

# The Technical Writing Internship

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*Note: This article is intended for technical writing students who are looking for hands-on professional experience.*

Recent articles in *Intercom* have addressed the difficulties of landing a first job as a technical writer. The catch-22 has almost become a cliché: All jobs require previous experience, but how do you acquire the experience without previous experience? As a newcomer to the field, I faced the challenge of convincing prospective employers that I was worth the risk even though I didn't have the experience.

Tired of sending out résumé after résumé, I became sold on the idea of an internship. Swallowing my pride and my desire for immediate high wages, I decided to market myself as an intern, in the hopes of gaining experience that would eventually land me that high-paying job.

An internship is a win-win situation. Under the internship system, employer and employee get to try each other on for size. The employer does not have to pay the intern much (most interns make between ten and fifteen dollars an hour) and may not be obligated to pay benefits, as the intern often works fewer than 40 hours a week. However, for that measly ten to fifteen per hour, the employer often gets a highly motivated, competent employee—one who is willing to bend over backward to prove his or her worth. Additionally, if the intern is lucky, he or she can arrange



higher pay. Qualcomm, Inc., my employer, agreed to pay me a much higher hourly wage, but I believe they are the exception, rather than the rule.

The intern also benefits from the arrangement. Despite the minimal pay, the intern gains invaluable hands-on experience. After six months of work, the intern may have convinced the employer to hire him or her permanently; if not, the intern has gained enough experience to land a permanent job elsewhere.

Is there anything bad about an internship? Well, I suppose that some interns may resent working hard for low pay and no benefits. But in my mind, these factors seem like small and temporary prices to pay for the experience that the internship provides.

I was lucky enough to get an internship with Qualcomm. With this high-profile software company, I am learning more than I ever could have in the classroom alone. And my employer and colleagues are more patient with me than they might have been otherwise: They don't expect me to know everything, and they *do* expect to train me.

For me, the most important aspect of the internship has been the opportunity to use software applications on real documents. Because, let's face it, no matter how many computer-based training classes you take, there's nothing more educational than using these skills in real life.

Tom Hoyt, director of Qualcomm's

technical publications department, considers the internship to be a valuable option: "I believe that internships are essential to the long-term success of our company for several reasons. They allow students an opportunity to gain corporate work experience in a 'penalty-free' environment. They allow the company to employ talented people who bring a new, academically based perspective to the workplace. We learn from our interns about new methods and ideas for producing quality documentation."

I hooked up with an internship through the technical writing certificate program that I attend at San Diego State University. Similar programs exist throughout the country, and they are a good way to make the leap from the classroom to the real world. Usually, these programs offer connections with local companies and can easily match the prospective intern with an appropriate position.

Many companies are now becoming wise to the idea of the internship, and even employers who have never hired an intern might consider it if the idea is suggested.

So if you are trying to break into the technical writing field and are having no luck, consider marketing yourself as an intern. It might be the foot in the door that you need. ❶

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