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Co-Op vs. Internship: What's the Difference?



Everyone's familiar with internships, right? They're pretty straightforward, typically available for college students (traditionally rising juniors or seniors) and give a person an inside look at a company. Gone are the days of the interns serving as the company "go-for", getting coffee all summer, and picking up the boss' dry-cleaning. Today, internships are much more. As an intern, a person may have the opportunity to work as part of a team, providing value to the overall organization as they're included in the creative process. Some interns may even be mentored by executives and have the opportunity to present to a group of their peers or senior-level individuals on the outcomes of their special projects.

But, what's the difference between an internship and a co-op opportunity? Why should job seekers consider both? I get this question a lot, so I thought I would share with you some of the key differentials between the two. Each provides a unique perspective – if you have the chance to do both, go for it!

Internships

- Usually a one-time work (10-12 week) assignment, often in the summer
- Typically doesn't interfere with college classes due to timing, but less training is given because of this
- Can be full- or part-time, paid or unpaid, depending on the employer and the career field

- Undergraduate students (rising Junior/Senior) are eligible in most cases. It's rare to find internships available at larger companies for freshmen and graduating seniors
- You don't have to miss a semester or two to complete an internship
- You'll have an edge over students who don't have experiential education gained through an internship
- Internships are usually limited to one area of responsibility (marketing, human resources, IT, etc.)
- Average GPA sought is 3.0, with 3.5 in some cases

Co-Ops

- Co-ops are a joint venture between the university, a selected employer, and you
- Traditionally at least three work terms alternated with school terms, resulting in a 5-year degree program (it's going to take longer to graduate, but you'll have some good experience)
- Co-Ops are full-time, paid positions
- More training is offered through a Co-Op
- Some Co-Ops are rotational, offering opportunities across functions
- Graduate students are eligible in most cases for Co-Ops
- Students frequently start at higher salaries and higher levels of responsibility than interns

NOTE: Not all employers use these terms separately. Some may see an internship or co-op as interchangeable language. Make sure you ask what program they're referring to when you talk to recruiters!

At the end of the day, the result you're seeking is to land a full-time with the employer of choice. Through your internship and/or co-op, you'll have a leg up in learning about the company, understanding the corporate culture, processes, and procedures and may even have some great mentors to help guide you to your success.

Did I miss something? Have something to add? Please leave a comment below! I welcome your feedback. You can find all my contact information [here](#). As always, thanks for reading!