



Why work experience matters! Real Prospects 2009 graduates' experiences of placements, internships and work experience

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Introduction and methodology

The recent report by Alan Milburn on fair access¹ to the professions highlighted how internships and work experience has become a key route into many professional careers.

Real Prospects 2009 is a new survey of graduate employees' views of their current employer. The on-line questionnaire was designed and piloted during the autumn of 2008 and launched in January 2009. The questionnaire comprises over seventy questions in the following sections:

1. Recruitment and induction
2. Training and development
3. Support, supervision and progression
4. Pay and benefits
5. Work-life balance and corporate social responsibility
6. Organisational leadership and management

Which graduate employees?

The target population for Real Prospects 2009 is graduates who had undertaken their first degree in the last five years; hence, new and recent graduates. In practice, this comprised those who had first graduated in 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008. There were 13,500 valid respondents².

Work experience and employment

Survey participants were asked how they found out about their employers and although work experience, previous placements and internship or trainee experiences were not options they could select in answering this, a number of respondents made reference to these forms of work experience in their further comments.

As the Milburn report underlines, there are many different work experience schemes and they can include:

- Internships out of term time brokered or facilitated by university faculties
- Year-out placements, which have traditionally been common in such subjects as engineering and sciences

¹ Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009. http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/work_areas/accessprofessions.aspx

² The respondent population is best described as 'opportunistic' and represents neither a random nor structured sample in statistical terms. The implication of this is that the survey may not be statistically balanced in respect of all graduate employment sectors or job roles and thus we advise caution against generalisation based on views reported. However, with that caveat, Real Prospects 2009 is a very large survey of a wide cross section of new and recent graduates and each respondent's view is influenced by direct experience of current graduate employment.

- Placements integrated into particular modules on a part-time basis, such as the London School of Economics (LSE) Parliamentary Internship Scheme
- Short one-off placements during term time.

More than 250 Real Prospect graduates mentioned some form of work experience when asked how they found out about their current employer. Although not all of the respondents specified how they had gained work experience, or how long their placements had been, some specific categories were mentioned. Around two-thirds of the respondents said they had undertaken an industrial placement, sandwich placement or placement as part of their degree – often a year long placement. Around a third mentioned a shorter work placement, referred to as a summer placement or specified as 6 weeks or 10 weeks placements. One in five reported having taken part in an internship or trainee programme. Some graduates had done a number of summer placements and others had been sponsored by a company through their studies. A wide variety of work experience is certainly covered mirroring the ones in the Milburn report. Throughout the rest of the report these different categories will be covered by the term “work experience”.

How does the work experience benefit the students/graduates?

From the survey responses, we see a variety of skills and advantages that work experience gives graduates including being a way they learn what kind of work they want to do, to exposing them to the life in the office, to giving them responsibilities, sector knowledge, crucial contacts and networking opportunities as well as being a direct route into employment.

Route into employment

Many of the graduates say that during or after the work experience, the employer offered them a contract or encouraged them to apply for a job role (in some cases to apply to their graduate training scheme). Sometimes, the work experience and the personal contacts created during this time means that the graduate could to a certain extent bypass normal recruitment and selection processes, or at least have a distinct advantage over any other potential candidates. One example of this is a student being notified about vacancies in advance. In the survey, work experience is demonstrated to be an important way to get noticed by employers.

“I had worked here for a year as part of my degree (industrial placement year) and therefore I had previous knowledge of the company and many contacts. I was informed of the position before graduation and therefore applied and secured the job before completing my course.”

(Female 2007 graduate, science and science services, age 21-24)

“My current employment is the result of an extended work experience position, which led on to the creation of a job role within the company. I got the work experience because I had an inkling that I would like to work within publishing and a colleague informed me that she knew someone who could probably get me a little experience. I had no interview etc, I just e-mailed and got a placement. When I was there, I made myself known and I made myself necessary.”

(Male 2008 graduate, publishing and journalism, age 21-24)

“My employer found me as part of an application I made through an internship scheme. I worked for them for a summer and at the end of that time they offered me a full time post for the following September once I had completed my studies.”

(Female 2008 graduate, other roles, age 21-24)

“After completing a voluntary internship with the employer, I was made aware of their vacancies at the time, one of which, higher members of the organisation strongly suggested I apply for. I felt very comfortable with the working environment having grown quite accustomed to it during my internship and was made to feel very welcome throughout”

(Female 2008 graduate, charity not-for-profit, age 21-24)

Placements are of a temporary nature and subject to changes in economic circumstances as well as employer priorities which means that although you may be learning skills and have excellent relationships with colleagues converting an unpaid position into paid employment is not guaranteed.

“I am currently working as an unpaid intern for (the employer). Although I admire the work that (the employer) does and I have a good relationship with my colleagues, I have no opportunities for my six month contract to be extended (due to lack of funding). I therefore feel a little unsatisfied because this is the second six month internship I have done since graduating from my Master's degree in December 2007. I am worried about securing a paid job once my internship ends in April.”

(Female 2006 graduate, administration, age 21-24)

Getting to know the job and what you want

Work experience offers graduates an opportunity to get to know a work place, the culture, the job roles and the other employees. They can use these experiences to discover whether this is the kind of work they would like to do and it can help them make decisions about career directions. It is also a way to learn more about what kind of training and development opportunities are available and gives them something to aim for or use as comparison in other contexts or with other employers.

“After completing a one year industrial placement with my current employer, I knew that the career opportunities presented were exactly what I wanted. The job offers so much diversity in terms of the day-to-day tasks and the people. My employer is also a globally recognised company which provided a lot of impetus for me to apply.”

(Male 2008 graduate, information and communications technology, age 21-24)

“I had previously taken out a sandwich placement with the company while completing my university degree. I had enjoyed both the market area and general feeling and atmosphere within the company and hence when I knew of the opportunity wished to apply for their Graduate Development Scheme.”

(Male 2007 graduate, management, age 21-24)

“I thoroughly enjoyed the vacation placement that they offered in the summer months as I got the chance to experience life and the people who worked there.”

(Female 2006 graduate, legal professional, age 21-24)

A few participants also mentioned that they had taken the job because they needed work experience in order to for example carry on with postgraduate studies.

Making sector and employer contacts

Not everyone connects their placement with getting a job at the same employer as some respondents did placements in for instance the same sector but not with their current employer. The work experience enabled these students to gain sector knowledge and contacts to use in pursuing employment opportunities.

“I did a placement year working for a similar company and got to know the names of competitors. Through searching the websites of other companies and the areas they specialise in I decided to join (current employer).”

(Male 2008 graduate, transport, logistics and distribution, age 21-24)

A number of respondents also give details of how it was the previous, casual work they had done with their current employer while at university that led to a permanent position. A few respondents worked as volunteers in organisation prior to applying for paid employment.

“I started as a temp in an internal department and liked being able to move around within the local government structure. When I finished at university there was a temp to permanent opening which I took in order to save for a postgraduate degree. After 3 months I was offered a full time, permanent contract working with two different teams,

neither of which required an application form or an interview as the posts were specifically tailored to suit me and the tasks given to me to complete.”

(Female 2008 graduate, civil service, age 21-24)

How do work experience students benefit employers?

The employer who offers a variety of work experience opportunities also benefits as they are able to recruit motivated employees that already fit into the working environment, who can hit the ground running and who have a realistic view of work tasks and the job role they are expected to do. It is a recruitment strategy for employers that let them “try before they buy” so to speak.

Conclusions

The Real Prospects 2009 graduates that describe a transition from work experience and placements to employment highlight the importance of making students aware of and ensuring access to these opportunities. Here we might keep in mind the unsuccessful ones, which the survey tells us very little about, and which are a necessary part of understanding the area of work experience. Not all work placements lead to employment and not all placements are of a quality that would lead students to apply to that employer for a job. The practice of unpaid internships is also of concern as some graduates will be able to undertake these whereas others do not have the means to support themselves whilst working for free. This issue is also discussed in more detail in the Milburn report. What the Real Prospects graduates’ experiences do emphasise is how useful work experience is for graduates and that not only does it allow them to acquire skills, knowledge and contacts it also enables them to explore job roles, careers and their interests.