

How to find a work experience placement



Experience of any kind is an essential part of preparing yourself for the professional world of work. Many schools set aside a week or two – usually in Year 10 – for their students to take part in a placement. Many others, however, do not have any allocated time during term to allow students to gain work experience. If you go to a school which has time at the end of the year for work experience, looking for your own placements can give you more choice in who you spend your placement with – as well as taking some of the strain off your school’s organiser(s)!

But whichever of these two types of schools you attend, organising your own experience outside of term time is worth considering. The long summer holidays provide a great opportunity to gain work experience. Securing a placement off your own bat can also be very similar to job-hunting in real life, and can therefore be valuable as an exercise in itself. Another similarity with job-hunting, however, is that it can seem a daunting process, and can be disheartening if you don’t succeed immediately. But with a level head, and a clear plan of attack, the process can certainly reap rewards. Some suggestions for such a plan of attack are discussed below.

1. What sort of career would you like to experience?

Some people might already have a good idea of what they want to experience or become in the future – but this is a minority, so do not feel worried if you can't think of what you might like to try!

Two good starting places are the subjects you enjoy at school and your skills and hobbies outside of lessons. For example, if you are good at or really enjoy English at school, think about jobs where you would be able to use your language skills, such as those at publishing companies, magazines or even schools. If you have hobbies away from school, perhaps photography, music, or making videos, you can also investigate jobs which would make use of your interests and skills.

2. Identifying companies to contact

Your aim here should be to create a list of 5–10 companies you would like to ask for a placement. Don't just find one company; if they are unable to help, then all your hard work will have been for nothing. Contacting multiple companies greatly increases your chances of finding a placement.

There are several ways of shortlisting companies to contact:

- Start by asking your family, friends, even neighbours, if they know anyone working for a company that fits what you decided on in step 1.
- Research local businesses by using a search engine, or an online directory such as Thomson Local or Yell.
- Keep an eye out for any companies that might fit your description when you're out and about or walking round town.

3. Making contact

Once you have drawn up your list of target companies, it's time to get in touch. There are a few ways to go about this. You could send an email, call the business on the phone or – if the company has a commercial premises – you could pay them a visit in person.

If you're writing an email, don't start it with 'Hi' – 'Dear' is much more appropriate – and you should do your best to find a name to send the email to. If all else fails, opt for 'Dear Sir/Madam'. Equally, make sure to sign off the email with 'Yours sincerely' followed by your name.

Make sure you do yourself justice by being professional and outgoing: explain clearly why you would like to work with this company and why you think you would be a good fit. Research the company, and mention what you hope to gain,

such as experience of the workplace or an insight into an employment area. You could link the placement to a career aim or to a school subject. If you know something specific about the company which has sparked your interest, say so. You are asking them to go out of their way to help you, so make sure you acknowledge this and are respectful and polite.

4. Responses

With any luck, you will get at least one positive reply. If you get a negative reply, try not to let it get you down! It is for precisely this reason that you have contacted several companies.

If the response is positive, you may be offered a placement right away, or the company might ask you to attend an interview. The same applies here to what is described in part 3 – make sure you act professionally, respectfully and confidently!

Key Advice

- Start early. There are a huge number of students out there, and they may well all be looking for work experience. So don't leave it until a month before you would like your placement to start, try and get in there before the other students!
- Contact multiple businesses. Getting in touch with more than one company will increase your chances of being successful, but make sure your emails or phone calls are personalised.
- Look out of town. If you can get a bus or a lift in a car, looking a bit further than the city centre will open up more opportunities to you.
- Do yourself justice by being professional. This includes being positive about both the company and your own abilities without being arrogant.
- Keep trying! Even if you get several negative replies, there will always be more companies to contact!

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