

## COVER STORY

# Learning the ropes

Work experience can be the beginning of your climb to the top, writes **Kath Lockett**.

**M**ost of us think of internships as something for university students that is mostly done in the US but they're gaining popularity in Australia.

Internship might be a trendier word for work experience but it is often more formalised and for longer periods. It's not just for students and can be useful for anyone seeking a career change or returning to work after an absence.

Internships are usually unpaid but can provide the opportunity to not only gain a closer view at a new career but that most-coveted of CV items: experience.

The head of talent at KPMG, Jessica Harrison, agrees. "We look favourably on internships, volunteer work or work experience ... it points to a well-rounded individual with a willingness to learn throughout their career," she says.

"This includes extracurricular activities that highlight the ability to be a team player as well as a strong commitment to getting the job done."

Experience and skills can be gained much earlier than adulthood. Many employers are impressed by applicants who have worked in casual jobs during secondary school and university.

Melanie\* started working in a fast-food outlet at 14. "What was initially a way to earn pocket money taught me how to be punctual, organised, reliable and

provide good customer service," she says.

Daniel worked as a restaurant dishwasher throughout his PhD. "Years later, employers are just as interested in hearing about the goings-on in that place as they are my educational credentials and it shows them that I was quite literally

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Katherine, a student

willing to get my hands dirty and work hard," he says.

Recent graduate Jack worked in pubs to support his studies. "I have friends who never worked through uni," he says. "Now in nearly every job interview, employers ask them about previous experience and references, which of course they don't have. I've found a full-time role and they're still looking."

Katherine did three placements during uni and says the experience gained at a community centre, *The Big Issue* and on a development project in India not only boosted her studies but helped her obtain work she was passionate about.



Great lengths ... doing work experience can help you climb higher, faster. Photo: iStock

"Work placements – at any stage of your life – can provide you with a range of skills you won't get anywhere else," she says. "It's not only a fantastic learning experience but can take you out of your comfort zone as you learn how to deal with different people, age groups, opinions, ways of working and beliefs."

Even when she was working full time, she felt she had more to offer. "I've just completed a five-week internship for a political party and lived off my savings to do it," Katherine says. "It can be hard work but if you don't have experience you won't get a look-in later. Having high

marks at uni isn't going to get you there – you also need practical skills and experience."

The executive director of career coaching firm Clarity Now, Kevin Orrman-Rossiter, says employers value people who gain experience through their own efforts.

"To stand out from the pack, you need to show initiative; that you're interested in learning and keen enough to find an opportunity yourself," he says.

Volunteering can be a doubly effective way of contributing to the community as well as adding oomph to your CV. A Volunteering Australia survey found that giving

## SEIZE THE DAY

- Contact your university or careers office to see if it has a list of employers who provide internships.
- Flick through your own address book. Do you have a friend who works in an industry in which you would like experience? Ask them to find a spot for you for a few days to see how it works firsthand.
- Join a relevant professional association and see if it can help you arrange your own informal internship.
- Contact employers you would be interested in working for. Offer your time and effort in exchange for the chance to learn about their industry.
- Contact Volunteering Australia ([volunteeringaustralia.org](http://volunteeringaustralia.org)) for information on work-experience opportunities, recognised previous learning, leadership training and corporate volunteering.
- Seek financial advice. Ensure you have money to support yourself during a placement.
- Clarify your responsibilities. Before you start, be clear with the employer/co-ordinator about what your duties will be as well as start and finish times.
- Arrange OH&S training and the equipment needed to do the job safely.

time and effort provided many avenues to employment for many of its members.

Orrman-Rossiter also suggests volunteering to clients seeking career counselling. "It gives you lots of valuable experience and shows that you're prepared to get up and do something rather than waiting for it to land in your lap," he says.

\*Names changed by request.

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