

# The Value of Experience By Wayne Coetzee

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Allan Gray Orbis Foundation

The Foundation's ethos or shared fundamentals, is made up of its tactical focus on Education and Experience complemented by the personal traits of Effort and Ethics. The Foundation's approach to cultivating entrepreneurs therefore includes experience as part of the beneficiary's journey. Guest writer, Wayne Coetzee, from the School of Global Studies, Gothenburg, Sweden, shares why experience is vital, specially for students. His study focuses specifically on the value of internships.



In a time of financial crisis, competition is a hard reality for anyone wanting to enter the job market, especially for aspiring young professionals. Due to fierce competition from seasoned professionals and early career candidates, students need to go beyond the basic requirements—they need to possess both academic merit and work experience. Internships provide aspiring young professionals with the prospect to achieve the latter by offering opportunities to those that want to pursue careers that match academic and personal interests. From a strategic perspective, internships open doors. From a personal development perspective, they foster skills and build character. The proof, as they say, is in the pudding.

Take Sweden as an example. In most university programmes, students are required to pursue a four-month internship at an organisation of their choice. The aim of this initiative is three-fold: One, it provides students with a unique opportunity to gain practical work experience in their field of interest. Upon completion, most students explain how practical application helped and even strengthened theoretical knowledge, and vice versa. As an educator at the undergraduate and postgraduate level, I have witnessed first-hand how internships have transformed students into well-rounded individuals. Those that have completed their four-month stints usually display strong teamwork skills, a sense of urgency, a more developed understanding of individual responsibility, greater adaptability, improved analytical skills, and the ability to complete tasks in a timely and professional manner. In short, the result is almost always positive.

Two, internships provide students with the opportunity to build strategic networks outside of the traditional classroom environment. These networks essentially allow them to get closer to the labour market. Professor Per Assmo, the Director of the International Programme for Politics and Economics at University West, Sweden, asserts that internships are an important part of gaining employment. "The experience shows that over the last four-to-five years, between seventy and eighty per cent of those that did internships received a job at that location. One can thus conclude that internships are an entry ticket to the labour market." But not only do internships provide an opportunity to build networks, it also provides an opportunity to add value to existing networks. Erik Andersson, a coordinator of the Masters Programme in Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, notes that students often underestimate their capacity to strengthen networks in the work market. 'Over the years, students have told me that they didn't realise they knew so much, and they didn't realise that they could actually add value to existing networks to the extent they do. This is a common theme in student feedback after their internships.'

Three, while internships are a gateway to future employment in an organisation, and a unique recruitment platform for companies, they also provide aspiring entrepreneurs with the tools to pursue other endeavours. This is particularly relevant in societies and communities where they are potential job creators. As one Greek exchange

student in Sweden explains: “In my country, where thousands of young people are unemployed, I want to be a job creator. I want to create jobs that could benefit others in the long-term. The internship programme provided me with the opportunity to learn from visionary leaders, and it provided me with the right tools. From such a foundation, I feel more confident to start my own business because I have seen first-hand how things work in practice.”

Despite the on-going and innovative modification of academic curriculums, most universities around the world are not set-up to teach students how to become business leaders or independent employees. This is where internships are particularly useful for professional development. The exposure to real-world problems provides candidates with critical insights of how to deal with issues that are not always well defined or anticipated in academic literature.

Even if universities have internal mentoring programmes, they often lack the capacity and flexibility to provide one-on-one training, which is something that internships usually provide. In a globalised world where systems and processes continuously change, internships closes the knowledge gap by providing interns with much-needed experience, adaptability, and creativity in changing environments. Although revolving door practices have meant that professionals move between corporate, state, and academic structures—spreading invaluable knowledge and experience—they do not always transpire in rapid succession, which means that there is a potential time-knowledge gap in tertiary education. In other words, what was relevant in a specific industry five years ago may not be relevant today. The only way students can get the most up-to-date insights and experiences is by doing an internship at an organisation that deals with their subject matter on daily basis.

If possible, students should try to do more than one internship in order to gain as much experience as possible. Two or more internships can provide students with a better understanding of what it is like to work in different professional environments, with various types of people, and diverse industry-specific challenges. To that end, it provides them with the opportunity to evaluate and compare, which is only possible if one has personal experience.

While internships provide a host of opportunities, and commonly strengthen key skill sets, they do not guarantee success, nor do they promise to ignite interest. Like most endeavours in life, it is up to the student to make the most of their experience. That said, there are practical challenges to doing an internship, such as the difference between paid and unpaid internships, the duration and location of internships, and the awkward balancing act between internship responsibilities and coursework etc. There are no easy solutions to such predicaments, especially not in South Africa where universities do not always facilitate internship programmes. Furthermore, in a country with uneven economic development and unequal opportunity such as South Africa there are legitimate concerns that individuals with greater access to resources will have more freedom to pursue internships. But those who are able to overcome the aforementioned obstacles should take some comfort in knowing that internships often level the playing field. If administered correctly, they provide equal opportunity to those that want to get their feet wet. The value of this experience should not be underestimated.