Holiday Extras

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My Year in Industry

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Abstract

This report will detail my journey as a placement student, all the way from finding and securing my placement through to completing my year. It will cover information about the business itself, the teams, the major projects I’ve worked on and touch on many key experiences that have contributed to an enriching year. I will explain what I’ve learnt throughout the year and how the experience has shaped me as an Engineer and even more so as a person.

Placement Details

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**Placement Dates:** 3rd July 2017 → 31st June 2018 (Contract extended until 31st August)

**Job Title:** Engineer

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Table of Contents

[1 Introduction to my Year in Industry 5](#_Toc519199178)

[1.1 Why Holiday Extras? 5](#_Toc519199179)

[1.2 Journey to Holiday Extras 5](#_Toc519199180)

[1.2.1 Initial Interviews 5](#_Toc519199181)

[1.2.2 Application + Interview with HX 6](#_Toc519199182)

[1.2.3 Offer from HX 6](#_Toc519199183)

[1.3 Holiday Extras: a brief overview 6](#_Toc519199184)

[1.4 My Job Role 7](#_Toc519199185)

[2 Working for Holiday Extras 8](#_Toc519199186)

[2.1 Web Team Structure 8](#_Toc519199187)

[2.2 Pod Structure 8](#_Toc519199188)

[2.3 Agile Process 9](#_Toc519199189)

[2.3.1 Sprint Structure 9](#_Toc519199190)

[2.4 What’s it actually like? 11](#_Toc519199191)

# Introduction to my Year in Industry

During the university selection process, the year in industry programmes really stood out to me, making it easy to say that I was excited for this year. It became one of the most pivotal factors in my decision to turn down King’s College London and come to Kent. The placement scheme sounded so much more fleshed out and enriching here. Having this passion before I had even made it to the year in the industry really fuelled my anticipation for the year.

## Why Holiday Extras?

It’s fair to say that before Holiday Extras came to present at the university I had never heard of them, so what was so enticing? Whilst it’s hard to honestly be excited about selling airport parking; the role, benefits, and emphasis they placed on their placement program really stood out. They also told us they only source students from Kent and that a lot of them had kept graduate positions, meaning that I’d already be surrounded by people of similar experiences.

Their entire presentation conveyed an image of an extremely relaxed and fun workplace with all the vibes of a start-up. They boasted about all the awards they’d received acknowledging them as one of the best places to work in the UK. They also had current placement students give their stories and experiences of their placement, all of which told tales of many learnings and great opportunities at HX.

Whilst all of this was promising I was initially reluctant to settle into a web-based role. I wasn’t completely against the idea but work closer to the back-end had always interested me more. Due to this I initially passed up the opportunity and only came back to apply when applications re-opened. By that time, I had realised that the work environment, benefits, and opportunities were too good to ignore.

## Journey to Holiday Extras

Having come into the placement process with no previous work experience I was at a complete fresh start without even a CV prepared. Luckily, by the time it came to my application at HX I’d already sorted out my CV, sent applications and even had an interview.

### Initial Interviews

The interview was with a company called SquaredUp who are a small start-up close to my home in London. Whilst it was useful to gain experience the process also knocked my confidence a little, they asked some fart-assy questions that put me on the spot more than expected. However, it also showed me that interviews are a two-way process, from those questions alone I knew that company was too ‘hippy’ to be a good fit for me.

### Application + Interview with HX

After putting in an application to HX I received an invitation to an assessment day. This day consisted of a group task, presentation, and individual interview. On the day I remember feeling nervous before arriving, but the relaxed environment helped me to settle in quickly once there.

We started with the group task which required us to plan out the handling of travel disruption caused by snow. We had to plan an email to customers as well design a system for the call centre to use as a means of reporting contact with customers. At first this was a little daunting to be working on with three unknown peers, but I quickly became distracted in trying to make the best impression possible; engaging with the group, conversing about ideas, and turning them into a full solution. When it came time to present our work the calm atmosphere helped me present confidently and I went to lunch pleased with my performance so far.

This quiet confidence in my performance so far really helped me going into the individual interview. In a complete contrast to my experience with SquaredUp this seemed to go a lot smoother. I didn’t feel that many questions really put me on the spot too much and I was able to be open about my initial reluctance to a web role. They had many re-assurances for me that there was enough modern technology in use to keep things interesting. This made me feel that they really understood where I was coming from and saw that my focus was on learning as much as possible. I appreciated what they had to offer in that regard.

I eventually left the day feeling pleased with the impression I’d given as well as being sure that this type of environment was for me. I began to realise how much this role would resonate with me despite my initial feelings.

### Offer from HX

After about a month I received a phone call telling me that HX would like to offer me the position. I accepted the role then and there because I’d spent all of the time since the assessment day feeling sure that it was the right fit for me.

## Holiday Extras: a brief overview

Holiday Extras started its life as the Apple Booking Company (ABC) when it was founded by Gerry Pack in 1983. It came to fruition when Gerry noticed a gap in the Airport Hotels market, they had previously been targeted to business travellers and never towards leisure travellers. Initially this was achieved through a simple booking platform in partnership with travel consultants who latched on to the idea; the new market area provided lucrative and convenient business.

Throughout 35 years of growth and a rebranding as Holiday Extras, the company’s offerings have expanded hugely, and they now specialise in a vast array of travel products. This includes airport parking, lounges, insurance, car hire, resort transfers and more. Now having around 800 employees situated across offices in Kent, Germany and Bulgaria it’s fair to say the company has grown with its success.

During those early years the company strived as a platform for travel agents to make bookings for their own clients, but April 2000 saw the launch of the HX website. Along with it came the ability for direct customers to make bookings. This was a large step at the time as most travel companies were only targeting one market or the other, not both. Nowadays over 90% of bookings come via the website with less and less reliance on the call centre for business.

### Should get something about awards in here somewhere? Might be in Section #2

### Need to add a description of my objectives for the year or what I want to gain, expected outcomes etc (job confirmation, initially few but gained more about communication etc)

## My Job Role

When joining my official job title was as an ‘Engineer’ which kept things open to interpretation. It was difficult to predict exactly what that might encompass initially. However, it soon became clear why it was left open with each team serving different purposes through different platforms. It was clear there would be many opportunities for me to learn across all of these different areas, platforms and codebases. I understood why ‘Web Developer’ didn’t truly fit the bill of this job despite that being the main throughput.

During my time with HX I managed to gain experience across a variety of systems and I ended up truly appreciating the fluidity of my role. Not only did I have the opportunity to work on the front-end of the site, but my manager actually planned my second team to be a challenging back-end focused role. This gave me a taste of both worlds and really helped to push my learning to a higher level, I’m thankful that my own development was such a focal point for the company.

# Working for Holiday Extras

This section will detail the structure and process of HX as well as how I feel about my time spent interacting with it as a whole.

Firstly, to pre-face, despite the fact HX has ~800 employees there are ~150 of us in the actual web team where I’ve spent all of my time. Therefore, the majority of what I speak about will be the structure and process of this web team as a subset of the entire team. This also affects how much I enjoyed my work at HX, the web team is held on a pedestal and treated the best out of the business. We’re given fun events, encouraged to attend subsidised conferences and provided the flexibility do these things. Whilst some roles in the CC only have small windows of time to actually enjoy what makes us such a “fun start-up”. So yes, *I* am the 1%.

## Web Team Structure

The web team is one of the biggest areas of focus within HX since there is a direct link to customers and a huge potential to drive growth and profit. It would be fair to say the work that’s done within the web team has some of the biggest influence on HX’s success.

The entire team is split up into smaller sub-teams known as pods, which were recently renamed to ‘teams’ but this hasn’t caught on yet. Pods were originally focused around a single area of the business, taking on all work that relates to that area. For example, the euro pod would pick up work that would improve the experience for our European customers. This approach allows each pod to work independently in a self-contained manner, with cross-pod communication still available for larger multi-pod projects.

There’s also the concept of ‘pop-up pods’ which would be created to achieve shorter term goals that either, didn’t fit into a single pod or needed multi-disciplined engineers to achieve. A good example of this is the Personally Identifiable Information (PII) pod, which started when we had <40 days to fix something which Google would detract our SEO rankings for.

Within the last few months of my placement the company began making a shift towards ‘mission-based’ pods. The intention of this was that pods would spawn dynamically around missions that the company wanted to achieve. This makes the pods much more reactive and allows fluidity with the assignment of engineers to missions that they suit best.

I personally have remained within a pod that isn’t truly mission based so I’ve not experienced it first-hand but it sounds like a sensible approach.

## Pod Structure

As much as the web team is built of pods each pod contains a concoction of roles that make the pod successful. The exact structure varies per-pod, but most pods contain a few engineers, a software tester, an agile coach and a product owner.

**Engineers**

The engineers within a pod are one of the main workhorses. They spend the majority of their time writing code to actually implement new features or fix issues. They’re also involved within the planning of work by helping use their experience to estimate the difficulty or time investment of certain pieces of work.

**Software Testers**

The testers within a pod are responsible for testing the work implemented by the engineers, they will ensure it works as expected in a variety of environments and scenarios. This is especially important within HX’s complex systems as there are often use cases that engineers might not have considered. Testers also typically offer a huge wealth of knowledge about the business and the complexity of all systems combined.

**Agile Coach (AC)**

The agile coach within a pod typically manages the workflow of the pod on a day-to-day basis. They will ensure that the agile process ([detailed in 2.3](#Agile Process)) is followed and that everyone can achieve what they’ve set out without issue.

The agile coach within a pod manages the workflow of a pod on a day-to-day basis. Ensuring that everyone in the team can work efficiently and effectively together without being affected by blockers on their work.

**Product Owner (PO)**

The product owners are responsible for managing relations with stakeholders, communicating and setting goals for the pod. This ensures the work being done suits the business and stakeholders’ needs.

Each of these roles play a vital part of each pod at HX and when combined they form a strong core structure for the pod to thrive off of.

## Agile Process

Every pod within the web team uses an agile approach which aims to deliver work quickly in an incremental pattern. This has become common within technology where the flaws of older methodologies, like the waterfall model, have been highlighted by the adaptive and reactive nature of modern technology.

### Sprint Structure

At HX this process manifests as bi-monthly sprints which aim to be a self-enclosed two-week section of work.

{{{{{ Sprint Diagram }}}}}

#### Sprint Planning

As demonstrated by the graph above the sprints have a clearly defined start and end. Most pods in the web team use JIRA to keep track of tickets and will store a backlog of all of the tasks they need to get to. This backlog is used when planning out exactly what should be done for the next two-week sprint. Tickets are ‘pulled in’ to a sprint based on the priority given by the PO, engineers and testers will work together to discuss what they think can realistically be accomplished.

#### Development Stage

Once a set of tickets have been agreed for the sprint there is then two-weeks of continuous workflow where every day the pod will meet to discuss progress. At this point the engineers will pick up tickets from the sprint backlog, working towards completing the requirements specified on the ticket.

#### Pull Request Review Stage

When a developer completes a piece of work he will open a pull request (PR) which can then be reviewed by at least one other developer. It will be checked to ensure the code has been written to a high standard and that it looks suitable without introducing avoidable technical debt. If the reviewer(s) deem it acceptable then the code will move on in the process to the testing phase. If not, then the original developer will usually discuss the feedback given and adapt the code as they see fit. This cycle continues until the code is deemed acceptable.

#### Testing Stage

During this phase the tester(s) of the pod will prove that the code works on their own machine in a range of scenarios. They will typically test it across different browsers and environments to prove thoroughly that it works as expected. This helps to cover areas that the engineer wouldn’t have tested and even use cases that they may not have known about. If there are any problems at this stage it will be sent back to the engineer to be investigated and addressed. If the fix involves code, then the process jumps back up to the development stage and has to come back through review. Eventually when the requirements have been met and no issues are found during testing it will be deployed.

#### Deployment Stage

Due to the closeness of testing and deploying this stage will usually be handled by the tester. There are two main steps of deployment, one of which is to deploy to staging and another from staging to production. The staging environment exists as a sandbox, hidden from customers but providing a more realistic testing environment than a local machine. This is another reason that deployments are commonly handled by testers, because they can use the time in staging to give it one final test before it goes live. As soon as a production deployment has been finished the change will be visible to the customers.

#### Mid-Sprint Review

During this iterative deployment approach work will be deployed frequently so some pods find a mid-sprint meeting beneficial. This meeting is used to look back on the progress that has been made so far, evaluate any blockers, issues and whether the sprint is still achievable. In some cases, work will be removed from the sprint to align priorities that need to be completed, or extra tickets could be pulled in if the sprint is going well. The agile coach will play an important balancing game during these meetings to ensure the sprint stays in equilibrium.

{{{ Post-sprint DEMO to stakeholders }}}

#### Post-sprint Retrospective (retro)

At the end of the sprint there will be a retrospective session that will look back at the sprint as a whole, evaluate what went well as a pod and what didn’t go so great. The agile coach will often prepare unique ways to run this meeting, but the goal is ultimately the same; to get everyone talking honestly and sharing their opinions. From the back of these meetings the pod should make adjustments in the future sprints to improve. I personally struggled with the retros in the Customer Experience Pod, every two weeks we’d have the same discussions, and nothing changed for months. They became dull and dreary and I had given up on the process actually making a difference. I haven’t since been in a pod that has actually had retros, so I can’t say I’ve seen a first-hand contrast in another team.

## What’s it actually like?

In many ways Holiday Extras does manage to live up to its ethos and start-up vibe. Even without having worked anywhere else I can still recognise the uniqueness of the workplace. The entire open plan office has an air of friendliness where the atmosphere stays relaxed, and everyone is approachable. This really helped me in my early days when I was adjusting and settling in to the office. The ability to go to anyone in the web team for help in such an easy and inviting environment really sped up my initial learnings. I feel thankful to have had that opportunity when I needed it most.

Even more than the casual discussions around desks that keep the day-to-day entertaining there are plenty of fun events organised. As early as my first week with HX we were outside playing tennis and eating strawberries with cream to celebrate Wimbledon.

<http://take.ms/ESIEt>

These events have continued throughout my time here including recently bush craft, human foosball and a rounders tournament. It’s been really refreshing to attend the events just to get out of the continuous work mode and get to know colleagues better.

Besides the organised events there are often impromptu goings on and treats hosted for us. For example, we were given mince pies around Christmas, our own Easter eggs at Easter and frequent free ice cream throughout the summer. It’s nice to receive these little boosts throughout the day and further shows the uniqueness of the HX workplace.

We also have the hosted ‘shout outs’ every Thursday afternoon where directors or even the CEO himself will update us on the business’ progress, our success against the budget, any new starters, leavers and more. Another key feature is the calling out cards which are essentially nominations given out for notably displaying the HX values. I can remember being called out as part of the Customer Experience pod and appreciating the recognition and gratitude for my work. It definitely goes a long way to making hard work feel worthwhile when it’s noticed and rewarded.

Another huge element of HX that makes it stand out as a unique culture is the Project Lounge (PL) Fridays. These occur on a fortnightly basis and offer an entire day just for personal development or working on a project to help push the business forward. It’s great to be given this free reign and have the ability to make a difference through creative ideas. I benefitted hugely from these during the start of my placement since I could spend an entire day digging deep into HX’s technology and frameworks. I’ve continued to enjoy PL time throughout the year and have found the time extremely beneficial to my own development.

In summary, I’ve found the environment at HX has really aided my overall development throughout this year. My technical skills have been improved because of how comfortably I can approach people and gain insight easily. Whilst my personal skills have improved tenfold, especially moulded by office chatter and special social events helping me network with colleagues.

Loose bibliography

<https://www.holidayextras.co.uk/about-us/company-history.html> - HX info