

13. The Story of my Placement Experience Department of Food Science and Nutrition Intern at a product and ingredient development laboratory

Invaluable experience...

The opportunity to do an Industrial Placement as part of my course was definitely a definitive factor in choosing to apply to the University of Surrey. I felt that the practical experience an Industrial Placement would offer would be invaluable since so many employers are keen for potential candidates to demonstrate some degree of experience which is relevant to the job being applied for.

My placement certainly provided this experience and also gave me an opportunity to consolidate what I had learnt during the first two years of my degree by applying that knowledge to practical applications. Not only that, but it was also great fun!

The application process...

The application process is generally quite intensive and can seem a bit daunting at first, but you'll soon get the hang of it. Most employers seem to favour on-line applications over CVs and these can take a bit of getting used to. In particular, I found that on first reading many of the questions it was difficult to identify exactly what employers were looking for from my answers.

However, the university provides a huge amount of support for those making applications and I found the lectures on how to answer application questions incredibly helpful. As you will hear in the lectures the best way to approach each question is to apply a simple three-part structure based on Situation, Action and Result. Once you break the questions down in this way it becomes much easier to answer them and your answers will be much more structured and comprehensive. Like with anything, practice is the key and the more questions you do the easier it becomes to answer them in a way which highlights your skills and potential.

The next stage of the application process is usually an assessment day or an interview, or both! These can seem pretty scary, but the important thing to remember is that by getting this far you have already impressed the recruiters and an assessment day or interview will give you a chance to shine. Preparation is essential and the best advice I could give you is to thoroughly research the company you are applying to since it is inevitable that you will be asked 'Why do you want to work for us?' and you'll really stand out if you can say something insightful and original.

My other top tip for assessment days and interviews is that if you are asked to complete a preparatory task before attending make sure you do it and make sure you do exactly what it asks of you. I know it sounds simple, but you'd be surprised how many people don't follow this simple rule. At one assessment day I attended, candidates were required to turn up having prepared a brief presentation on the company's core values in the form of either a PowerPoint or flipchart presentation. Some candidates hadn't bothered at all, some hadn't prepared the visual cues required and others had prepared a presentation on something completely different! If you get to the assessment day or to interview don't let yourself down like this.

Of course all the classic interview advice about dressing smartly, offering a confident handshake and making eye contact applies as well. Although interviews often seem a bit mysterious at first, just like the on-line applications it doesn't take long for a pattern to emerge in the format and the

types of questions that you tend to be asked each time and after the first one or two all the mystery will have disappeared. The careers service offers practice interviews and this is by far the best way to prepare.

As you will see, the university provides support at every stage of the application process. The tutors are very involved in helping you choose the right placement by suggesting companies which will develop your interests and provide suitable experience for your desired career and are happy to advise on how to approach trickier applications. If you take advantage of this, as well as the lectures and practice interviews, you'll be in an excellent position to make your applications.

My placement...

I did my Industrial Placement at a laboratory facility owned by a major UK confectionary company and based on a university campus. The company is made up of a number of labs specialising in different areas, from microscopy to DNA and proteins. At the interview I indicated that I was interested in product development and so I was thrilled to find out that I would be working in the Product and Ingredient Development Laboratory. The best thing about this was that it allowed me to put all the aspects of my Food Science and Nutrition degree into practice.

My first week passed in a bit of a blur. The emphasis throughout the placement was very much on hands-on experience and by the end of the first week I had already been trained on a dozen pieces of laboratory kit and prepared my first formulations. It might all sound a bit overwhelming but it is amazing how quickly you pick up the techniques and although there was a steep learning curve the work was always enjoyable and I felt that by getting to carry out all these techniques in practice I understood them far better than if I had just learnt about them in a text book.

The focus on hands-on learning meant I was given a lot of independence and expected to take on quite a lot of responsibility. On a day-to-day basis I was responsible for contacting suppliers and working with clients on the development of their products as well as attending regular departmental meetings where I presented my work to colleagues and contributed to work being undertaken by others. The work was incredibly varied and each week I was doing something different and learning something new.

After a couple of months I started to get involved in some of the more important projects coming into the lab. This was particularly exciting as it involved cutting-edge product development for a number of household names. One of the biggest projects I was involved in was the development of a new product for a well-known multinational company. I carried out a lot of the initial research which led to the final formulation and had regular meetings with company representatives to keep them up to speed. After months of work it was time to produce a test batch in the pilot plant which meant I was able to go to the pilot plant in France and see the product being mass produced.

The most rewarding part of being involved in these projects was being able to follow them through from the initial concept to the final product as it allowed me to be involved in every stage of development from the initial meeting to seeing the products I helped develop on supermarket shelves.

What I took from my placement experience...

The most important outcome of the placement for me was that it vastly increased the confidence I have in my own ability. Before the experience I would have questioned whether I was capable of all those tasks and approached them very cautiously. However, working independently in the laboratory pushed me to think for myself and rely much more on my own initiative. Although at the beginning I was daunted by the work load and the speed at which I was expect to complete tasks, the challenge turned out to be great fun and hugely rewarding. I made plenty of mistakes in the beginning but these are all part of the learning curve and as long as you learn from them then you very rarely make the same mistake again.

The placement also provided me with a wealth of experience, not only in the context of Food Science, but also in a much broader, commercial context. There was so much more to the placement than simply applying what I had learned in my degree. I had to learn how to manage clients' expectations and make commercially aware decisions. One of the best things about an Industrial Placement is undoubtedly the variety of the work and the fact that you never know what you're going to be asked to work on next or what challenges you will need to over come to satisfy your client.

Finally, my placement gave me the opportunity to work with some brilliant people whose enthusiasm and energy was so contagious that it has given me more energy for my final year as I now have a focus on what I would like to do as a graduate.

So to conclude...

If you have the opportunity to do an Industrial Placement, you absolutely should take it. You will have a great time and take away so much from it. From the point of view of getting a job you will have the much prized experience which will make you stand out from other graduates, but you will learn a lot more besides.

I had a great year and will now feel more confident going for jobs as a graduate due to the experience I have gained. I hope you enjoy you Industrial Placement Year as much as I enjoyed mine.