

# My Internship Experience

*Jose Miller, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY*

## SECTION 1 Getting an Internship

My internship search started during my freshman year. I knew that an internship was an important component to the career success that I was hoping to obtain. Counselors and friends had already told me that gaining a valuable internship would set me apart from the rest. But like every freshman, I did not know where to start. I was completely lost. I had no relevant work experience, coursework, or reference (recommendation) that proved I was ready for a job. So I turned to organizations. I figured that not only would they help me find an internship but also develop some leadership skills that could be used in the future.

The first organization that I joined was the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE). This organization seemed to be exactly what I needed. It encouraged the growth of minority engineers in the workplace, and helped retain students in engineering. The first general body meeting talked about how NSBE had many internship opportunities via their annual conferences and on their website. Future meetings introduced me to INROADS, an organization that strived to find internships for students in business and industry.

I attended the first NSBE conference and figured I would use the experience to learn what questions to ask and how to approach recruiters. Though we were coached at NSBE meetings on how to obtain an internship, it is not the same as when you are face to face with a recruiter trying to show them that you are a good candidate. You may get nervous, or perhaps be intimidated by the recruiter. It never goes as planned. By the second conference, the National Conference in Dallas, I was ready. With resumes in hand and a list of questions for the companies that I had targeted, I was confident that I would find the internship of my dreams. But it was not what I thought it would be. I was expecting to go in there and easily gain some offers from some companies. I thought all I had to do was hand them my resume and they would get in contact with me. I figured that there were going to be over a hundred companies there that needed interns. I was wrong. It was not as easy as that. I forgot to account for the fact that there were also going to be over 10,000 students there, making it very competitive. I found myself engaging in short conversations with recruiters and asking questions that they could answer very easily (like they had heard them twenty times already). In addition to this I was nervous and kept asking questions I already knew the answer to. I found myself trying to force a conversation when there was no longer anything to say. Before long, it was the end of March and I had not been contacted by INROADS or any of the recruiters I had met through the NSBE conferences I had attended. I was now desperate for a summer job.

By the time March had turned into April everywhere I looked had either completed all of their summer interviews or were no longer accepting applicants. I ended up finding a summer job in Manhattan at the American Museum of Natural History. A friend who knew I was in need of an internship sent the application to me. It involved

being a tour guide. At first I thought that it was just a small summer position, but it actually involved some learning, thinking, and exercise of unused skills. Prior to this position, one of the things that I had not had much exposure to is public speaking. My voice would crack and get low whenever I spoke in front of a group of people I did not know. I was not sure if this position would help me or just make public speaking more of a fear for me. The position proved to have some educational value as I had the opportunity to learn about earth and soils (information that I later used in my soils class), as well as information about dinosaurs, animals, countries, and cultures (past and present). The museum has actually turned out to be one of my favorite places to visit. Most importantly I had the chance to work on my public speaking skills.

The skills that I learned during the summer would help me the following school year in obtaining a more challenging internship position. By sophomore year I had joined a few more organizations including the African American Male Congress (AAMC) and the Collegiate-Science and Technology Entry Program (C-STEP). I had also been elected vice-president of NSBE. My goals for the year included gaining some leadership experience. I felt prepared to take on a new challenge and exercise my skills. I knew that by obtaining these goals I would gain the confidence and experience that employers look for. I had applied for INROADS earlier in the year and had begun preparing for the NSBE National Conference in Boston. I had also begun looking for internships on my own. I called companies that were in my field of study and looked online for opportunities.

At the NSBE National Conference in Boston, MA, I was prepared. I had experience, leadership and most of all confidence. I was confident that I deserved an internship just as much as the next person. Unlike the earlier conferences, I no longer wondered, "why me, what makes me the one for the job". I had three companies that I had targeted heavily. They were contracting companies that did major construction work across the nation. They did exactly what I wanted to do. They made everything from skyscrapers to sports complexes to bridges. I had managed to land an interview with the second company on my priority list, M.A. Mortenson. I had run into them the year before in Dallas, and was sure to come prepared the second time around. Previously, a recruiter from Mortenson had provided me with information about what he typically looks for in a candidate and how he would prefer for students to approach him. He had disclosed this info with me because I had admitted to him last year that I was a freshman and did not have a clue about what I was doing. He was a nice guy and because it was the last day of the career fair, he decided to give me some very good advice. This same gentleman happened to be recruiting at the current conference and luckily did not recognize me. I landed a group dinner interview the first night of the career fair that included all the candidates they had considered for the day. They contacted me the next day and told me that they wanted to have another interview with me on the last day of the conference. By the end of the second interview they offered me a position.

When I returned to school, I was weighing my options and figured that I would accept the position since they had only given me a week to sign the acceptance letter. While this internship was exactly what I had wanted, I was troubled by how far away

from home I would need to be. Though I had accepted the position, I was still hoping that I could find something better or closer to New York. INROADS had sent me an e-mail saying that my resume was being sent out to a few companies and that I might be contacted soon. However, the semester was over and no other companies had contacted me. I was off to Des Moines, Iowa.

## SECTION 2 *The Internship*

The first day of my internship was overwhelming. I arrived at a nine-story office building that still had two more levels waiting to be added. I was nervous when I was in the presence of the project manager, superintendent, field engineers, and many other successful people that I one day hoped to be like. I became even more nervous when I was given my daily activities which consisted of: a) making changes to the drawings supplied by the structural engineer or architect, b) conducting daily safety checks of the site, c) making sure that all equipment and material was accounted for and putting them onto the computer (this required me to perform some research on the software program being used), and d) collect concrete sampling invoices and other quality control/assurance documents. Along with these task, there were a list of things that I was expected to learn how to do by the end of the internship including, calculating project duration, calculating a budget for a project, and other information that would be taught to me. This seemed to be a pretty structured development process.

The second week of my internship a Human Resource manager at Kraft Foods Inc contacted me on my cell phone. He had received my application through INROADS and wanted to interview me. Working with Kraft Foods Inc would provide me with the opportunity to work closer to home, work with the world's second leading food company, and earn more money. As I would still be doing engineering (just a different concentration), it seemed like the better choice. I had decided to do the interview and see what the outcome would be. I told the HR manager that I was interested in the position and would be available but I had no means of getting to where he was located. He told me that he wasn't expecting me to actually go to his office and that it would be a phone interview. He contacted me on Memorial Day for a screening. I had the day off that day because the site had been closed. I remember being nervous as he asked me questions about certain scenarios that I may have faced in my leadership positions and how I would overcome similar situations.

A few days later the HR manager contacted me and told me that he would like to offer me an engineering internship at Polly-O, Kraft Foods Inc., in Campbell, NY. I accepted the offer and told Mortenson that I could no longer continue working with them.

When I told my family and friends about the decision they were somewhat concerned about why I chose to take the position if it wasn't exactly what I wanted to study. However, for the most part they supported my decision. Before the internship had started I was looking for a place to stay because the company offered limited assistance with housing. In my search I realized how hard it was to pick out a place to live. So many

factors go into making such an important decision. Distance from work, neighborhood, rent, utilities, owner; all play an integral part in the decision-making process. I ended up finding an apartment complex that was a thirty-minute drive to work. It was the closest thing I could find for the price and convenience I wanted. Unfortunately this decision was made right before gas prices skyrocketed.

My first day on the job was spent saying hello to important people working for the plant, touring the facilities, attending new hire orientations, and filling out paperwork. I was not nervous on my first day. I felt relaxed and ready to get started. I remember talking to the HR manager right before I left to go home for the day and telling him how nothing crazy had happened on my first day. I was expecting something out of the ordinary to occur, something usually happens to me on the first day of school or job. As expected, at the end of the day as I turned my car ignition, I realized my battery had died. It seems I had left my lights on from the drive to work that foggy morning. The HR manager had a kick laughing at the fact that I had just finished telling him that my first day had gone very smoothly. The first week I spent learning the facility and taking computer based trainings and other new hire trainings. These trainings consisted of everything from fire safety to protective work equipment to food quality.

By the second week my computer was set up at my cubical and I was given a minor task to do. I was supposed to familiarize myself with one of the projects that would be taking place in the near future. It was a truck scale that was going to be added to the entrance. My duty was to look at the proposals from contactors and decide which was best. Though the final decisions were not made by me, my supervisor wanted me to understand what things were taken into account when overlooking bids. I also had a chance to observe the AutoCAD drawing of where the scale was supposed to be installed. I measured the area where the installation was supposed to take place and determined where the road would start to slope. The project allowed me to learn information such as where exactly the property is divided between state and owner; gradient of the road, and other documentations needed to do construction in an area that would alter the roads of the community.

As the weeks progressed I had a chance to do an AutoCAD drawing of the stock room. I was also assigned a project that involved calculating the current energy usage of certain sections of the plant. This project was the beginning of what would be the installation of new equipment, but first the plant needed to find out if they could install more equipment in one area. I was also assigned the task of looking into a new rinse system for the pipes and the milk trucks that delivered our milk. The pipes and trucks needed to be flushed out daily with either air or water. My project was to devise a way to retain the milk that was in the pipe and trucks. Systems were already installed but were either abandoned because of safety hazards or ineffectiveness. My job consisted of looking at what made these systems go wrong and what changes could be made to fix them.

I had a chance to learn about pipe flow, pumps, and even the wastewater treatment facility that was installed in the back of the plant. Much of the technical

information I learned that summer was useful for my following semester of school. Though there was a lot of technical learning going on, I also had the chance to learn about the industry and each person's position and career. I realized that the food industry is an industry that utilizes many disciplines. Kraft Foods uses engineering, human resources, finance, logistics, and marketing. I received a lot of advice on my personal career from my supervisor, including information about graduate school, P.E. license, and academic focus in civil engineering (structural, surveying, environmental). I also had the chance to see how other people made it into the positions they were in, including whether they went to graduate school or not, and what their next plans would be.

The opportunity to work in a cubicle and attend company picnics and events was one that I will never forget. The atmosphere in the office was nice. Everyone got along well and it was easy to tell when a co-worker was not feeling good on a certain day. I had the chance to learn a lot about employee morale and how to keep staff motivated. I spent a lot of time talking about my experience with the Assistant HR Manager. He asked me about what I was observing and how it was different from what I was learning in school. I understand now why it is crucial to get involved in organizations and take some responsibilities. Besides deadlines, one has to understand his/her role in the group's success. One needs to be able to work in a group and understand his/her teammate's strengths and weaknesses.

Throughout the summer I attended INROADS Conferences and also a Kraft Internship Conference. The INROADS conference provided development training on each person's career field and also motivated students to succeed and excel at work and in school. The Kraft Conference helped answer any questions about working for Kraft. The conference made the interns feel as if they were being trained to become full-time employees. They made me feel like I was wanted and needed after graduation. They talked about the benefits of Kraft and the industry, and what it took to excel in our internships. They were telling us how to ace our summer long interview. I found this to be funny because I thought they were testing us to see if we did these things, but it seems like they wanted us to succeed. Things like punctuality, how to communicate with co-workers, how to effectively communicate your work, and how to ask the right questions at the right time to the right people, were all revealed to us.

During the summer I had two mentors, the Assistant HR Manager and a Junior Analyst in the finance department. They gave me great advice on everything from how to manage your boss to minor things like allowing the person with the most seniority to have the first choice. I distinctly remember being out on the company golf trip and being given advice from the Junior Analyst on how to allow the person at the highest level of command to go first and choose the best shot (captain and crew style tournament). I was given advice on how often I should be going over my project with my supervisor and how many meetings I should spend with my supervisor about personal career choices I was considering. I learned how to monitor and schedule my own work-day/week.

By the end of the internship I was used to my daily activities and had grown comfortable with not only my mentors but also the people out on the plant floor. I had the opportunity to live on my own and pay my own bills. I learned a bit about NASCAR and

learned how to play golf. My presentation at the end of my internship was about my entire summer experience; including personal successes and technical knowledge I had gained. I was advised not to make my final presentation primarily on my work because most of the staff would not understand if I went into much detail and my projects had already been presented to my supervisor. The plant had a small going away lunch for me and a few gifts. I had the chance to speak with many of the employees before I left and thank them for their help. A lot of the staff provided me with final advice on my choices and for my studies abroad. Some of the staff even made me promise to keep in touch. I realized that I had grown fairly close to all the people I had worked with for those two-and-a-half months.

### SECTION 3 Conclusion

The summer of 2005 was one full of learning. Not only was it one of my most productive summers in a long time but it also proved to be fun. I made many decisions that summer. Every choice from leaving a position to choosing a place to live was solely dependent on me. Through all of the things I did that summer I still had the time to read two books, learn a new sport, spend time with family, visit friends at school, and also relax and prepare for studying abroad.

I try not to, but every once in a while I think about the decision I made early in the summer. I wonder what would have happened if I had stayed at Mortenson. I don't regret any decision I made, but knowing what I know now my decision would have been different. I understand now that I should have stayed with the career choice that I believe I want for myself. I had the chance to try something else and realize that I liked construction better. It is more artistic in a sense (which is why I got into the major); innovation, simplicity, usefulness, beauty, perfection, all matter when it comes to building a structure. Kraft provided a good learning environment for me but I learned that, the construction site suits my interests a lot more.

I believe that either way I might have burned the bridge between Mortenson and myself when I decided to leave. I learned that I should think about a decision a little more closely before making it. I should look deeper into the circumstances and benefits. Money, location, and company are important but they are not the only things that should go into such a major decision. In the future, I will also look at other factors, like if the position will keep my interest, if it will utilize and enhance my skill as well as teach me new ones, if the position will help me reach my desired goal (or if it just a detour away from the job I really desire). I should have taken my time making a choice about the decision (instead of just one night), the same way I took my time and looked at all the factors that went into choosing a home for the summer.

I used to think that the distance away from home was a factor, but after spending time in London I realized that it was the fact of being in such a small town with nobody around and nothing to do. Other than realizing my tolerance for small towns, the summer was full of learning both academically and personally. Life lessons and school lessons

were both learned. I would have to say that this was the most important summer of my life thus far.