

How to secure a work experience placement and succeed in it

Whether you're seeking a new job, looking to change careers, or have just completed high school or tertiary education, you could benefit greatly from unpaid work experience. But landing a placement is not always as simple as walking into a business and offering to work for free.

Some companies may not take on participants because of the cost of insurance to cover their presence, the risk to the confidentiality of clients, or the need to provide training or health and safety briefings. They may also lack resources to properly supervise and provide that valuable feedback a participant would be looking for.

But don't let that deter you, as many organisations are willing to host participants to showcase their career paths and help people get into the workforce.

How are people finding placements?

The 2016 Unpaid Work Experience in Australia report reveals about two-thirds of students seeking placements as part of their studies at university, TAFE or high school have had this organised by their institution.

Other common methods include responding directly to an advertised opportunity, which 29% of post-school students used, and leveraging personal networks such as family and friends, which 28.1% of secondary school students used.

For people seeking placements as part of Newstart requirements, most (51.7%) have been helped by a job services provider and more than a quarter (27.9%) have used a broker or external agency.

People who seek a work experience placement for reasons other than educational or government requirements are most likely to organise it themselves (60.3%).

Top tips for finding a placement and leaving a good lasting impression

Entree Recruitment General Manager Megan Nicholson says there is no greater teacher in life than experience. Here's her advice for successful placements:

- **Pursue the placement you want with tenacity**

"To secure a work experience placement, my advice would be to contact the business directly," Nicholson says. "Send a letter explaining why you wish to complete a work experience placement with their business and what you hope to achieve from it. "Companies want to see someone with drive and passion for their industry."

- **Treat the placement like you would a real job**

Once on placement, Nicholson recommends making the most of it by asking lots of questions and getting involved in the business.

- **Show initiative**

"Identify tasks that need doing, and show initiative," she says. One of the biggest challenges for businesses considering taking on a placement is trying to find the right tasks to keep a placement busy and challenged. If you can show that you can identify tasks that you can assist with without instruction, you will leave a great impression.

- **Present well, don't be tardy and stay in touch**

"Make sure you are well presented and on time and when you leave your placement, keep in touch with the organisation. This will show the business you are serious about having a relationship with them in the future."

Bec Fisher and her 40 jobs at 40 experiment

Bec Fisher has found a unique way to celebrate her 40th birthday, with a plan to trial 40 different careers throughout the year. The teacher-turned-serial intern is keen to determine if the grass really is greener on the other side.

“I wasn’t desperate to try something new, but I wondered if there was something else,” she says. “Something might really pique my interest, or I might think ‘actually I really love my job’.”

Fisher has tried careers from firefighting and floristry to physiotherapy. In May, she shadowed celebrant Rachel Green at a wedding at Summergrove Estate.

Fisher’s first step in setting up work experience placements was to see what her friends and network could offer. “If people know you or can vouch for you, that often gets you through the door,” she says.

“Work experience is so important. Finding out what you don’t like is equally as important as finding out what you do.”

Next, Fisher began cold calling and emailing companies she was interested in working for.

“Give them a little bit of background information about yourself... why you want to work for that company or what about the role you find interesting (and) what you are interested in doing and learning and why,” she says.

“That has been the hardest and most time-consuming part because it’s a bit like applying for a job in that you write each letter specifically to each business.

“Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.”

She recommends using each opportunity to not only try the work but talk to people in the industry.

“Get an idea of the path their career has taken,” she says. “What you can observe in one day and what you can find out with a half-hour conversation are two different things.”

“If you are genuine and want to find out about a job, it’s surprising how much people are happy to tell you.

“Work experience is so important. Finding out what you don’t like is equally as important as finding out what you do.”

This article was first published by Melanie Burgess, Deputy Careers Editor at News Corp Australia.