

Working for the Devil: My Internship at Comcast*****

Crystal Qian, 8.21.2015

When I applied to college, I had to send in an application, a transcript, three essays, two short answers, three recommendation letters, fifteen test scores (ACTs, PSATs, SATs, SAT IIs, PLANs, APs, ABCDEs, etc.), and my firstborn child. I also had to attend an in-person interview.

I wish I could say that it's been all smooth sailing since applying for college, but the average internship application process is almost just as excruciating. If you're lucky, after submitting a cover letter, resume, transcript, and application, you'll get a call for a Round 1 phone interview. Round 1 consists mainly of personality questions. If the company deems that you're a relatively normal human being, you advance to Round 2, a technical phone interview. During this round, an engineer from the company will talk you through a few coding problems through an online CodeShare; "Write something that will sort through this array in $\log(n)$ time," "Find the duplicate in this linked list quickly," etc. After Round 2, you're led through a series of in-persons, more phone screens, and on-sites, depending on how competitive the position is.

My weaknesses with this process are, I think, writing the cover letter, boosting my resume, and talking about myself. You see, I have so many redeemable qualities that my cover letter and resume usually span the length of the average doctoral dissertation, and once I get started on talking about myself, it's very hard not to give the interviewer a comprehensive overview of my top fifty talents. In all seriousness, it's hard for me to pack in buzzwords like "people skills" and "effective synergy" without laughing.

So, when Comcast offered to look over resumes on campus in early December, I decided to take them up on the offer. When I think of places to work in the tech industry, to be honest, Comcast isn't at the top of the list. I associate Comcast with cable and television, not necessarily with software and engineering. However, talking with a recruiter (Rick Bradshaw) and engineer at the resume screen convinced me to give Comcast a shot. (Plus, Rick shared my interest in video games!) The application process was very painless; I don't recall having to write cover letter or give any "short essay" answers. This was a big plus, as I've let the cover letter deter me from applying to internships more than a few times.

I heard back relatively quickly; just two weeks after I applied, I got an e-mail from the recruiting team to set up a quick phone interview. I was out of the country visiting family, and Comcast was really nice about rescheduling for when I came back. The call was pretty standard; Brian, contractor, asked me why I wanted to work for Comcast, what kind of projects I've worked on, etc. Two days later, Charlotte, a different contractor, asked for my availability for phone screens with two different potential managers, Andrew and Matthew. Over the next week, I had three calls and an in-person, which resulted in an offer from Matthew's team. Surprisingly, most of the calls weren't technical. Before each call, I'd prep myself on data structures and algorithms, memorize sort times, and brush

up on my Python skills. But, each time, I got asked the standard, “what kind of projects are you interested in?” questions. The Comcast people on the other end of the phone seemed very knowledgeable and willing to answer my questions, but I was surprised that I was doing so many phone screens in a week.

Comcast was very fast and responsive with the interview process, and Rick called me often to keep me updated. To be fair, I have a few friends who’ve had opposite experiences with Comcast’s recruitment process (that is, they applied and never heard back again, or didn’t hear back after a round), but I personally didn’t experience this.

I got the offer in early February, which is extremely early to hear back in the internship process game. Most places start interviews in February, advance to in-person rounds in mid-March, and send out offers in early to mid-April. At this point, I was also kicking off interviews with other companies. However, Matthew’s team seemed to be working with interesting technology, I’d be working with a new programming language (Go), and an internship decided so early in February was very attractive. The icing on top (or, rather, the nail in the coffin) was when Matthew allowed for (and even encouraged!) me to attend Global Hackathon: Seoul in South Korea. Other offers were not as flexible with me taking time off as an intern.

To be honest, I was a little surprised that I hadn’t been asked any serious technical questions. I was used to the application environment where you’d be dropped ASAP if you couldn’t figure out how to determine if a binary tree was symmetric in less than fifteen minutes, so I was afraid that this suggested that I wouldn’t need much technical training for the internship. But, Matthew described a very agile work environment where they’d build a project depending on my interests, which sounded a lot better than some of my friends’ internship offers, which were like “if you’re going to be working at Twitter, you’ll be scouring through error logs.”

After I accepted, I had to take a drug test (which was mildly annoying since the only drug testing facility near Princeton was an hour away and also super sketchy) and fill out a few standard intern forms. Mark and Matthew kept in contact so I didn’t have any questions, and everyone was very flexible with start and end dates.

On my first day, I was given a laptop and a pitchfork. That’s just part of orientation when you intern at Comcast. (Just kidding.) My parents actually e-mailed Matthew and set up a brunch before my first day; while this was really mortifying, I did feel better knowing where I was going and what to expect. My first assignment? Learn how to make a nice cup of coffee.

Comcast’s 1401 Wynkoop office has a pretty standard cubicle environment, but also has perks you would see in other modern tech companies: a foosball table, snacks (including ice cream bars that I didn’t find until my third week!), and pimped out coffee machines. I worked in the “Kill Room”, a cubicle-less office space with a basketball hoop and big windows.

The CDN team (around 10 people) was very inclusive; I tagged along when the team went out for lunch, walks around the block, and coffee breaks, and even went go-karting and bowling with them. I also went to happy hour once (although, of course, I didn’t partake) and to a local Go meetup.

They seemed very competent (except for maybe Jeff) and passionate about computer science, but not to the point where they were super weird (again, except for Jeff). Matthew has two daughters around my age who were very friendly, and his whole family included me in activities. The team was pretty laid back; they only hated me a little when I blasted Taylor Swift music during work, and sometimes we would take breaks to watch videos on YouTube (and by we, I mean Phil).

Although I'm objectively infinitely more attractive, I felt like one of the guys. I got to interview new hires with the team, and even got to go to Gophercon (the annual Go convention) in Denver! On my birthday, they surprised me with cupcakes. They were very supportive as I kicked off my foosball career, and even came to spectate on my last day. (My record is currently 4-0 against Mark and 0-50 against the other intern.) I also got to work on other fun projects outside of my API; when we got an Edison from Gophercon, I built a color thermometer for the office. (This only works sometimes. If it ever breaks, run `./temp_display` after ssh'ing into Eddie. Sorry, guys.) During my last week, I built a Slack bot to replicate my presence on the chat channels. (Admittedly, this intern bot is a little annoying and had to go through some training, which is not unlike the current intern.)

The first few weeks, I made some big, useful changes to the CDN. First, I fixed some integral parts of the documentation (such as correcting spelling and grammar). Then, I added a new column (routing names) to a table in the database (this pull request later got closed without a merge) and contributed to Apache Traffic Server (my contribution broke many things and had to be fixed by Phil, sadly). Finally, I got a big project to work on: a web API for the Traffic Ops database written in Go. I felt very qualified for this job because I knew nothing about web servers, Go, or even SQL. While I was very much on my own for figuring this problem out, I could always bother members of the team for help. Jan and Mark helped define project specs and push me in the right direction; Dewayne taught me his Vim secrets, and Jeremy helped me figure out how to later incorporate the AngularJS front-end of the API. Hopefully this project is more useful than my other contributions.

At college, I've learned a ton of theoretical things (algorithms! math!) but didn't have that much technical experience. I feel much more confident about my coding abilities now, particularly after realizing I code better than everyone else in the office. (Kidding. Jan's pretty decent, I guess.) I also learned that this team was very different from my last internship team; no one seemed impressed by my beautiful PowerPoint presentations, and they seemed much more interested in my code samples. This was a pity, because my PowerPoint skills are excellent, but my code samples are not as excellent.

There was a bit of difficulty juggling work with my team with other intern work, though. While working on CDN stuff, I was encouraged to fill out intern surveys, contribute to the Comcast social media presence, and, most frustratingly, work on this big "intern project." I was expected to contribute time each week to intern group meetings and work on an "ideas portal" app; I understand the point of this was to encourage collaboration with other interns and learn how to work in a real-world environment, but isn't that the point of working on an actual team? It could be worse; I've heard from the Philly office that there were many more intern events there - dance parties, networking, blech. Because the interns in Denver were much more spread out, I was only subjected to a few mandatory events. I did make a few friends during the "Comcast Cares" intern volunteer day, which was really nice as I didn't really know many other people in Denver.

However, I realize that my experience with the intern project was not universal (excuse the Comcast pun). Some of my intern friends were instructed by their managers to work solely on the intern project. Not all interns got to work inclusively with a team or work on an interesting project. I was very, very lucky in the team that I got put with, I think.

In terms of benefits, Comcast's internship program is much less standardized. For reference, most internship programs I've been exposed to give all interns equal benefits: Jane Street sends interns to Taiwan or London for a month, Google provides housing, etc. When I compared my perks with other interns, though, I found that benefits depended largely upon the managers; one friend got reimbursed for flights to Denver, another got light rail tickets, and I got a week off.

At the end of the summer, I asked my friends if they'd consider coming back to Comcast. The general consensus from them was, "eh, no, this was just another internship," and I realized how variable experiences can be by team. As for me, I got to contribute to open source software and build a web API from scratch. I became an expert barista (which will be useful in case this whole programming thing doesn't work out) and flexed my tiny origami crane making skills. I even learned how to throw a football (kind of; causalities of my training include John's face and Mark's cup), gained an appreciation for *Office Space*, and caught up on two seasons of *Silicon Valley*.

Comcast has a continuing education program, Denver is not very smelly (unlike Dave), and sometimes, on Fridays, they feed us burgers and hot dogs. So, yeah, Comcast seems like an awesome place to work and not like the terrible place they describe on the internet. I have no idea why some friends would prefer grueling 80-hour internships on Wall Street or extremely competitive "only the top 10% of interns get return offers" internship programs when they could be working on cool projects with *Mr. Brit and the Kill Room*. (Have you guys considered starting a band? That's a great name.) Maybe people just hate on Comcast because they don't know what it's like; Comcast is the equivalent of King Kong, or Frankenstein- it's just misunderstood, that's all. I'll try to correct this stigma around the Princeton area... or maybe I won't, because then *they'd* apply too and you guys will realize how grossly unqualified I am! (Well, I'm sure you guys knew this already.)

Anyways, my mom told me to thank you guys for the great summer here, so thank you. I had a really good experience. Also, I named this article as such so that hopefully you'd get outraged and read this whole thing. If you're reading this, it worked. Haha, sucker.