

2. Get noticed

Faculty of Management

Operations intern at a large international computer company

This was the single, solitary thought that was going through my head as I walked through the clear glass, revolving doors of my potential company. I knew that the statistical odds of successfully qualifying for a position on their Intern Program were slim. Over 2,000 applicants and only around 100 jobs? That's 1 in 20 and there were already 15 other undergrads sitting in the waiting area already. I was one step ahead though. I was wearing my new black suit; a bright pink Ted Baker shirt with an equally outrageous (yet matching and classy) tie and new shoes that my girlfriend at the time had picked out for me. I looked stylish and confident. What man wouldn't in a pink suit?

As it turned out, style was won out by substance this time around and I was not picked for that particular marketing role. I was however a 'strong candidate' and would be considered for other roles. So that was the assessment day over with. I had already passed through two telephone interviews and the day had been filled with a quick roundtable introduction of employees and candidates, a brief presentation on your past experience and what you are there to offer, a quick lunch and finally an interview with the hiring managers.

Tip for Phone Interviews: Never tell the person interviewing you that you aren't wearing any clothes. As honest and well-intentioned your comment may be, there are some times where certain degrees of honesty... just aren't necessary.

So followed another series of phone interviews; I remained 'unsuitable' with no other feedback than that. By now I was participating in the interviews fully clothed and answering clearly and concisely. The answers were also now thoroughly rehearsed. Finally I received a call from the recruiter asking if I'd be interested in a job in the Operations department. I confirmed my interest, thanked the lady, put down the phone and ironed my pink shirt.

I once again walked through the clear glass, revolving doors but this time there were no other candidates. Not an undergrad in sight. I felt good. I sat down in the waiting area for a minute or two while the receptionist called through to let them know that I had arrived. I was met by the current Intern. I spoke with him briefly and we walked through to the Operations department to meet the manager and his 'deputy'. We walked through to a 'quiet room' and began the interview.

The interview was really more of a 'get to know you' session. We discussed the job but spoke more along the lines of the people I would be dealing with and the team and where it sits in the organisation. This was my manager's style. The interview concluded and I thanked them all for their time and left the building. I travelled then to a Fancy Dress Party... the theme was either Smurfs or Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles. This was of little concern to me as I received the call telling me that they wanted me for the job. It was a good night.

July came round sooner than I had expected and my first day had arrived. The Intern Induction went on and we I became accustomed to the surroundings. I met the team, I met the Director of Operations and I met my fellow intern.

I still haven't worked out whether it was of any relevance that I was surrounded by 50 other Interns, or the fact the Intern Program had such high visibility, but my priority then and there was not to excel at my job... that could come later. My priority was to climb the social ladder as

quickly as I could. I had a fresh start, I could be myself and I was excited. The possibilities were endless and so began the emails.

The Interns are privileged with their own collective email address. This is used to quickly communicate information to all Interns within that particular location but soon became a medium for jokes, pictures, stories and ultimately 'Intern Banter'. This became the common term for any 'unofficial' communication between Interns and I became familiar with this very quickly. After several nights out with the Interns, there were plenty of stories to tell and plenty of opportunities to claim a place in the social hierarchy. With no hint of arrogance and complete humility, I became a 'key' member of the Intern Community concentered by a particular email authored by myself re-telling the events of one particular evening, which has no business being discussed here.

So things were good. I was popular, I was enjoying my work and I liked my team. I had made a lot of new friends who I'd become close with and I was known throughout the company. Unfortunately, what I didn't fully appreciate at the time was the fact that this coin has two sides. On one hand, I had an almost 'celebrity' status amongst my peers and that is without a doubt, an excellent feeling. On the other hand however, the reasons for my popularity were not exactly something you'd place in a marketing campaign. Not for my company at least.

What hadn't even occurred to me was the concept of how other people perceived me. As far as I was concerned, I was well-liked, the conversations that I'd had with others in the business were going well with everyone leaving with a smile on their face and so far I had had no complaints of my work. I'd had one instance where a manager from another department had told me to 'please be quiet' (more or less) because I was tapping a pen on the desk for quite some time and at quite some volume. At the end of the day I approached him and apologised respectfully for a second time. We spoke for a few minutes and became quite friendly after that.

I was under the impression that I'd had no complaints of my work up until my first managerial review. This was... a reality check. As it turned out, there had been complaints. These complaints were never brought to me directly, but were directed to my manager. My conduct was seen by many as inappropriate. The work I'd been doing was sub-standard. I was missing deadlines and losing track of important information. I remember protesting at the fact that nobody had brought their problems to me directly, but of course that didn't carry much weight.

In retrospect, it was arrogant of me, but that was the stage I was at. With this Internship, I had found a new person in myself, a better version of what I once was. I had the same values and the same convictions, but I was more confident and better able to 'put myself out there'. However, I hadn't become entirely used to it yet. I didn't know how to control the new found confidence in myself or when and where to put my extroversion to good use. I remember my manager once telling me "sometimes, less is more... if you talk too much; eventually you lose the value of what you're saying."

So this was the first of what I'm afraid to say was a series of reviews. Each time I would listen to the advice and make the improvements I needed to and this would last for some time. I learned valuable time management skills, I learned how to organise and prioritise my work, and I learned when it was appropriate to talk casually and when it was all business. But with each new advance, I would eventually fall back again into my old ways. This became increasingly frustrating for my manager, not just because he was the first point of escalation... but because he had taken a sincere and genuine interest into my success and development.

My manager knew that I was a prominent member of the Intern Community and he also knew that it was difficult to find the balance between work and social. But the fact of the matter was that I was causing our department to suffer. My job role was extremely visible within the business as we acted as a hub for all the other departments within our division. I, along with my Intern colleague Mark were the focal point for every new piece of business that the sales force had won and it was our responsibility to ensure that it was booked and recorded into the system before the month closed under what were sometimes high-pressured situations. If we weren't performing our roles then the repercussions included a loss of revenue, inconsistent and unreliable data and ultimately failure to meet certain audit requirements. Clearly then, mine was not a position where you could afford to just 'get-along'.

The final review came around December / January time, when I was told in no uncertain terms by my exasperated manager, that I had to get my act together. I had been performing well up until that point and I had finally started to get back the respect that I had lost in the previous months. Regrettably though, I had thought to myself that I had finally 'made it' and could now relax; another instance where I would fall back to my old habits. For simplicity, all I will say is that I had abused a trust that I had developed since my first day and that was... unacceptable. And it was.

While I had never intentionally acted in a way that would be detrimental to my team, the fact is I had been, and I needed to establish my priorities once and for all. I took some time to think about what I was really trying to get out of this year. Why had I applied for the position in the first place? What do I want to achieve? How do I want to be remembered? None of these were easy questions to answer. It is amazing though how you can change your perspective so drastically when you put the effort in.

I knew that Monday would be tough. The situation I had created for myself was not a simple one to fix and I knew that I would have to spend time making up for that while simultaneously giving my all to the role I had promised to fulfil. It was going to be hard, but I took responsibility for that.

I put the 'Intern Banter' on back burner. I kept my social conversations short and to an overall minimum. I was still fun to be around and I was still enjoying myself, but I had finally realised what mattered most to me. My time there was never meant to be about having a fan club. It was never meant to be just another place I could hang out. It was about me taking on the challenges of the real world to see how I measured up. It was a test of my character.

What surprised me though is how much more I began to enjoy myself once I had gotten the job down. As soon as I started to excel, I started to earn respect. People began to trust my judgement. They came to be for consultation. I helped substantially in the co-ordination of the busiest financial close of that year. The service that I was providing had become a reflection of myself. I could never have imagined that the feeling of doing my job well would be so rewarding. It may sound cliché, but it's the truth. The relationships I built with my team, my manager and others by the end stay with me today and I've been invited back for the Christmas Ball.

So how did I learn to be professional? For me personally it revolved purely around my priorities and getting over my ego. I had always had the potential to perform the job well; otherwise I wouldn't have been awarded the position. At no point was there anything stopping me doing so, apart from my own lack of dedication. I am a strong believer in self-expression and a firm opponent of having my behaviour dictated to me, but there is a very fine line between self-expression and arrogance. There is a certain respect that you should carry for others at all times and that can require compromise. Without this, you can end up stubborn and egotistical. To me, that is the essence of professionalism; a mutual respect.