mentors/managers for the summer, and finally with a VP in charge of the entire Summer Associates program. My interviews went very well, I was able to keep them engaged, I spoke honestly and gave them straight answers to their questions, and they seemed to love it the whole way through. They told me all about the fun and challenging summer that being a Summer Associate would provide, and they even had a pretty engaging video of one of the past SA's experience. Despite being told they would wait at least a week to make their decision, I received a call two days after my final interview and they made me an offer. I was thrilled!

Looking back, I think there were a few major issues with that process. The first is that I was told again and again about the Summer Associate program itself, but never specifically about the nature of my work. I was given examples of some of the more successful projects from past years, but not given a sense of the overwhelming amount of projects that yielded no results. And most importantly, I still had no idea what I would be doing over the summer. It's hard to believe I was so naive, but I was completely lured in by the promises of a great summer with other interns, fun activities, leadership development opportunities, and challenging work, that I didn't imagine it could end poorly.

My first major sign to start being worried was when I got my job assignment. I was assigned to work with Joe Furmanski in the Forbes Tower Data Center. I immediately started googling around for information on what kind of work was done there, as I had no data center experience, but my searches didn't provide much. I was able to find some conferences Joe had attended and read about some partnerships with IBM and the like, but that was it. When I met with Joe (my manager) and Jim (my mentor), a few days later at Red Oak Cafe to talk about the project, my heart sank a bit.

Joe and Jim were both looking pretty stressed and upset when I met with them. I figured they were just in the middle of something pretty big, but as it would turn out Jim was miserable nearly every single day of the summer. Anyways, they told me I would be very busy over the summer, which I was happy about. I get anxious when I don't have work to do, so I was very happy they would be keeping me busy. I started asking about what sort of programming I would be doing, and they looked confused. Joe told me that I would be 'hacking around' on a Microsoft Surface tablet (which he referred to throughout the summer as 'the device'), but he wouldn't give me more specific details. He also listed off a few other projects they would give to me, but for each one he seemed to have no more than a few sentences of high-level reasoning for the project, not an actual assignment or problem to solve.

I was taken aback after that first meeting, for a few reasons. The first is that neither of them seemed good at holding eye contact for more than a few words at a time. I understand that some technology-oriented people have poor communication skills, but I expected a little more than that. Second, I couldn't help but notice that they seemed to be miserable, with no real passion for their work or enjoyment from what they do. As they described some of the challenges they'd solved over the past few years, there was no pride in what they'd accomplished. And most importantly, there didn't seem to be a clear plan of action for what I would do once I started.

Fast forward a month, and I'm at my orientation. It's a typical long, boring, corporate HR seminar, but after a few hours they break us off into our individual areas and let us talk to our peers. This was a really positive experience for me. I love interacting with my peers and getting to know people and their motivations. I had a lot of fun joking with my group and talking about how we thought the summer would go, but I couldn't help but notice I was more qualified than the rest of the tech people. Many of them seemed to have very little programming experience and in fact didn't even enjoy programming. This was really worrisome for me, as I was starting to realize that the summer may not be filled with programming, but I pushed on anyways. When I got my actual packet of information specific to what I would be doing over the summer, it was literally blank except for my manager and mentor's names at the top of the page. That should have been an enormous warning sign.

When I got to my desk (which was in a cubicle in the back corner of an office with no windows, only 12 full-size printers), my mentor just dropped me off, told me that I was taking the desk of a guy named Todd who was in the process of being laid off (and so, he may come back yelling at me at some point, but just ignore him), and left. I had some initial stuff to do like setting up Outlook and writing on the Summer Associates' blog, but that was it. After an hour I was ready for action, so I went off in search of my mentor. When I found him he told me to just go back to my desk and he would find something for me to do.

As it turns out, there was nothing to do. And there would continue to be nothing to do for 12 weeks. Every single week would start with a meeting where my manager would say the same tired phrase "We have to get the kid [me] working on something. We need some results out of this." Every single week, my mentor would avoid me, look miserable, complain about how demanding his wife was during her pregnancy, and not much more. I really can't overstate how much I disliked my mentor. I met with him daily (as part of the Summer Associates program requirements), yet I saw him smile only a handful of times. His perpetual bad mood was contagious; I found myself dreading going to meet him because I knew it would make me upset as well.

Within the first week I was already starting to get nervous that I would not be doing serious programming or even much work at all over the summer, so I started reaching out. I talked to the other interns, who nearly universally told me that the same thing was happening to them- they had no work- but most of them were just fine with it and enjoyed being paid for nothing. I talked to my parents, who told me that I should wait it out for a few days and see if it got better. I talked to HR, who assured me that it simply could not be the case that there wasn't work to do. I talked to my manager, who promised that soon they would give me 'the device' (the Surface), and I would start up on the project ASAP.

I was actually pretty hopeful for a while after talking with HR, because they seemed to have a genuine interest in improving the experience. They said that they had a meeting with all the managers and sent out a few emails reminding them of how important this experience was to the company and how the Summer Associates need to be engaged in order to lure them back for a full time position. After all- the whole idea was to 'recruit once, hire twice.' More on that later.

The summer just never turned for the better. I didn't receive the Surface device for 9 weeks, and by the time I got it all of the meaningful work had already been finished by one of my coworkers. He claimed he was just doing it to help me out, yet he had also heard me asking for more things to do every week. My manager got into a pretty big argument with him over the situation, because my manager felt bad and truly wanted to make my summer better, yet the coworker just wanted to solve the problems with the device himself, probably because he didn't trust me to do it correctly. My other large project (analysis for a third data center) was cancelled due to a lack of funds. I did a very large amount of sifting through Excel spreadsheets, watching lectures from conferences, and generally just delving into what they wanted me to do, but it turned out not to matter at all. I watched as some of my peers moved onto challenging work and the majority of them just became complacent in doing nothing. I became depressed, and started seeking counseling through the company's free LifeSolutions center. I truly did not enjoy my internship, but I did learn a lot out of it.

Did I accomplish my goals? Absolutely not. I reached out constantly for support from my superiors, but I was never given any sort of assignment that met my skill set. I truly believe that anyone

from any discipline could have accomplished what I accomplished last summer, and I am extremely upset about that. The worst part of all is that they offered me a full time position at the end of the summer. They were happy with what I had done! They literally made me sit in a cubicle, rarely gave me anything to do and then took away my assignments when they rarely gave them to, and they wanted more of that! The fact that they would offer me a job based on my summer experience was reason enough to not accept it.

I wish going in that I had been more persistent in finding out exactly the nature of my work and what I would be doing. Specifically, I should have continuously asked if I would actually be programming, and not accepted the offer until I got a clear answer. I wish going in that I had rejected the initial assignment in the Data Center and pushed for the Technology Development Center instead. From talking to my manager, it sounds like the TDC is one of the few places that behave less like a corporate machine designed around Dignity, Respect, and Professionalism, and more like a place that actually programs and produces meaningful work. I can partially reason with myself and understand that I just took them at face value and trusted that they would provide an engaging summer with challenging problems, but looking back that was quite the stretch to make.

The best part of the internship were the times I spent with my peers, laughing, commiserating, and finding out more about them. It was the best part because it was pretty much the only time I felt in my element. When I wasn't with the other interns I was surrounded by coworkers all aged 40 and up, doing PC support and printer maintenance. I actually got to spend quite a bit of time doing activities with the other interns, which is one thing I'm grateful for. We went to a Pirates game, we cleaned up trash downtown, we ran a carnival for a women's shelter, we attended a number of leadership development conferences, and generally just got to spend a lot of time together. Meeting with my peers was often pretty surreal since we were all in this crazy experience together, just trying to push through until the end and hoping it would get better.

One more highlight of the summer was taking part in a program called 'Toastmasters.' It was a speechwriting program that my manager offered to help the CS students learn how to communicate, but it was mostly just a fun time for the interns to meet up and tell stories. I really loved that experience, and got to know my fellow interns and my manager a lot better, and it truly helped build strong relationships between us.

The thing I learned the most is that I can never settle for a work environment like that again. I will never allow myself to get depressed like I did last summer because I have nothing to do, no one to talk to, and a truly miserable set of mentors and managers. I now know that I cannot settle for doing nothing; cannot be complacent with getting paid for having my projects cancelled. I'm applying to jobs for after I graduate, and I feel much more assertive and confident about the process. I know with certainty what I don't want, which makes it a lot easier to figure out what I do want. When applying for jobs I'm

looking for ones with great work environments, where people actually enjoy going in. I'm looking for places where coworkers enjoy each other's company (as much as that's possible). I'm looking for a job where I can actually apply my knowledge and solve problems that laymen would be unable to. I'm a programmer, and I'm ready to start programming.

I feel no background would have prepared me for this, except maybe some Yoga classes. It wasn't that I was technically inept, it was that I was mentally and emotionally unprepared for the summer I was about to face. The only thing I would have liked beforehand would be for someone to tell me not to do it, because they had a horrible time there. I'm hoping that this paper will suffice as that warning for future students down the line, so that they know that the UPMC Summer Associate program is not a good opportunity, and should be avoided.

As far as a number of lines of code, I ended up writing a dozen or so scripts which will probably be thrown away because none of my superiors understand programming. I made a really nice, easily maintainable, well-documented Google forms page for nightly checklists linked directly to a Google doc spreadsheet and equipped with email alerts. It was intelligent enough to only send emails to the people who needed to see them, instead of flooding everyone and waking up all the managers in the middle of the night when something in the DC went wrong. Unfortunately it was completely scrapped because we were forbidden from using Google products anywhere. This arbitrary decision even applied to web browsers- I was forced to use Internet Explorer instead of Chrome.

I ended up having to instead make my checklist in Microsoft Sharepoint, which is a horrible, horrible tool that no one should have to endure. The product was ugly, much more difficult to update and maintain, unresponsive, and generally a much worse solution to the problem. It frustrated me extensively that there was a great solution that I had already produced (in less than a day) which had to be completely abandoned due to corporate policy. Being forced to switch to a far inferior product and being given no good reasons why just hurt me intellectually.

I also wrote a short Visual Basic program to take inputs from data-logging servers used to monitor the data center and turn it into CSV files with useful organization so that they could be imported into this really cool data visualization tool. Despite asking multiple times, I was not able to actually use the data visualization tool myself, although the other intern who was working with it asked me a few times for help and I gave him some pointers. It was tantalizing seeing someone else so close to coding, but not being able to do any programming myself.

So I realize at this point that I've been complaining for about 5 pages now, and you're probably getting sick of reading this, so I'll summarize. I wanted more than anything last summer to be able to dive into the industry and start programming professionally, a big step up from the projects assigned in school. I chose UPMC because they're a staple of Pittsburgh, Dr. Marai recommended the medical industry as an

enormous untapped field for computer scientists (she claimed it was twice as big as the entertainment industry, which definitely caught my attention). I was initially swayed by the HR sales-pitches and very excited for my summer, but I quickly realized there would be nothing for me to actually accomplish during my time at work. Despite reaching out constantly to my superiors, I was still left with no work to do. This led to me becoming increasingly anxious, and I started taking anti-depressants by the end of the summer (don't be concerned- I'm fine now). My manager had good intentions but the bureaucracy held him back from being able to help me in any significant way. My mentor was miserable because of his wife's pregnancy, and actively made me feel worse whenever I had to meet with him (which was often). My projects that I was assigned were cancelled, done for me, or overwhelmingly simple. I did not enjoy my summer, and I would not recommend UPMC's Summer Associates program to anyone else in the future until they significantly overhaul the operation.