

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR WORK TERM

CO-OP TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

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As we enter a new millennium, the role of education and the workforce is in the midst of great change. No longer is the primary function of post-secondary education to challenge and expand our way of looking at the world around us. Today, the world of higher learning is preparing 'a ready-made employee' for the labour market. My own university experience has shown me this firsthand.

Had it not been for that fateful day in the second year of my Bachelor of Arts degree at the University College of the Fraser Valley (UCFV) in Abbotsford, British Columbia, I may not be writing this article today. As a result of a classroom visit by the Co-operative Education Arts Coordinator, I was introduced to the world of Co-operative Education and have not looked back since.

Up until that momentous day, my time at university had been fairly enjoyable. My degree was well underway, and I had a typical student life - student by day, waiter by night. However, I was beginning to worry about career options after graduation and felt my restaurant experience would not assist me in getting the most out of my degree. The Co-operative Education coordinator immediately struck a cord in me when it was mentioned during the class visit that co-operative education was all about gaining practical experience in a student's field of study.

Although I was earning a bachelor's degree in History, my goal was not exactly to work in a museum. I have a lifelong dream of an international career, perhaps with the Foreign Service. I felt that enrolling in a co-operative education program might take me closer to my dreams. Although I quickly found out that the Co-operative Education Program at UCFV was very dynamic, as it presented me with various first work term possibilities, I couldn't have imagined how far co-operative education was to take me.

My first work term in April 1996 was with the British Columbia provincial government as a Student Administrator for the Student Summer Works '96 employment program. I was responsible, along with two other co-op students, for allocating almost half a million dollars to find summer employment opportunities for over 250 students in the Fraser Valley region. This work term put me in contact with a number of employers in the region and taught me valuable administrative and office skills. I ended up staying on for a second four-month co-op term in September to wrap up the employment program. During this time, I compiled and submitted a comprehensive report on the program outcomes to the then Provincial Ministry of Education, Skills and Training. This report later won UCFV's 1997 Co-operative Education Writing Award for the Faculty of Arts.

Before my next co-op term, the following summer, a unique opportunity presented itself to me through a contact I made during my first work term. I worked with the International Education Department at UCFV when they hired a couple of students through the summer employment program. The department was now looking for applicants to go to Japan for a semester to study at UCFV's sister institution in Hokkaido. I jumped at the opportunity to apply and successfully represented UCFV in Japan for an academic semester during the spring of 1997. This opportunity was absolutely amazing as I saw my international goals beginning to become a reality.

When I returned to Abbotsford, I set about looking for my third co-op term when a truly outstanding opportunity presented itself. The Centre for Co-operative Education and Employment Services was looking to fill a new position - Program Administrator for a Youth International Internship Program. My previous co-op experience, coupled with my Japanese experience, gave me a competitive advantage and helped me secure a position for my third and fourth co-op terms.

This was a dream opportunity - and I was ready for it. I needed to put all of my previous skills and experiences to work to allocate a program budget of over \$300,000. When all was said and done, the program was successful: 26 interns working in 12 different countries on every continent except Antarctica. This included two interns going to work in the Japanese city where I had studied the previous year. The position required that I visit countries from Mexico to South Africa and many points in between. The places and events of my history, political science and economic textbooks came to life each and every time I explored a potential country for a potential internship. I spent a total of six weeks of my two work terms literally "on the road," travelling and meeting with international companies, embassies, and some of the interns at their work sites.

The eight months I spent administering the Youth International Internship Program gave me experiences beyond my imagination. I explored ancient ruins in Korea, caught the subway between meetings in Singapore and arranged for the safe departure of two interns from Indonesia when that country experienced political instability in the spring of 1998. It was a fast-paced, exciting position that had me communicating all over the globe through faxes, e-mails and telephone calls at all hours of the day. I was sorry to say goodbye to the international program when my co-op term ended, and I graduated with my bachelor's degree in June of 1998.

So as a new graduate, what was I to do? How could I put my co-op experience to use to find meaningful employment? Well, I explored internship opportunities for recent grads and came across a great opportunity through UCFV's Employment Services office.

The British Columbia Legislative Assembly hired seven graduates yearly to be legislative interns in Victoria. The process was competitive, and many of the top graduates from B.C.'s universities applied. I was successful and became UCFV's first grad to have the opportunity. When I met with the other new interns and discussed with the internship organizers what made for a successful candidate, it came down to one large factor in my case: my co-operative education experience.

As an intern, I spent some time with the Ministry of the Attorney General and put my office and networking skills to use to secure a meeting with the attorney general himself. I rubbed shoulders regularly with leading politicians, including the premier. It was another fast-paced and exciting work environment that enhanced the skills I had acquired throughout my degree.

With the current political climate in British Columbia being very divided and confrontational, I soon found myself exploring other career options. It was not long before I returned to my roots, so to speak, and was hired on by the Centre for Co-operative Education and Employment Services at UCFV to run the day-to-day operations of Employment Services. I was now working for my Alma Mater, assisting students to find employment opportunities and sharing the many employment tips I had picked up along the way. This was the latest development in a great relationship with the University College of the Fraser Valley's Centre for Co-operative Education and Employment Services.

Earning a university degree is no longer a guarantee of a job. So, for today's post-secondary students gaining the skills to make yourself more employable has become all the more important. Co-operative education and graduate internship programs provide post-secondary students the opportunity to follow their dreams while turning them into the skilled and sought after graduate labour force of the next millennium. Explore the co-operative education opportunities at your institution you can only imagine where it might take you.