

The internship advantage: Real but not bulletproof

"An internship is a wonderful and effective way to connect your academic experience with the professional work arena. It allows you to gain valuable exposure to the workplace, provides the opportunity for skill development, and gives you a competitive edge in the job search," reads UC Berkeley's career placement page. But is this true? Are internships actually valuable? In short, yes — but for a moment let's be skeptical and see what the science says.

M. Susan Taylor, now a professor at the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland, conducted a comprehensive study back in 1988 to answer this very question. In it 101 active recruiters evaluated the fictional resumes of above-average graduating seniors for hypothetical positions within their organizations. Some resumes had career-related internship experience and others had non-career related work experience. (For example, interning at an accounting firm is related to an accountant position but lifeguarding is not.)

Since Taylor used resumes that matched candidates equally on all characteristics except internship experience, she was able to determine whether the internship itself, instead of some other factor such as a high GPA or good social skills, actually contributed to getting employment opportunities. This is an important distinction, as it's quite likely that the same intelligence and social skills that allow one to land an internship will also get a person a job offer, internship or not. The results were surprising only in their strength. Employment opportunities for students with career-related internships were significantly higher than for those with unrelated work experience. Recruiters considered the students with career-related internships to be much more highly qualified and much more likely to be hired than students with unrelated work experience. Students with internships were rated 22% higher than students with unrelated work experience.

Then again, as you might be thinking, most of next year's graduating seniors were born after 1988. Does this research still hold in the digital age? In 2008, University of Louisiana business professors Stephen Knouse and Gwen Fonte reviewed the value of internships and confirmed these findings with two decades of research. Internships are still the best method of setting oneself apart from a crowd of candidates, although Knouse and Fonte pointed out some ways in which they could be improved. They recommended more active student and employer participation, the setting of clear expectations, and the implementation of a mentorship program, among other suggestions.

Taylor herself, in a separate study, looked also at the differences between real interns' and non-interns' number of job offers, starting salary, compensation satisfaction and position satisfaction. Students who interned received higher salaries than non-interns and were of course happier with their higher salaries, but they did not receive significantly more job offers and were not happier in their positions.

So internships can definitely help you gain a competitive edge in your job search, but they're not magic. They are an effective way to gain new professional connections, valued experience and new marketable skills. While an internship might get you past a recruiter and eventually earn you a higher salary, it isn't a guarantee of a job or of job satisfaction. (There are many other factors that contribute to job satisfaction, which is one of the most studied topics in Industrial-Organizational Psychology and beyond the scope of any blog post.) Turns out UC Berkeley's claim is indeed valid.