Guest Post: Elise Waxenberg's Advice from an Intern

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I had the opportunity to work closely with Elise Waxenberg at Bridgewater — she's someone who has always reflected deeply on professional development and on "how work works." She's now a rising second-year student at Harvard Business School and spending her summer working with Lincoln Center. Her email response to the Advice to an Intern piece was among the most thoughtful of the replies I received, valuable to share with all readers as a guest post. – Niko

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The last time I was an intern was nearly 10 years ago, when I was an undergrad working in New York for a magazine and banking about $10 an hour. Now as an MBA student, I'm getting the unusual chance to reincarnate as a summer intern again, and to figure out how to make the most of what can be an excellent experience to learn and try something new.

Being an intern has some unique challenges, unlike any other form of employment, and I feel like I've encountered all of them anew this summer. Internships are inherently short-term, inherently temporary. You likely are not experienced or expert in whatever it is you'll be working on. You may be quite different in terms of age or background from co-workers. The organization or your team might not be well equipped to utilize you well or visualize how you can fit into the mix. That last is a common complaint I hear from my classmates, who are also interning all over the world now: "My boss doesn't know how to use me."

Of course the world would be a better place if everyone had a great boss who scoped out a brilliant project for you at the right level for your capabilities and interests, gathered everything you needed to get started in advance, had a rich plan for your development and so on – but you can't expect that. You have to be prepared to seriously self-manage. Instead of worrying that your boss doesn't know how to utilize you, you can devote your mental energy to figuring out how to best utilize yourself and your time there.

As Niko wrote in Advice to an Intern, each task can be thought of as both a rehearsal and a performance. This metaphor applies well to the entire internship experience. Remind yourself not to just worry about the performance side of things – the immediate outcomes may be underwhelming despite your best efforts. I find I have to remind myself that internships are about learning more than anything – learning about a field, a company, a function, a skill, and especially about yourself. So it's extra important to worry just as much (or more) about your approach as about your results.

The short-term aspect of an internship is both a challenge and an opportunity. If you know you're only working ten or twelve weeks, you can choose to either assume that it's not much runway to accomplish something and rest on your laurels, or you can choose to set truly high expectations for yourself. If you go down the second path, which is no doubt the more fulfilling one, that means you need to plan your time early and concretely. I think it's common to have a slow start as an intern, depending on what you walk into. A couple of slow, not-plugged-in, still-figuring-it-out weeks is practically nothing if you're full-time, but if you spend a couple weeks getting up to speed as an intern, that's a third of your engagement! For that reason, it's important to propose deliverables and milestones early on – better to create something provisional and adjust than to spend a couple weeks waiting for an assignment or for more clarity from your manager.

Of course, a wise manager will know that this is a great time both to help you and to benefit from your talents, which they only have for a short time. But many managers either don't see that or don't know how to get you into the mix. And sometimes, managers see interns as more of a liability than an asset, at least in the short run. So if meaningful work is not coming to you (and you should get a sense of that within the first couple days, not weeks), you need to come to it by pitching ideas to your manager for what you might work on, which can be informed by talking to people in the organization about their work and challenges, by researching comparable organizations, and also by just thinking about what you are passionate about doing and can contribute. Your internship is a great opportunity to practice "managing up" – set goals, plan for, and get the time with your manager that you need.

All of this is, of course, easier said than done. I've been trying to focus on my approach, to be proactive, to manage up, and so on, but even after 6 years on the other side of the table – managing teams, recruiting and managing interns myself – I've still found it hard to do this summer. At times I've felt discouraged and fretted about not accomplishing more, about getting deeper into the organization, not getting to know enough people or learn enough about the function I'm in. But when I return to the "working world" after the upcoming school year, these struggles and lessons may be the most powerful ones I take with me from my (likely last) internship experience.

(Guest post by Elise Waxenberg)