

14. Learning to be a professional: The story of my placement experience Department of Computing and Information Technology Programmer analyst at a major global pharmaceutical company

After two years of studying for a BSc (Hons) in Computing and Information Technology, I spent my placement year working for one of the world's leading pharmaceutical companies. In addition to my interest in Computing, I have a passion for writing, having been editor of the university's own student newspaper, *barefacts*, as well as being a programme representative and peer mentor. I have now returned to Surrey to work on a final year project on optical character recognition for an electronic voting system.

In September 2007 I took my first steps out into the big wide world of professional working life as I embarked on my industrial placement year, but in reality the beginnings of this learning experience were sown many months, in fact almost a year, beforehand – right from the transition from first year to second.

Having been attracted to Surrey due to its high graduate employment rate, taking advantage of the chance of a year's experience in industry prior to completing my degree seemed like yet another attractive option. Yet despite its sense of being a significant milestone to work towards in both my academic and professional life, I must confess that during my first year it barely crossed my mind: I was a carefree fresher, more than comfortably becoming accustomed and well adjusted to the university way of life. It was perhaps the imminent loss of this 'way of life' that would mark my return to Guildford at the beginning of second year as being somewhat bittersweet: things were starting to get serious and I was getting nervous.

Finding a job was made easy by the superb support from the Department of Computing, whose placement office had a database brimming with job descriptions, roles and salaries on offer. Whilst *finding* a job seemed simple enough, it was *getting* a job which would prove to be a challenge. Having been narrowly knocked back from the first two I applied for, I spent much of the run-up to December 2006 applying for as many jobs I could possibly could. Eventually, the plethora of online applications paid off – leading me to be offered the first job I was interviewed for in January 2007; the role of a programmer/analyst working for one of the world's leading pharmaceutical companies. For the time-being, I could sit back, relax and happily allow thoughts about placement linger at the back of my mind – I had a job, a signed contract, a starting date (3rd September 2007) and a "Familiarisation Day" scheduled for the end of June.

However, much of the spring semester would go by quickly, with my attitudes to work, time management and my extra-curricular activities changing for the better. Throughout the entire process of finding a job, filling in the forms and answering the detailed questions, I began to re-assess the way I used my time and how to make better use of it; already making steps towards preparing myself to becoming a professional 'in the real-world', so-to-speak.

Before I knew it, second year was over; I had handed in my last piece of coursework, sat my last exam and with the weeks rapidly turning into months, I arrived at the end of June for what the company called a "Familiarisation Day". A day of finding a bit more about the company, meeting the many other students that were also working there for the year (although in different fields) and banding together to find accommodation! There was also a handover session with

my predecessor who talked me through the job, answered any questions I had and gave me useful bits of tips and advice.

As daunting as some of it may sound (finding accommodation in less than a day with a person who I had just met, for example) it was the perfect preparation for the year to come: being thrown into the unknown, having to think and react quickly. As I panicked in the build-up to starting the job that I would not be technically competent enough, or that I would say something stupid or embarrass myself with a ridiculous question, it wasn't until a few weeks working on the job itself that I learnt that these kind of worries were misplaced.

Every other student I spoke to had, at some point and to varying extents, worried about the same thing and the team I had been placed in were all too aware of this – in fact, they actively encouraged me to ask questions, speak-up and join in on discussions; to be part of the team and more than just someone who had just been plucked out of university part-way through their degree. Once this had been made clear to me, I began to understand more about how my work placement would benefit my professional development.

My team was an application development and support team consisting of four members of staff; the team manager, one placement student (myself) and two senior programmer/analysts (one of which who acts as the placement students' supervisor). The team's main activities centred on providing support to statisticians and non-clinical research and development scientists worldwide with systems developed by the team itself or vendor-supplied packages (e.g. off-the-shelf, commercially available products). My placement provided excellent experience of working for a large multinational company, whilst also allowing me to work closely as part of a small team on a day-to-day basis.

My role working as part of the team had the following four main areas:

- Providing support to in-house applications or vendor-supplied packages.
- Developing, maintaining and testing in-house systems.
- Providing support for and maintaining the department's web sites.
- Maintaining the department's training laptops.

Throughout the year I became increasingly familiar with the many standard operating procedures (SOP) the team had to adhere to for all aspects of work, development, support duties or otherwise. Training and guidance came from other members of the team, as well as e-learning modules, self-study and off-the-job training. Throughout the year I completed several projects and one-off tasks, eventually experiencing all areas of the IT system development life cycle, whilst additionally attending to my other regular tasks which were repeated throughout the year. In doing so, I was able to put what I had learnt at university into practice, in addition to learning new skills that would I would then be able to put into practice upon my return to university (formal documentation would be transferable to my dissertation report writing, for example).

Bridging the gap between study (at university) and work (my employment) was a difficult challenge to master in the beginning, with the added troubles of adjusting to working every single day between set hours instead of whenever I felt was best. Whilst it was arguable that many of the academic assignments set at university were similar in fashion to the types of trials a person may face at work, these would never replicate the surroundings or processes one would need to go through in the work environment. Learning to be a professional was not just about learning more technical skills, but learning how to work collaboratively in a team, yet as an individual learn, develop and nurture new skills, too.

In the first few months of the placement, working life was a nerve-wracking, yet exciting, new experience. Whilst I had worked before part-time in a retail job, not only was this a significantly different experience due to the fact I was applying what I had learnt at university to the job I was doing, but also due to the fact I had moved away to the unknown once again. Much like I had swapped my home town for Surrey at the beginning of my university career, placement saw me county-hopping again this time across the UK and moving to a small, picturesque town far removed from the bustling streets of Guildford. However, in this sense the move to university itself had proved I was already capable of making this kind of change in my life, whilst also making something successful and positive out of it.

Emotionally, the journey – at the beginning – was a time of acceptance and readjustment to my new surroundings and circumstances, and all the while I missed university at the beginning, by the end I had developed a definitive appreciation for working life that made me sad to leave. In my year in industry I had learnt so much, it was difficult not to imagine how much more I could have learnt in another year and so on; although I look forward to the challenges graduate employment will offer!

Learning to interact with the people I worked with was possibly one of the least daunting parts of the entire experience and something I would change very little about if I were to do it again. Part of the entire professional experience was not only applying the skills you already have, but learning from the small mistakes that would inevitably be made along the way, too. My team mates were particularly understanding of this and from the continued support of my supervisor (who I had one-to-one meetings with every 3 weeks to discuss my progress/work) I was able to take on board any issues, criticism and general feedback that would allow me to work better as part of the time.

An advantage of working for a large organisation was that the company I worked for employed a large amount of placement students at its many sites across the country. At my particular site, there was approximately 30 other placement students; all from different universities, scattered across the country and all originating from different places, likewise scattered across the country and in some cases the globe! There was no shortage of potential housemates and clear sense of community amongst the students which complimented the transition from the social life of a university student to that of a professional working full-time, five days a week.

Over the course of the entire placement experience, I noticeably changed as a person. Not only has confidence in my own abilities vastly improved, but I return for my final year with an increased drive and motivation to do well and get my work done. Whilst I still enjoy the benefits offered by university life such as the social and extra-curricular benefits (e.g. societies and sports clubs) I am more capable now of interacting effectively with my lecturers, with a greater discipline in terms of meeting deadlines, attending lectures and managing my own time. Whilst I may no longer be a carefree student, I feel the combination of both my university education and my experience of the working world have equipped me with the necessary skills to go on to get a good quality graduate job upon completion of my degree.

Despite the good and bad times I encountered, I look back fondly on my placement experience and would thoroughly recommend the year out to any student with the opportunity to. Whilst I have only been able to provide a simple overview of a very busy, enriching year away from academia, I believe I have returned to university with an improved work ethic, greater knowledge and skill set that will no doubt benefit me in the completion of my final year, dissertation and all future professional endeavours. To anybody about to embark on a work

placement themselves, I would advise them to approach the year with an enthusiastic, proactive attitude and to not only learn more about the practical application of your degree to 'the real world', but to discover more about yourself and where you might want to go with your career!

Learning to be a professional is about the perfecting the balance of your own knowledge, nurturing your skills and working in collaboration with others.