

Internship Q&A with Two ZF Alumni



Chelsea Weidman Burke has been a part of the ZF community since college, first as a ZF scholar and now as a member of the ZF Student Advisory Group. She graduated with her MS in Chemical Biology from Boston College in 2017 and her BS in Biochemistry from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 2015. She currently works as a laboratory technician/clinical study coordinator in the microbiology and immunology department at a medical school and as a freelance science writer.



Meagan Lettko studied mechanical engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. She is originally from Averill Park, New York. Throughout her college experience, she played D3 soccer, participated in student government, undergraduate research, and had two internship experiences. During college, she worked for W.L. Gore and Associates as a New Product Development Engineer in Elkton, Maryland. She also worked for BAE Systems as a Test Engineer in Lexington, Massachusetts. After graduation she'll be working full time as a mechanical engineer at BAE Systems in their Engineering Leadership Development rotational program.

Should I have experience before I apply for an internship?

Chelsea: No! That's the point of an internship - to gain experience! Now, some internships have the dreaded double standard of wanting experience (how are you going to get experience? internships! but they want experience...). So getting experience before internships, if possible, is almost always a good idea. Do research with a professor at college, identify similar work you've done in class to the work you'll do at the internship, write a few unpaid articles for the school's/department's newspaper or blog, etc.

Meagan: These responses are relevant for students in the STEM field! I can only speak to my experience working in the tech industry. Experience is not at all necessary for your first internship! Employers do not expect you to have relevant work experience if you are a freshman in college. However, they do value students who have shown initiative in getting experience in other ways as well as experience practicing soft skills. Examples of this type of experience would be participating in a tech club in high school or college, playing on a sports team, participating in a leadership role (student government, club officer, volunteering, etc), working a job throughout high school or college, mentoring other students, and obviously your coursework counts as experience! If you are a sophomore or junior in college you should have multiple semesters worth of experience in an extracurricular you are passionate about. You should also consider using undergraduate research as a way to gain experience that can be applied to an industry job!

Many internships are unpaid, and obviously the experience is valuable, but is it worth going without a form of summer income in order to have an internship?

Chelsea: Yes! (if you can afford it). Unpaid work or an unpaid internship will yield much more in experience, connection, and building your resume/portfolio (especially in the beginning stages of your career) than it is worth in money. For example, when I wanted to get into science writing as a scientist, I wrote (unpaid) articles for a graduate student-run science blog at Harvard University (my graduate school, Boston College, didn't have one, so I reached out to a neighboring university). Those articles were the basis of my writing portfolio, which I used to show to other potential clients and get other (paid!) writing positions.



Meagan: Many internships are unpaid, and obviously the experience is valuable, but is it worth going without a form of summer income in order to have an internship? For engineering specifically if you are not getting paid it is not a valuable internship. There are so many opportunities to make money as an engineering intern. Definitely make sure you are getting paid for the work that you do. Many companies that hire engineering interns give you a project that is considered “real work” and that will add value to the company but will not necessarily make or break a project. In all of my internship experiences I have been trusted with work that would be given to entry level engineers. This is how engineering students figure out if it is the right career path for them. We figure it out by doing exactly what we would do after graduating.

How do you connect with the people who will read your internship application to increase your chances of receiving the internship?

Chelsea: I'm not sure how to connect with people you don't know, but you could try to track down their email and send them a polite, business casual email introducing yourself and saying you applied to their internship and would love to work for them because "x, y, z..." and thank them for reviewing your application. Building your network and asking people in your network about any internship opportunities will help you have a more personal relationship with those looking for internships. For example, I got my first college internship at Advion, Inc because of my neighbor at home - he worked at Advion and knew I was a chemistry major, so he talked to the Co-founder of Advion about taking me on as an intern (they had never taken undergraduates before). So I got an internship that never previously existed because of who I happened to know. And I got connected with ZF through the co-founder of Advion as well - so you never know where your connections will lead you!

Meagan: Making connections with current employees increases your chances of getting an internship in a huge way! People want to work with other people so the more chances you have to talk face to face with recruiters and current employees the better! Go to career fairs, informational sessions, and contact alumni that you may know at the companies you are interested in. Apply to multiple jobs at the same company. If recruiters keep seeing your resume in job requisitions they are more likely to remember you! In general, when you are picking a college, make sure to pick a school with a good reputation in the field that you are interested in going into. For example, I wanted to be an engineer so I went to RPI which was the first engineering school in the country. In the field of engineering people will see “RPI” on my resume and they will know that the school has a good reputation. My first boss was an RPI



graduate and my new boss after graduation was also an RPI graduate. This part of my resume probably encouraged these people to read the rest of my resume more intently instead of just skimming it over.

Is there a certain amount of internships I should try to have had by the time I complete my undergrad?

Chelsea: I would suggest doing a different internship each summer - so 3 by the time you graduate (take off the summer after you graduate!). Try to get 3 very different experiences to try out as much as possible before you decide on what you want to do after undergrad. For example, I did an internship in industry research & development (at Advion, after my freshman year), a summer of academic research continuing my undergraduate research (after my sophomore year), and an internship doing research at a research hospital (St. Jude Children's Research Hospital's Pediatric Oncology Education (POE) program).

Meagan: In general, by the time you graduate you should have relevant work experience in the field that you are interested in. This is a situation where quality outweighs quantity. However, if you have had multiple enriching experiences that could help to diversify your perspective, this could make you a more valuable candidate for a full time position. As an example, if you have an internship after sophomore year and you absolutely loved that experience you could try to go back to the same company after your junior year. Or, you could go to another company to gain a different perspective but still have the intention of going back to the first company. There is no right way to do this, it is totally up to you and both options are valuable for different reasons. Although, always make sure to be honest with employers about your career intentions! You do not want to burn any bridges before entering the workforce full time.

Are there any helpful websites or platforms you have found with internship opportunity postings?

Meagan: I have used Glassdoor, LinkedIn, and my college's career portal. Every company also has a career page on their website that can be helpful in finding position openings!



Should I look for internships offered by my institution or by outside companies or does it not matter where your internship is?

Chelsea: It doesn't matter where your internship is located - it mainly matters what experience you get and if you get varied experiences.

Meagan: You could look for either or both! After my freshman year I stayed at my institution and did paid research. This experience helped me to land internships at outside companies after my sophomore and junior years.