

Internships

by Jack Wilson

ACM's career consultant, Jack Wilson, answers questions from students about their forthcoming careers in computing and information technology.

Q: Is it realistic to think in terms of a career based on skills related to the Internet and World Wide Web?

A: Predicting the future in this industry is always risky, particularly when the technology is moving so rapidly, but at the present it seems very realistic. There are real needs for skilled IT professionals with HTML and Java language abilities. Many companies are adding specific positions in web development and maintenance. Corporate intranets are becoming very commonplace and require skilled people in both management and individual contributor roles. I believe you could make a very good living in this area for the foreseeable future.

Q: Last year I was able to find only a few internships in my field of interest. I applied for them all but was not successful. How can I increase my chances for next year?

A: I'm assuming the ones you for which you applied were in the ``published" category. I think you should make a concerted effort to go after some ``unpublished" ones as well. Let me explain:

Many IT organizations hire students for the summer without necessarily having a formal internship program. The same could be said for software development companies. I suggest you focus on your field of computing interest, your geographic interest, and any other relevant criteria. Then do some research on the Web or in your business library to find companies that match your interests. Get the name and address of the CIO or whoever heads their technology area.

At the beginning of the Spring term, write those persons a one-page self-marketing letter, outlining your skills and your interest in a summer job in their organization. They may not know at that time what their needs are, but this will give you a head- start on the competition. If you get any expression of interest on their part, you can follow up with a resume. Don't expect a decision too soon; many companies do not decide on hiring until March or April.

At the same time, I would advise you also to apply for the ``published" opportunities through your career center and publications like Peterson's Internships.

Q: Why is it necessary for me to focus on a particular field of computing interest? Wouldn't that narrow my opportunities?

A: Not really. I'm suggesting broad areas, such as systems programming, application systems, intranet/web development, database management, etc. Employers like to see applicants who are focused: who know themselves, their interests, and their abilities; who know what they want to do.

In addition to making yourself a more attractive candidate, there are two other good reasons for doing this: (1) it will give you an opportunity to test and validate your interest in the real work environment; and (2) assuming it's valid, it will further develop your skill and add measurably to your credentials for regular employment upon graduation.

Q: I'm very interested in working for a company where ongoing training is available. Is that going to limit my job search?

A: Probably not, because training is a growing way for companies to attract technical professionals like yourself. According to a recent study by OmniTech, by year 2000, 77% of all Fortune 1000 employees will have access to multimedia workstations; and 40% of all training will be done via CD-ROM, the Internet or a corporate intranet. This is an appropriate area for you to explore during the interview process.

Q: I've been studying the salary surveys you suggested, but I can't seem to find the position titles that match my exact skill areas.

A: Keep in mind that these salary surveys are rather generic, where the data are summarized and aggregated at a fairly high level. You cannot expect them to be so granular as to match a specific skill set. Furthermore, they should be viewed not as a guide to your own worth, but rather as a benchmark. Remember: YOUR worth is determined by what YOU can effectively negotiate and contribute to the employer's organization, regardless of what a survey may say.
