

TEXT: JOYCE THORNTON

The importance of work experience in gaining a foothold in the hugely competitive world of design cannot be over-emphasised. Although usually unpaid, work experience builds confidence, increases knowledge and skills, and offers an invaluable insight into the world of work. It is the best way to discover what sort of work you would find enjoyable and satisfying, and just as important, to discover what you don't enjoy.

Francesca Muston, Senior Editor for WGSN's 'Whats in Store' fashion retail directory told us, "Internships are often wrongly viewed as exploitation and cheap labour. In fact they're an invaluable opportunity for students and graduates to network, try out different career paths and most importantly, to really demonstrate to potential employers what you have to offer."

Today, many universities specialising in design integrate work experience into their course curriculum. However, if this is not

the case, how do you go about getting a work placement?

SECURING THE PLACEMENT

Find out all you can about your target work destination and its staff.

Enquire if they regularly take interns and work out the best person to write to about this. Never assume that the best place to start is the personnel department (HR), as general letters addressed here normally just generate a polite reply reading 'thanks for your interest and that they will "keep your details on file"'.

Find out the actual department head's name and work out why and when they might need some help—and, crucially, how you and your skills may be of use to the company. Armed with this information, **write a concise and enthusiastic covering letter** and **attach a CV which**

you have checked and perhaps amended to **ensure that it is entirely relevant** to that company.

You must ensure that the name of the person you are writing to (usually a manager) is correctly spelt and also that you have their correct job title—ie Head of Design, Design Manager, Senior Editor, etc... This sort of attention to detail is very important, and getting it wrong may mean that your letter hits the wrong note before it's even read.

Francesca agrees, she says, "When I screen CVs I immediately look for a professional covering letter which conveys a sense of genuine enthusiasm for the company and the position. I dismiss those which seem vague or don't have a professional tone. Spelling and grammar are also hugely important. A CV which is riddled with typos and grammatical errors gives the impression that the student is sloppy and careless in their work. Double-check everything before you send it."

Finding a link with your preferred company definitely helps—do you know anyone, (a friend of a friend perhaps) who

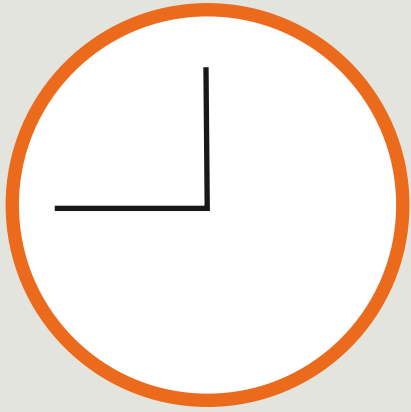


works there? Recommendations can go a long way when competition for placements is fierce. Most people use email these days—in which case your this email should replace the covering letter, but it is also worth sending a "hard copy" (printed version) of both the letter and your CV through the normal post.

Once you have done this, it's worth following the correspondence up with a polite phone call the following week to check that they have received it. Once you know that your letter and CV have been received then **DO NOT** call again—just wait for the company to get back to you in their own time. Calling again will be counter-productive and may well turn the impression you have made from being labelled 'keen' to that of 'pest'!

YOU HAVE THE PLACEMENT. WHAT NOW?

Prior to day one: it is a good idea to write or email a short note to say thanks for the work placement opportunity—and at the same time, this is your chance to clarify anything that you are unsure about. This may be simple things like clarifying



re-cap, and will add to the impression of organisation and efficiency that you should be striving to achieve.

In many jobs you will become a hands-on member of the team. Whatever happens—**be punctual, willing, cheerful and use your initiative.** Don't sit there waiting for the next job to come along once you have completed something, let the team or your line manager know and ask for something else to do. The experience is usually a great way to pick up new skills, experiences, ideas and broaden understanding.

WHAT MAKES A FANTASTIC INTERN?

Francesca says, “My most important factor for recruiting is attitude. It doesn't matter how creative or intelligent a student is, if they don't have the right attitude and work ethic they're no use to me. I expect students to be punctual, reliable, enthusiastic and able to use their initiative. Those who repeatedly call in sick or are late all the time are unlikely to be given a good reference or invited back. Nor are those who spend the day on Facebook or gazing

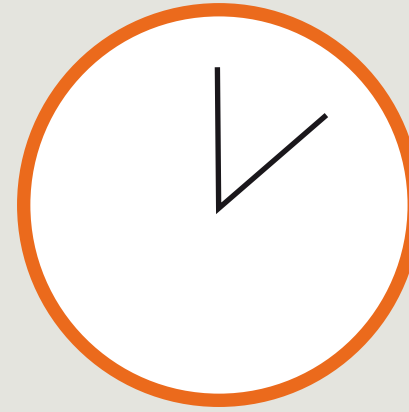


the **exact location of where you will be based and the hours you will be expected to work.** Hopefully, you will have already clarified the sort of tasks they will be expecting you to undertake, but if not, make sure that this is clear before you arrive!

You may also want to know what the 'dress code' is. Most design and media offices are very relaxed about what people wear to work—but if it is a “customer facing” position—they may wish you to dress more smartly, so it won't do any harm to ask before you turn up.

Day one: arrive early! Give yourself plenty of time to get to your destination—and then add on another 15 minutes just to make sure. It's never a bad thing to get there too early and you can spend the time waiting in a reception area, soaking up the atmosphere and composing yourself. Being late—especially on day one is just not acceptable.

Come prepared: always bring a pen and notepad, as you will invariably have to write instructions down (passwords to computer systems etc). Your own notes will ensure you don't have to bother people later for a



almost two years of unpaid placements in everything from graphic design, to catwalk styling and even a photography placement in New York. In February 2003 I began a two-week work placement with the graphics team at WGSN. Roll-on six years and I'm now a Senior Retail Editor; a position I largely attribute to the experience and contacts I gained as an intern. My placement, which lasted nearly six months, was an opportunity to work across all the departments of WGSN and really develop my writing, photography and trend analysis skills under the watchful eyes of the industry elite.

“I won't pretend that two years of work experience is an ideal situation; I funded much of it with dreary office temping positions. Once I had my foot in the door of a company I made the most of the free samples and press invites!”

Francesca is in no doubt about the huge benefits of work experience placements, she says, “An employer is far more likely to recruit based on personal experience and a proven track record than they are to take a chance on a faceless CV”.

absently into space waiting for instruction. Positive students who are bubbly and keen are a joy to work with. Those who ask lots of questions and offer to go the extra mile to help out are the ones we're likely to dedicate more time to helping out with further work placements, university projects and references. They're also the ones most likely to be rewarded with party invites and press gifts! The more an intern puts into the placement the more they will inevitably get out.”

One of the most valuable aspects of work experience is undoubtedly learning how to work with a team of people, as invariably at university you are usually working on your own individual projects. Take the opportunity to talk to people who are already doing a job you may aspire to—find out what they think about the work they are doing and apply any tips they may give you.

Francesca's own personal experience of interning was longer than most and money was very tight. Eventually, her determination paid off. She explains, “I began my fashion career with a mammoth stint of work experience—including my industrial placement year, I completed

