



Hiring International Students as Interns: The Process Demystified

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HIRING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AS INTERNS: THE PROCESS DEMYSTIFIED

In June 2006, the number of international students studying in U.S. Bachelor's degree programs under an F-1 visa was just shy of 173,000. A large percentage of these students are interested in gaining practical workplace experience as part of their studies. Internships and similar experiential education opportunities are highly valued by these students as they work to make the most of their education in the United States. The challenge facing many of these students, however, is that employers balk at considering them as interns because of ignorance regarding the ease in which they can be hired, as well as lack of education regarding non-American cultural norms. The following information is designed to help employers understand that international students can be evaluated on their skill level and potential, just as with domestic intern candidates.

THE F-1 STUDENT

Most undergraduate international students are in the United States studying under the F-1 visa. The J-1 visa is also used, but is much less common for the B.S. and B.A. populations. For that reason, the focus of the information and language in this document will be on the F-1 student. International students in the United States under an F-1 visa are considered “non-immigrants who are pursuing a full course of study to achieve a specific educational or professional objective.” They are here solely for the purpose of study. This status presents some limitations on the kind of work they can perform and for whom. These limitations often result in students' reluctance to seek out internships as well as in employers' unwillingness to hire them for a short-term internship experience. But, the reality is that the F-1 student has a number of options available to facilitate working in the United States. Those that work with these F-1 students as counselors, advisors, instructors, and potential employers can play a pivotal role in helping students understand their options and navigate the often-daunting world of the federal government.

THE EMPLOYMENT APPROVAL PROCESS

F-1 students may engage in on-campus employment with no additional approval required from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. This is why many of these students opt to engage in on-campus research with professors rather than explore internships with employers beyond campus. This is not to undervalue the on-campus research experience, but

students should choose that option because it provides them with needed skills and application of classroom knowledge towards a professional goal. The danger is that students who need to acquire the internship experience expected by employers do not choose this option because it is “less complicated” to work on campus. It should be noted here that there are large campuses that may have more complicated definitions of what constitutes on-campus employment (such as employment performed for the university but completed off campus). Students should work directly with a DSO (Designated School Official) to determine what kind of work is defined as on-campus employment. Institutions may have a number of DSOs from a variety of administrative departments. Students will receive contact information for the DSOs upon initial arrival on campus.

International students interested in working for an outside employer have two primary options available to them: Curricular Practical Training (CPT) and Optional Practical Training (OPT). All international students planning to work off-campus must obtain permission in writing from the appropriate source prior to beginning the internship. Failure to do so puts the student in violation of his or her F-1 visa status and can result in ineligibility for future employment, or even loss of permission to remain in the United States. CPT is the form of authorization used for employment which is “an integral part of the student's established curriculum.” CPT can be used for an internship, co-op job, practicum, or any work experience required for one's degree. Employment that may not be required for a degree but is considered an important part of one's studies AND results in the receipt of course credit may also be eligible for CPT. The bottom line is that CPT can only be used if the internship is directly associated with the student's curriculum. Most often, this is demonstrated through the earning of academic credit. It is important to note that students cannot receive CPT until they have been enrolled on a full-time basis for one academic year (i.e., students are ineligible until the completion of the freshman year).

CURRICULAR PRACTICAL TRAINING (CPT)

The CPT process is school-centered and does not involve approval by USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services). Students must have a letter from their employer acknowledging the offer of an internship

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opportunity. CPT is employer-specific and cannot be awarded until an internship is secured. Many schools also require a letter from the student's academic advisor, although this varies by institution. Students must then take all required documents to the campus DSO. The DSO will issue a new SEVIS I-20. Students may not begin employment until receiving this updated I-20. CPT can be issued for part-time or full-time work. Employers play only a small role in the approval process for CPT. They must provide proof of an internship offer that the student can then submit to their school. The employer should be prepared to discuss with the student (and often, a faculty advisor) how the internship duties correlate to the student's course of study. CPT must be used even if the student is doing an unpaid internship but receiving some sort of compensation. Students able to secure CPT from their institution present minimal obstacles to the employer in the hiring process, and thus employers should certainly consider these students without fear of having to navigate a complicated bureaucratic process. Employers are not required to offer continued employment under an H1-B visa to students that have worked for them under CPT.

OPTICAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT)

If the student wants to do an internship that is not directly tied to the academic program or is ineligible for academic credit, he or she must use the option of Optional Practical Training (OPT). OPT is a more involved and time-consuming process due to the simple fact that approval must be obtained from USCIS. OPT is also the option used by international students staying in the United States after graduation and prior to obtaining an H1-B visa. Because of this, students need to think carefully about how they use their OPT allowance for internships. OPT may be used pre or post graduation for up to 12 months of full-time employment. OPT cannot be used until a student has been enrolled on a full-time basis for one academic year

OPT does not require an offer of employment, so students still involved in the internship search process can apply. When applying, students must request an effective start date, even if they are unsure of where they will be interning and the employer's preferred start date. For this reason, employers may need to be flexible with dates of employment for international interns. As with CPT, students cannot begin working until approval is received, and, depending on

when OPT was requested, that process can take 30 to 120 days. Since OPT is not employer specific, employers do not have to provide proof of employment. They are obligated, however, to provide a temporary position that is in line with the student's degree and academic level. The school does not involve itself in the discussion of the actual internship duties since academic credit is not being awarded. As with CPT, employers are not required to offer continued employment under an H1-B visa to students that have worked for them under OPT.

Because many employers expect international students to use their 12 months of OPT for post-graduation employment, students must carefully consider how they choose to use OPT for internships. This is a bit of a catch-22 for these students since they need internships to be competitive when it comes to full-time employment, but they may not be considered by employers if they have used any of their OPT for internships. Employers should acknowledge this dilemma for students and examine their hiring policies with regard to the special situations faced by international candidates. During this post-graduate OPT period, many employers complete the process required to sponsor the new hire for an H1-B visa. In April 2008, the Department of Homeland Security extended OPT from 12 to 29 months for qualifying F1 students. These students must have graduated from a STEM program (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics) and be working for an employer enrolled in the E-Verify program. This extension will help in solving the problem of OPT running out before an H1-B can be secured.

There are two lesser used options for students working off campus that allow them to avoid the complications of CPT and OPT. Students interning in the United States for an international organization with special approval (such as the World Bank or the World Health Organization) can be granted permission to work by submitting some basic paperwork, a new I-20, and a fee. International students can also receive approval to work if they demonstrate "severe economic hardship." This also requires documentation and a fee. This option is extremely difficult to have approved. Students looking to intern under either of these two special situations should speak to their DSO for guidance and support.

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THE RECRUITMENT AND INTERVIEW PROCESS

The complicated administrative process international students must deal with is only one of the barriers to successfully obtaining an internship. Many employers will not consider international applicants because they are under the impression that hiring a foreign student will be a time-consuming and complicated process. As outlined above, this is not the case. To help combat this impression, international students should be well-versed in the authorization and hiring process, and how easy it is from the employer perspective. Students should be prepared to explain exactly what is needed from the employer, depending on what method is being used. Students are not obligated to disclose their country of origin or information related to ethnicity and race, but they must be able to answer the question, “Are you authorized to work in the United States?” Schools can also play an important role in this process by educating their employer partners and providing guidance about the international student employment approval process. Some employers will not consider international students for internships because they do not sponsor them for H1-B visas. Although sponsorship is not a requirement for CPT or OPT, employers that select most of their full-time hires from their internship pools feel they are wasting everyone’s time in taking internationals on as interns. If hiring professionals better understood the ease in which they could hire international interns, perhaps they would provide the internship, even if there is little chance of a resulting full-time position after graduation. Glenda Henkel, Associate Director of Towson University’s Career Center, feels that employers may be too quick to dismiss the idea of hiring an international student as an intern. “Some employers assume that an international student who applies for an internship expects subsequent sponsorship upon graduation,” says Henkel. “I honestly feel that sometimes employers perceive barriers that do not exist.”

International students are often able to present very strong resumes to potential employers. Attributes can include high GPAs, on campus employment, in-demand STEM majors, and involvement in campus activities. Employers are impressed with such a resume for both content and presentation. Unfortunately, the star candidate on paper can result in disappointment in an interview setting. Where the student may have had significant help in preparing the resume (including using proper English), they are on their own in the

interview. Employers sometimes feel a disconnect between the person in the resume and the person in the interview.

Before judging international students harshly on their interview skills, it is important for employers to have an understanding of some of the cultural differences between American students and those from other countries. Communications skills are highly valued in the United States, so most interviews are based on how well a student expresses himself or herself. Problems arise, however, when employers ask questions that make students uncomfortable sharing information, even though they may know the answers. For example, many cultures consider questions about one’s personal traits and experiences to be intrusive. Students are reluctant to talk about their strengths and weaknesses because they consider this a violation of their privacy. Behavioral-based interviewing, a very popular technique in American culture, requires the student cite personal examples in order to answer the questions. International students may have trouble answering such questions because they feel talking about their accomplishments makes them boastful, an unattractive trait in their eyes. The directness and assertiveness that employers expect to see from students has not been taught in other cultures the way it has in the United States. Consequently, students new to American culture are expected to learn these behaviors in a relatively short period of time. Dr. Alfreda James of the Career Center at Stonybrook University notes a major challenge with regard to the interview setting. “The students certainly hear English in the classroom but they then translate the instructor’s words into the native language. Needless to say, interviewing is a challenge. An interview requires spontaneous responses. But a student translating between languages is anything but spontaneous.”

There are some other stylistic differences that employers should be aware of before rushing to judgment about an international student’s performance in an interview. Certain non-verbals, such as eye contact and a firm handshake, are not valued in other cultures. In fact, direct eye contact with someone of a higher status is considered disrespectful. Punctuality can also be a point of conflict between cultures. In the United States, we value being on time, but in other countries, punctuality may not be important. Attire can also cause problems for international students in the interview

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setting. Some of these students have lived in locations where no one wears suits or western styles of formal attire. Without proper guidance from the Career Services office, these students (especially younger students) may come to an interview underdressed. There is also the unfortunate reality that many of these students studying in the United States come from poor backgrounds. They may not have the funds to purchase appropriate interview clothing.

Although I've stated that employers must be familiar with the cultural differences that can affect an international student's performance in an interview, it is still the student's responsibility to learn how to perform according to American standards. It may be difficult for them to overcome their own preferences and adjust their behavior, but that process is necessary for their success. International students should utilize the Career Services staff and programs available to them. These students should engage in mock interviews to become comfortable with the process. The reality is that the student who wants to successfully transition to the American workplace must be able to perform according to American cultural norms. Employers can help in this regard by suggesting international candidates work with their Career Services office to improve their communications skills and performance. If employers see talent in a candidate, they can work with the student to teach American business techniques. They may also need to provide additional advice on topics such as local housing. International students will most likely need to find a place to live in close proximity to the internship, as they usually do not have their own transportation. Many Career Services offices can also offer advice on housing for students.

CONCLUSIONS

An internship is a learning experience for students that exposes them to a career area, allows them to apply classroom knowledge, offers an opportunity to build skills, and teaches them how to be successful in a professional setting. Many domestic students are just as inexperienced as international students when it comes to spending time in a professional workplace. Employers should not shy away from considering a talented international student because of perceived obstacles. Ann Blasick, Assistant Director of the Undergraduate Internship Program at Georgia Institute of Technology, is optimistic about employers' perceptions on hiring international student interns. She says, "I think

employers who hire F-1 Visa students typically find them to be very intelligent, very respectful and also very driven because they know the cards are stacked against them, although sometimes they may need a bit more hand-holding than other students."

Hiring an international student as an intern is no more complicated, expensive, or time consuming than hiring a domestic student. In fact, it can be less expensive since most F-1 students are exempt from social security and Medicare taxes. In a society where businesses continue to be more global in nature, employers can greatly benefit from having international interns. There is much to learn from these students about how to interact effectively with businesses all over the world. Americans traveling beyond North America to conduct business must be readily able to adjust to other cultures. International student interns are valuable on-site resources for information related to appropriate behaviors across the globe. According to Nanette Cooley, Assistant Director of Employer Relations at Lafayette College, "International students bring a cultural diversity and richness to an organization while offering innovative and fresh perspectives to business challenges." Career Services and International Student offices are working hard to prepare these students to present themselves well as candidates. It is the employer's responsibility to understand the context from which these students come, and make decisions based on facts and not assumptions. All the parties involved want a mutually beneficial relationship between student and employer. Open communication and sharing of information are key components toward this end.

Rachel Nelson Moeller is associate director of career services at Lafayette College with 15 years of experience in career services and academic advising at the college level. Her work at Lafayette involves assisting students in all parts of the career development process as well as coordinating the alumni sponsored externship (job shadowing) and internship programs. Rachel works with students of all class years and academic majors as they move through the career exploration and decision-making processes. She also works closely with Lafayette alumni cultivating opportunities for them to share their career expertise with current students.

Rachel holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics and Business from Lafayette College, Masters degree in Education from the University of Pennsylvania and a post-Masters Certificate in Career Development from John F. Kennedy University. She has written and presented on numerous topics related to academic and career advising.

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