

CAREER JOURNAL.

Giving Internships a Post-College Try

With Jobs Scarce, Recent Grads Look to Make the Most of a Part-Time Gig

BY TODDI GUTNER

Nora Cook has her dream job. As a member of the "recycling police" for the Central Contra Costa Solid Waste Authority in Walnut Creek, Calif., Ms. Cook, who graduated with a business economics degree from California State University East Bay in June, finds businesses that don't recycle, educates them on the process and keeps track of their progress.

But Ms. Cook's job isn't the sort of full-time gig a recent college grad would be lucky to find in this economy. Rather, it's a nine-month, 20-hour-a-week internship that she hopes will help her land a full-time position.

Internships—both formal, paid training programs and less formal, unpaid positions—have long been used as a recruiting tool and as a way for young professionals to get their foot in the door of an organization. Among graduating college students who had internships, nearly 70% received offers of full-time employment from their internship hosts during the 2007-2008 academic year, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers 2009 Experiential Education Survey.

In this tepid economy, taking an internship when a full-time job can't be found may be a new grad's best option. "There has never been such a high level of graduates taking internships," says Donald Asher a career expert and author of "Who Gets Promoted and Why." While many of the more-formal internship programs geared toward undergrads may already be filled, soon-to-be grads can still find them if they're resourceful, target their efforts and are willing to work to convince a company to create one for them.

You've probably already targeted the companies at which you'd like to work. To get an internship created for you, you'll need your network to find the company who



Steve LaBadessa for The Wall Street Journal

Nora Cook in her dream job: as an intern for the 'recycling police' for the Central Contra Costa Solid Waste Authority in Walnut Creek, Calif.

can help you. If you had a good interview with a recruiter or met an executive at a campus networking event, that's a good place to start. Tell your contact you understand there are no jobs available, but ask if you can come in for an informational interview to learn more about the firm.

If you're excited about what you hear, ask your contact if there's a way you could do an internship to learn more. Offer up ideas on where you might fit in and stress that you're flexible and eager to learn. If you're in a position to offer your services without pay for a short period of time, say so. But even then, there are a few things you can do to make sure you're going to get the sort of experience that will help you land a job later.

The best internships will provide meaningful work, a mentor relationship and opportunities to establish professional contacts and

connections. The goal, short of a coveted job offer, is to "make sure there is a work project with a finished product and a highly positive letter of recommendation" at the end of the internship, says Mr. Asher.

To land a position that benefits you, ask critical questions during the interview or negotiation process. If you're asking for a spot to be created, have enough knowledge about the company so you can suggest a worthwhile project that benefits the firm. If the program is more formal, ask if there are any projects planned for interns and whether there will be an intern supervisor or mentor.

Marianne Ruggiero, founder and managing director of Optima Careers, a career consulting firm, suggests asking how much time you will be able to spend learning about the business. Offer up examples of what you'd like to do, such as attending a client meetings or working alongside some-

one whose career inspires you. And check to see if you'll have opportunities to attend events, lunches or classes; these will be critical for getting more involved and making professional connections.

Of course, there are no guarantees that even with the most pointed questions, an internship will be a winner. Sometimes, "there is a huge disconnect between what [organizations] say in the interview ... and what they ask the intern to do the first week," says Mr. Asher.

In that case, do the scut work without complaint and then "design, get sponsorship for and approval for a project that can showcase [your] analytical skills or show work above and beyond what others have done," he says.

Even if your internship turns out to be a strong learning experience, you can still go the extra mile to stand out. Lindsey Block is finishing a master's degree in elementary education at Northwestern University while working as an intern at the Field Museum in Chicago. While she's responsible for coordinating education programs within the museum—work she says offers a good deal of responsibility—Ms. Block took on another project.

When she saw that the museum needed help organizing a program for high-school biology students, Ms. Block offered to help. She hopes her efforts will resonate with her supervisor, who is also in charge of hiring for a soon-to-be-available full-time position.

Of course, even doing everything right may not result in a job offer. Ms. Cook, who is interning on the recycling project, was set to be hired as a full-time program manager by her internship employer until budget cuts eliminated the position. Still, she says it has been worth it. "I've gained a lot of confidence in my abilities and made lots of connections with other waste-management companies and recyclers," says Ms. Cook.