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Career Advice

Broaden Your Horizons: A Step-by-Step Guide to Organising Your Own Internship, Part 1

The benefits of spending some time in a different lab, working with different people, are well recognised. If you're still at the stage of your first degree, a summer internship can be your first opportunity to really 'get your hands dirty' and work on your own project. Meanwhile, even for those pursuing a PhD, a little time spent in another lab can be valuable, because doing so enables you to learn some new techniques and to experience how science is done elsewhere, especially if that 'elsewhere' is another country. No wonder, then, that a wide variety of programmes, both at the institutional and the European levels (e.g., the **Marie Curie host fellowships (http://www.cordis.lu/improving/fellowships/home.htm)**), have sprung up to help young researchers spend a few weeks or months at someone else's bench. So with all this assistance available, why on Earth would you want to organise your own internship or placement?!

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Well, despite the plethora of schemes, perhaps the right programme for you just doesn't exist. Maybe your university only has opportunities for students in a limited range of fields, or you have extremely clear ideas about what you want to do or where you want to go that don't fit into an 'off-the-shelf' format.

There's no doubt that finding your own opportunity and making it happen is time-consuming, challenging, and at times frustrating. But arranging your own internship can also help you to develop and demonstrate a lot of the 'soft skills' so sought after in today's job market: organisational ability, time management, presenting yourself and your ideas well, and determination. What's more, if you organise it all yourself, you'll have the added bonus of doing something different that not many people have done before.

Having just returned from a 10-week summer internship in Tokyo, which I organised myself, I know how worthwhile the experience can be--and how difficult it can be to set up. So, if you fancy having a go, you might want to follow my step-by-step guide, which should help you get to your chosen destination with the minimum of fuss.

Step 1: Make sure you know what you want!

There's no point expending a lot of your own or other people's time unless you know what you want to do, and why. Nowadays there are endless possibilities, a fact to which the Internet has contributed massively. If you don't set your mind straight and determine an approximate field of interest, you might get lost in this information jungle and risk wasting your time on little details. That's why in many cases this decision process is the most important phase.

If you already know exactly what you want to do and accomplish, lucky you--please move on to Step 2! But the majority of the people I know are not that confident. You'll probably want to gather information on a variety of subjects before you zoom in and focus on a specific field. Take a look at and read the scientific literature (e.g., search **Medline (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?db=PubMed)**) and books; visit the Web pages of institutions that are of

potential interest to you; and talk with your friends, peers, and professors. Sometimes you acquire the most valuable input in the most unexpected situations--in a chance conversation or when walking by a message board--so keep your eyes peeled and your ear to the ground!

In my own case I knew that I wanted to do my internship in the field of immunology in a lab with a stellar international reputation. I had previously gained some research experience in several other countries of the so-called Western world, so I set myself the goal of working in a lab somewhere rather different this time.

Step 2: Get started early

During your preparations you will need to contact a bunch of people. Some of them might reply to your enquiry immediately; others might be rather slow in doing so. One might forward your question to someone else who seems more appropriate to answer it, so that eventually it works a circuit. You also have to be aware that it almost certainly won't be possible to do everything in parallel, but that you'll have to take one step at a time (e.g., you'll need the professor to confirm your internship before you can apply for a scholarship?).

You probably get the idea that this whole communication thing might end up taking much more time than expected. Thus I would recommend you start preparing at least 6 months prior to when you want to begin your internship.

For my part, I began working on my summer internship around February. I had some real luck and great support in getting an introduction to the lab where I was to work (more on that later) and so things went rather smoothly. Nonetheless it still took months to arrange everything, and I was still sorting things out just before I set off in late July.

Step 3: Contact the person you want to work with

Establishing contact with someone in your target lab, either the head of the lab or, initially maybe, one of his or her co-workers (they may have a little more time for you), is obviously crucial because if the person ignores or declines your request you will be in a dead-end street and will have to start again. There are three possible scenarios:

i) You have already met the scientist in person, or they already know about you somehow. This is the ideal situation as it certainly increases your chances of success significantly. Alternatively, is there the opportunity to attend a conference at which he or she will be giving a presentation? If so, grab it! It has been my experience that in situations where you can chat with scientists face-to-face, express your interest in their work, and maybe even ask directly for the chance to work with them, they are very open-minded.

ii) You have never been in contact with your target before, but you are lucky enough to know someone, for example one of your professors, who does. Make use of the connection! Ask your professor to send a letter of recommendation to let your target know that you are interested in working with their lab and will get in touch yourself.

This is exactly what happened in my case. I told my genetics professor that I was hoping to work somewhere other than Western Europe or North America. He came up with the name of a postdoc at another Austrian university who had previously worked in the laboratory of Professor Taniguchi at the University of Tokyo. And that's how I came to spend a summer in Japan!

iii) The scientist you want to work with is a stranger, a name only from the literature, and you don't know anyone else with connections to that person. This is obviously the most difficult situation and therefore requires the most careful preparation so that you don't get turned down immediately. Be aware that successful scientists are all too busy and receive numerous items of correspondence every day, so you will need to tailor your request accordingly. Keep it short. You should, of course, be familiar with his or her work, so say why, and give your reasons for wanting to work with them. You could give a brief history of your studies and career to date, or simply attach a short CV. The subject line of your e-mail might seem to be a minor detail, but choosing the right words could be the key to capturing its recipient's attention!

Come back next week for part 2 when Andreas discusses sorting out the money and those all-important last minute details.

Andreas Bergthaler (mailto:9745144@bendomsrv.vu-wien.ac.at) *is a 24-year-old Austrian veterinary medicine student at the* ***University of Veterinary Sciences (http://www.vu-wien.ac.at)*** *in Vienna. He recently completed a self-organised summer internship in the department of immunology at the Graduate School of Medicine at the* ***University of Tokyo (http://www.u-tokyo.ac.jp)*** *. In his project he was working on molecules that effect the interferon regulatory system.*

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