



# Internships: Learn Before You Earn

Internships can offer an effective bridge to a job in the music and recording industry. A good internship position puts you in a working environment where professionals are practicing their craft in your specific field of interest.

Although I am a strong proponent of internships since they provide an unparalleled real-world learning experience, they also may tax your financial health: Many MRI internships are unpaid positions. A few paid internships do exist and they are competed for fiercely. However, even an unpaid internship can be extremely valuable to your career development if you plan for it properly and set a goal for what you can learn.

To get the most from an internship, expose yourself to as many facets of the company's operations as possible. Avoid no task or activity that can help you grow. If you see the company president is hosting a golf tournament, volunteer to help. The more you can rub elbows with the movers and the shakers, the more benefit you will receive from your internship.

Learning how to set up a tape recorder, mail out a press release, or wind a cable properly isn't the only thing you want to master. Many benefits accrue for savvy interns who network with the employees they meet.

Another way to maximize the benefits from an internship is to widen your exposure at the company. As an example, if you intern three days a week at a record label, perhaps you could come in one of the other days and be a shadow in another department. That way you will learn more about what's done in the legal department, the art department, or the promotions department.

My bottom line on internships is that they provide outstanding opportunities for a person who wants to learn and get established in the industry. But there are exceptions, situations where a few companies may take unfair advantage of so-called "interns" to get free labor, with little or no learning or mentoring offered in the exchange. I've known interns who were faced with requests for unpaid activities that, frankly, were way above and beyond the call of duty for what amounts to a

volunteer position. My advice to those facing such a situation is to use common sense in judging whether or not you should commit to a seemingly inappropriate or overwhelming task.

If you find yourself in what appears to be an abusive internship situation, paid or unpaid, bring that to the attention of the supervisor or boss. State your concern calmly and listen carefully to their response. What's the worst thing that might happen? They may let you go. If that does happen, don't fret. You probably aren't going to have a career at a firm that does not value every member of its team, even a "lowly" intern.

A few unscrupulous employers may take advantage of an intern if they can. Should you be wary of all internships? Absolutely not. There are many fabulous internships. If you are enrolled in a school program in music or the recording arts, you likely have access to internships that have been tested by previous students and recommended by faculty. This is a good approach to landing the right internship that can be your stepping stone to your first job offer.

One studio manager at a leading world-class recording facility candidly remarked to me that "the first place we look to fill an opening is our pool of current and past interns. They know our business and what we expect in an employee."

### **On the Job/Your Internship**

Once you arrive at your internship, a new level of learning begins. Although academic training is important, there's only so much you're going to learn in a classroom environment. When you've got an artist breathing down your neck demanding, "Where's the guitar track that I just played?" your motivation to learn quickly is definitely heightened. When you're in a classroom environment, there is a different dynamic. When a client is paying \$300 per hour to be in a studio and they're not happy, it changes the landscape and your priorities significantly.

What will make you, as an intern, valuable to your future boss? That's the golden question that interns perennially seek to answer. Here are the key attributes that employers look for most when hiring.

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## MRI EMPLOYER'S WISH LIST

- 1. Problem-solving ability** is very important. Bosses generally are bosses because they're the best at dealing with a million and one problems. So if you develop problem-solving skills, chances are you're going to go a long way toward impressing your supervisor.
- 2. Technical skills** also play a part, too—especially if you've charted a career path on a technical track.
- 3.** The ability to **responsibly complete assignments** is a critical skill. Employees who can work effectively in a self-directed manner are a big asset.
- 4.** There are not “white-coated operators” standing by at every recording studio and record label waiting for job assignments. There are just enough people to get by and sometimes not quite enough people to get by. So to succeed in this industry you're going to have to **hustle**. You'll have to work some weekends. You will occasionally stay until midnight to complete an important job. It's the nature of the beast. The entertainment industry is not like the retail business, in which shops are open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and then everyone heads home. Weekends? Prepare to sacrifice quite a few of them over the course of your career.

- 5. Perseverance** keeps turning up as another key attribute. Early in my career, a publisher told me, “Keith, you've got to be in the right place at the right time... and that means being aware of what's going on in all the areas you have an interest, all the time.”

What he meant is that if you're serious about a career in the MRI, you have to get plugged in so that you have constant access to the information that relates to your interests. You have to be ready to network every minute of every day, even if you've got a nonmusic job. You may be pleasantly surprised to discover that someone in the company at which you work has a kid or a nephew or an uncle who works at a label or a studio. Let people know what your aspirations are.

Not to the point of annoyance, but it's good to voice where you are headed in the long run to those you feel close to at your day job. “I enjoy working here, but I'm also writing songs every chance I get and studying how to become a successful songwriter.” You never know where you're going to make a key connection.

- 6. Integrity** is a key component of your success, not only as an intern, but all the way to the top. When you say you're going to do something, do it. If you say you're going to do something and you realize you can't, don't be afraid to go back and say, “You know, I really can't do that.” People will respect you for that far more than if you hide under a blanket and think, “I hope they forgot I said I was going to do that.”

Your boss and coworkers are not likely to forget your failure to live up to your promise to perform. The entertainment industry is surprisingly small and most people have good memories. It's okay to regroup and say you can't deliver, but it is a huge liability to just blow off an assignment, no matter how trivial it may seem to you.

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## Financial Survival for Interns

The last concern prospective interns have is usually the biggest one: that is, the lack of pay from the employer even though, as an intern, you must make a firm commitment of time, effort, and energy. If a studio calls up and offers an internship and it doesn't pay, you may have to do a little finagling, especially if you have a full time "day gig" to pay your bills. You may have to ask the boss at your day gig if you could work flexible hours for six months. That's why it's helpful to let people know a little about your long-term quest to be successful in the music industry. Most people want to see others succeed in the long run.

The worst thing that can happen is that your day job boss will say, "No!" and you'll have to choose to decline the internship or look for another day gig.

The key thing with internships is to try to land an internship that is managed, in which they can say to you, "Here's what our internship offers you." That's important. Because if your internship description consists of "clean up and setup, make coffee, and clean the bathrooms," you might want to look around a little more. Ask a few more questions, because a successful internship is a two-way street—a give-and-get proposition.

A good internship program should offer you learning opportunities, and you should be interviewing the intern managers as much as they are interviewing you. "Mr. Studio Manager, if I intern at your studio, would there be some learning opportunities for me? What would they include?" If you get a good answer to that, it's a very positive sign.

However, if you don't, or if they hem and haw a bit, that's a warning sign.

Find out if there will be an opportunity to ask questions of the senior staff at some point. If they don't have an answer to that question, you've got a problem. If you have to do any errands or traveling, will you be reimbursed for gas? It's smart to ask those kinds of questions up front.

A few internships, usually with the larger companies such as record labels, actually offer minimum wage to interns, as they understand the mutual benefit of actually offering a paycheck, however small.

Why is that? The intern, even when receiving a small paycheck, is often more committed. And the employer, since they are actually paying, thinks, "It's a resource, we're paying for it," instead of saying, "She's an intern, she sits and reads *Billboard* for four hours and only does fifteen minutes of work." So ask questions and if possible, speak with a current or past intern to hear what they learned during their internship.

Another key is to network with your friends and acquaintances. Let your friends who have similar interests know: “I did an internship at such and such company and they’re looking for more people now!” If you’re in a school program, network with other students constantly.

I really believe in the value of internships. However, try to find one where you really believe you’ve got an opportunity to learn. Prepare yourself, since you may need to work a part-time job or save up enough money to focus on your internship. Earning will come later in your career. Do not mistake your internship as an earning opportunity. It is a way to enhance your “hireability” as soon as you absorb what knowledge you can.

Remember, an internship is temporary. Go into an internship knowing that it is not your permanent station in life. Secondly, in a good internship, there’s a balance between learning and earning: earning for the company and the boss, and learning what they do to enhance your marketable skill set.

Not all internships lead to your next step on that career ladder. A former student called to say, “Oh-h-h-h, that internship was a nightmare. I had no idea what a MRI public relations firm did. I was licking envelopes and running a copy machine in a tiny, hot room. I was sorting hundreds of pieces of mail and clipping articles with an X-acto knife. I was there until 2 a.m. because there was an ad campaign breaking, and we had to assemble and hand out goodie bags to 10,000 people at an event at 6 a.m. the next morning. After three months, I knew I had to quit.”

Guess what? That was the *second* most valuable internship that person could have had at that point. Why? Because they now know for sure that they are not cut out to work in entertainment public relations. The *most* valuable internship is one that leads to a job offer in your area of interest. ☉