

## **9. Placement: A year of growth and opportunity**

### **School of Management**

#### **Procurement trainee at a global pharmaceutical company**

My placement journey began by applying for 'Procurement Industrial Trainee (IT)' at my chosen company. This company is the world's largest pharmaceutical company producing drugs that sustain and save lives; from drugs that help fight the symptoms of HIV to therapies for Alzheimer's. I decided they were my first choice because of the reputation of the company, the opportunities it promoted and its culture. I also applied relentlessly to other placement programmes soon becoming busy scheduling interviews and attending assessment centres on top of academic commitments having also decided to go on exchange to Hong Kong the following semester. Fortunately, I was offered the position at Pfizer at the eleventh hour- a few days before I boarded the plane for Hong Kong- I was relieved to say the least!

Fresh-faced and back from Hong Kong I thought to myself "What is procurement? What will I be doing for the whole year? What are the people like?" as I waited in reception the first day.

Procurement is the department responsible for handling the purchasing transactions of a firm, whether buying stationary or contracted services, everything the company purchases is processed by procurement. My role was split between process; handling invoices and purchase orders and sourcing; helping the buyers make strategic decision by running reports and conducting analysis for them.

My colleagues were diverse; from those straight out of university to those who had been with the company for 20 years, people from all over the world, from different departments and of differing seniority. My team encouraged me to constantly ask questions, took me out of my comfort zone via job rotation, taught me new skills and involved me in big strategic projects making me aware of the 'bigger picture' by getting me out of the day-to-day processes and realising the impact procurement could deliver to the whole organisation. We were a close team often going out for lunch, pub quizzes, dog and horseracing or having meals at fancy restaurants. Working makes you realise how important having good relationship with the people you work with is, after all, you do see them everyday and getting along makes a big difference to your job satisfaction.

The culture was professional yet relaxed. The office itself was designed to foster an open environment and demonstrate transparency. All the walls in the building were glass so you could see exactly what everyone was doing, even your manager. There was an open door policy meaning managers left their doors open when they were available for anyone to come in to discuss any work related issue and you were guaranteed complete confidentiality.

Training provided an invaluable cornerstone of my professional development. All the training courses were free and employees are encouraged to attend. I joined as many courses as I could, beginning with ICT courses like Excel to help me with the requirements of my role. As the year progressed I attended the advanced courses becoming the most proficient member of my team in programs such as Excel, PowerPoint and Access and my skills were constantly relied upon and utilised not only by my immediate team but other departments too.

I also attended 'Mind Gym' courses designed to develop soft skills such as effective time management, negotiation and listening. I found myself applying these skills in the workplace

and managing to utilise them outside work like helping to effectively get my point across in a conversation and planning a timeline and objectives for my placement report.

Early on my manager offered me the chance to be involved in a variety of prominent sourcing projects including a supplier cleanse project, spend analysis and a creative agencies project.

The supplier cleanse project was essentially a housekeeping project. My task was to go through each supplier in my division updating details and classifying whether they were redundant or not. This was a laborious effort that I worked on over a few weeks on top of my daily duties but by the end of the project suppliers were reduced from 14,000 to just over 8,000. My efforts were recognised and I was awarded £50, a nice surprise, for displaying key company attitudes such as teamwork and alignment.

The spend analysis project gave me a chance to demonstrate the ICT skills I acquired. I was asked to report the company's annual spend from 2006-2008. This was no mean feat as this had never been attempted before. At the time I thought "just another project", little did I know the impact this would have on the department and others too. Over the months I developed one report detailing what the company spent, with which suppliers, on what commodities and products, forming the basis for future procurement objectives and strategies. Finally the department had one report of all spend and commodities. My manager shared this with the finance manager who, impressed, soon adopted the same way of reporting. It's nice to know that I have pioneered a reporting style that will live long after I have left the company and will provide the basis for future reports.

My last project was tracking invoiced rates by creative agencies. I identified and tracked the changes in rates the company was being charged, compiling these in to a spreadsheet that showed percentage changes in prices. Once the exercise was completed for several agencies the findings were presented to my manager who was surprised to see that a little monitoring and attention to detail could possibly yield huge savings. For a 'quick win' my manager was able to negotiate standard rates with these agencies immediately saving the company thousands. Again my efforts were recognised and rewarded with a leadership award, a certificate and £50.

During placement I was given the task of organising a directorate charity event. This was one of the biggest challenges I faced as my directorate was comprised of over 50 people and coordinating this could be disastrous! As a department we chose to volunteer to landscape the garden of a local respite for teenagers with learning difficulties. I had to arrange logistics, maintain liaisons with the charity and organise the whole directorate into teams and tasks, buy equipment and refreshments... all this on top of my already busy work schedule. It was difficult to be on top of every all the time but following a plan and checklist of tasks to do helped. The day went smoothly and was highly enjoyable and satisfying. Everything I had been organising for weeks went accordingly and the whole team and charity was pleased with the outcome.

I was also given the opportunity to mentor a work experience student. As with most work experience students the tasks assigned were fairly menial; archiving, printing and data entry. Although this was a rather boring I also arranged ICT courses and one-on-ones for him with the team so he could get an idea of what 'procurement' entailed. Having to mentor a fifteen year old was very challenging as his attention span was relatively short. A few times I had to remind him that he was in a professional environment and how understanding how to behave professionally would benefit him in the future. My manager pointed out how important this experience was in developing my managerial skills. Believe me, it's harder than it looks!

I learnt valuable skills and knowledge during my placement year that- had I not done one- I would not have learnt until I was thrown in to my first full-time graduate job.

Firstly I learnt to interact with people of all different cultures, lifestyles and experience. The more I interacted with different people the more my confidence grew in approaching people and not being intimidated by the thought of meeting someone new or who had a different opinion to mine because I was confident in dealing with disagreements or debate in a diplomatic and professional manner.

I was introduced to the concept of 'office politics', something that goes unmentioned at university and you cannot prepare for until you face it. Office politics is the use of power within the organisation to personal gain. It's about who you know and how much they can influence situations to your favour. Knowing the right people can determine how successful you will be in achieving your personal goals.

During my placement I began to link the theory I learnt at university to practical examples in the workplace. I related elements of organisational behaviour to the different management styles I encountered and how an employee's wants and needs are directly linked to job satisfaction. I saw manager's use strategic tools like SWOT and cost-benefit analysis to measure how successful certain decisions would be and the impact of external influences, such as competition, on the company's strategy.

Another contributing factor to my placement preparation was my time as an exchange student in Hong Kong. There I met and worked with people from all different international backgrounds. I developed the art of networking, transferring this to the workplace by building a portfolio of professional contacts. Going on exchange really took me out of my comfort zone- I had to adapt and adapt quickly taking my own initiative in a lot of things which relates to starting full-time employment too.

The whole placement year was truly a test of character. Everything was alien to me at the beginning confronted with situations and people I was unaccustomed to. There were obviously highs and lows. At one point I really missed being a student again; responsible only unto yourself, the amount of free time and going out without the dilemma of waking up to go to work in the morning.

My placement year report was another struggle. Maintaining the motivation to write a report outside working hours was difficult as all you want to do outside of work is devote that free time to things you enjoy doing. The only way I managed to stay on top of it was to do a plan, set deadlines and commit to them.

These issues were nothing however to the amount of enjoyment and benefits the placement year brought.

Placement is a year of immense transition. The experience opened my eyes to the reality and difficulty of working full-time. It also shaped my thoughts on the career path I would like to follow with my sights firmly set on being a buyer. I am also more assertive and confident now than I have ever been. Speaking to a room full of strangers was something I would have been terrified doing before placement but am now not phased by. One thing I set out to achieve during placement was taking more responsibility and accountability. Through my experiences at work I now do not shy away from responsibility. It helped that I developed in a supportive and proactive environment which gave me the assertiveness needed to achieve goals because no one is

there to 'hold your hand'. I have met so many people, learnt new skills and acquired new knowledge, experienced different situations and grown and matured in such a relatively short space. From being quite lost in terms of what direction I wanted to go in life to becoming proactive in my approach to the future. I know what I want and how to get it, all this I owe to the placement year which has helped me take my experiences during university to the workplace and vice versa.

To those who are thinking about doing a placement year I would say- do it! My placement year was an amazing and unforgettable experience. Placement will prepare you for the realities of the world of work with the support of your company and the university. Placement year demonstrates commitment and any valuable contributions or experiences you made during your placement year will be noted by potential employers giving you an advantage over other graduates.

Placement may only be for one year, but it could change your life forever.