

Strategies For Getting Real World Experience

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“Real World” experience - working outside of University for a business, community organization or even a volunteer group - is valuable for a number of reasons. First, it shows what a particular career is really like: you’ll see the fun parts along with the more routine - or even dull - chores that go along with any job. And how often have you heard that you can’t get a job without experience? Working will show potential employers that you’ve had experience outside of the classroom.

But how do you get experience?

The most important thing to realize is that even as a University student, you can get into places of business. The trick is to know what you’re getting into, and to be professional and courteous as you search for a graduate position, summer job, part time position or volunteer position.

The Importance of Experience

No doubt about it, work experience you get now will look good at university selection and for future employers, even though your first “real” job may be years away.

But it’s as important to you, as well.

Work experience will help you develop a “track record” in the workplace. In other words, you’ll demonstrate that you can work in a business environment, no matter what kind of chores you do there. This, in turn, will help you “sell” yourself to employers and others who can help you reach your career goals.

It will increase your awareness of college majors related to your career plans. Being in a workplace may give you ideas about your career you’d never thought of before.

It will let you explore your leadership potential. After all, the real world is different from University. In the Real World, you’ll often be expected to think on your feet more than you might in class.

You’ll start building a network of people who can refer you to opportunities in the future, and who can vouch for you through the references employers and others ask for.

Perhaps most important, work experience will let you discover for yourself how well suited you are to a career. For example, does your image of the job match what it’s really like? Do your talents and personal style fit the career? Is this a field you want to stick with, learn more about, become expert at someday?

You’ll also get an idea of the career’s benefits and drawbacks. You’ll see first-hand the environment people work in, and see what kind of people tend to succeed. Are their hours long? Do they work alone, or with lots of people? Is the work stressful? You’ll get a grasp of the skills and abilities you’ll need to succeed in the field, and maybe even an idea of what drives people who leave the field early on.

There are several ways to obtain experience in the “real world.” To start, investigate local people involved in your target career, and talk to your career counselor. As you begin, think about the kind of experience you want. A lot will depend on how old you are and whether you’ve had any experience already.

The WorkReady Program can help you find positions to gain real world experience, ensure that you are covered by insurance when undertaking work experience and offer you support if issues arise. Contact the WorkReady Project Officer at the Careers and Employer Liaison Centre for details or visit:

www.flinders.edu.au/careers/WR.html

Your options include:

- Shadowing & Mentorships

In many places, students can link up with employers to spend a day or longer observing - or “shadowing” - professionals in a variety of careers. Often, the students end up wanting more information about the career. Sometimes, though, students realize they wouldn’t want to do that work!

The Flinders University Graduate Mentor Scheme links final year students with graduates of the University. Each of these mentors listens to their students’ ideas, and offers advice. The mentorship, if a good match, may become a long term relationship.

- Project Activities

Real world experience doesn’t have to be career-specific to be relevant. Your accomplishments in school or community groups demonstrate work-related skills and abilities. For example, if you’ve been involved in clubs/Committees at University, fund-raising, volunteered for a community or public-interest organization or organized the marketing effort for the school play, you’ve begun to develop your interpersonal, communication and leadership skills.

The Flinders University *WorkReady* program aims to enhance the skills and range of experiences at University by providing work experience and employment skills for students. Further information is available from the Careers Centre.

- You’re not a joiner?

You can still get experience working by yourself. For example, you might grow a garden, restore a car, care for younger siblings after school or during summers, or help raise livestock. All of these things require planning, responsibility and a serious effort. They can help you develop the professional mindset you’ll need to succeed in the work world.

- University

Finally, you can use University assignments to get experience. Write and debug a computer program, create a Web page or a wall mural for your University, complete a project in science, automotive technology or building-trades class, or conduct a study of the history of veterinary medicine in your community.

- Volunteering

If you’re young or can’t find the right internship or summer job, think about volunteering. Call organizations dedicated to helping people or to making the world or community a better place. Want to be a veterinarian? Volunteer some time at the local animal shelter. Dream of practicing law? Help out at a legal aid society, or work on a political campaign. Check out the *WorkReady* program (details from the Careers and Employer Liaison Centre) and how that can assist you.

- Part-time or Summer Jobs

Some people work at Hungry Jacks. Some at Woolworths or at a local cafe. Others provide clerical support or file and answer phones in an office. Perhaps you’ve been a camp counselor. You may have done babysitting or tutoring. Have you cleaned out stables, done yard work or housework for pay? The job may not be in your career field, but it’s experience.

You never know what a job might lead to: A student hoping to become a graphic artist was working part time in a clothing store. When she discovered a customer who owned a graphic design firm, she told him her dream. He invited her to show him her work. Eventually, he offered her a job after graduation.

Whether you become active in a club or organization, shadow a professional in your chosen career, complete an internship or a special project, do volunteer work, or work at a part time or summer job, you’re building your skill and knowledge base. What better way is there to get experience than in the real world?

Adapted from an article by Valerie Lipow. She is a nationally certified career counselor based in Grand Junction, Colorado, Appeared in *FutureScan Magazine*.