

WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO YOUR FIRST EMPLOYER? GPA OR EXPERIENCE?

Note: According to a survey of employers, the vast majority of employers with internship (75.2 percent) and co-op (65.9 percent) programs indicated the primary focus of these programs was to recruit college graduates for full-time, entry-level positions. Many employers look for these students during fall recruiting on college and university campuses.

WILL YOUR COMPANY BE INCREASING THE NUMBER OF INTERNSHIPS IT OFFERS? 77 PERCENT – YES!

In the search for a strong college full-time hire, employers are reviewing and redefining characteristics on what makes a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) candidate stand out. Is it the student's performance in academics, which might translate to the understanding of basic engineering fundamentals? Or, is it the practical hands-on experience obtained through internships and co-ops, which showcases real-world complex problem-solving abilities, interpersonal, and communication skills?

With companies increasing the number of internship/co-op positions each year, the more vital considerations are: 1) Which of these might give the STEM student the advantage in his or her job search, and 2) Which of these might benefit the company in the long-term strategy?

WHAT DOES CO-OP/INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE MEAN TO COMPANIES?

- Charlie Kramer from Meyer Contracting, "Understanding our culture, our work ethic expectations, our demands of our employees, and corresponding rewards."
- Josh Szymanski from Owen Ames Kimball, "Students learn to work with others through problems, politics, and conflict on projects. They also see real world application on concepts they are learning during the school year."
- Angela Stemo from HUSCO, "Students also gain confidence in themselves and their engineering knowledge through executive presentation."
- Scott Liebelt from BCI Burke Company, LLC., "Another advantage to co-op/internship experience is what it can do for you during the interview process. It opens up a lot more situations and experiences that you can draw from when answering questions."
- Matt Rosentreter with Burns & McDonnell, "Internships provide industry-specific experience and exposure, which provides students with valuable insight into future opportunities, as well as, gives them an edge as they come into the work force after graduation."

WHAT DO STUDENTS SEE AS THEIR VALUE?

- "The level of project autonomy I have and the incredible learning experiences are the most satisfying while on co-op." – Ryan, Michigan, Tech co-op, Bemis
- "The greatest value a co-op brings to a company is their point of view and the way they look at the world. They are new to the company and are not yet accustomed to the way things have been, which is why they are more open to ideas of change and trying new ideas which might help. Another value that co-op students bring to a company is to show the type of work ethic and knowledge that comes from

being at a specific college to aid the co-op hiring process in the future.” Jenna, Michigan, Tech co-op, Greenheck

- “Stepping into a refinery was like stepping into a textbook. Heat transfer, mass balances, and reaction kinetics surrounded me daily.” – Demetrius, Michigan, Tech co-op, Marathon Petroleum Company

WHAT DO RECRUITERS VALUE MOST?

Co-op/Internship Experience – 51 percent | GPA – 13 percent | Both – 36 percent

When asked if internships/co-op were valuable, a spokesperson from Twitter stated, “Yes, I believe so. Although I believe college is a test of how well an individual can approach, learn from, and retain new information, I do believe real work experience is more valuable. The ability to navigate through an organization or even understand what navigating through an organization means, is key in quick success at any company.”

Although employers recognized that some companies in the selection criteria might require a minimum GPA, many more stated that once this was met, experience would take precedence in their choice, especially with upperclassmen seeking full-time jobs.

For example, a student who has a 3.0 GPA with experience would more often than not be chosen over a student with a 4.0 and no experience.

A respondent from Caterpillar said, “Both are very valuable to have, but students considered for Caterpillar internships must meet the minimum GPA specified on the job opening in order to be considered. However, involvement in extracurricular activities and other work experiences, even if it is not related to their major, is more important than the higher GPA.

“We are looking for well-rounded students that have demonstrated the ability to balance their time. The experience gained working, while applying what they have learned in class, demonstrates they have the ability to do that and work with others in a full-time position. For these reasons, we seek out individuals that have had co-op, internship, and/or extracurricular experiences on their resumes.”

As with Caterpillar, many of the employer comments centered on the preference for a well-rounded candidate, especially with full-time candidates, emphasizing that GPA is important, but experience shows application of the skills they have learned.

Respondents said that GPA alone does not indicate application of skills such as communication or the ability to learn from mistakes. With so much of the coursework for students being similar, what makes the individual stand out is the work they have done outside the classroom.

One respondent said, “Although grades are important, hands-on experience is priceless. When you go out to the work force and you can point to actual projects and examples of your work, it will go a long way to set you apart from other applicants.”

This sentiment was echoed by a spokesperson at ARCO, “We feel co-op experience, coupled with a strong GPA, is the largest recipe for success at ARCO. We seek the brightest and the best, both in terms of experience and overall academics.”

WILL YOU MAKE ROOM FOR TOP TALENT? 88 PERCENT - YES!

We then asked company recruiters “If you find strong candidates on the recruiting trail, will you make a position for them?” Eighty-eight percent responded with a resounding YES! Corporate America manages budgets to maximize profits and drive share price. Its most precious and scarce commodity is the graduates our STEM-focused institutions are producing, so much so that they will make space for them on their teams, regardless of budget. That is the definition of a valued asset!

Authors: Steve Patchin – Michigan Technological University; Julie Pittsner – Missouri S & T; Jean Manning-Clark – Colorado School of Mines; Sarah Raymond – Montana Tech

Courtesy of the National Association of Colleges and Employers