

Publication: Today Online

Date: 01 October 2019

Headline: Gen Y Speaks: Why I took on more internships than others

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The author (standing, second from right) with his colleagues at Nielsen during a six-month internship in 2016.

Sometime in my first year at Singapore Management University (SMU), I got a revelation. After talking to my professors and several seniors, I realised that internships can help students more in getting their careers off to a good footing than completing their modules in school.

And in line with my personal motto, “stay hungry, stay foolish”, I decided to maximise the number of internships I would take. Why stay foolish?

People may call you foolish when you make unconventional decisions. But follow your aspirations and you will prove them wrong.

I wound up doing five internships spanning business development, private equity, consulting, investment banking and market research in Singapore and overseas during my four undergraduate years. The average SMU student usually completes two to three internships during the summer school break.

While it takes resourcefulness and persistence to obtain internships, they are quite possible to get with some effort and determination.

A particularly memorable internship for me was with Ambit Capital in Mumbai, India, my first overseas stint.

It challenged me to step out of my comfort zone. I was in a foreign city alone, for a three-month long internship to work on a real-world financial project that put all that I had learnt as a finance major and a business undergraduate in SMU to the test.

As the project required knowledge and experience that were sometimes beyond what I had learnt in school, I needed to read up and do my own self-learning. It was a daunting experience initially as I had no one to rely on for information.

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To overcome the challenge, I put more time and effort into the project by staying back late in the office if I have deadlines to meet and doing my own research and modelling.

This internship shaped me beyond just my career but also my perspective on life. I recall heading to India with fear and trepidation. Indeed, my first few days in India were tough. I felt lost and disoriented and started to wish I was back home in Singapore instead.



The writer with his real estate officer of the apartment he stayed at during his internship stint in Mumbai. Photo courtesy of Darren Yuen

My colleagues had their meals at their own desk, instead of having meals together at a café/restaurant. This limited my opportunities to interact with many of them, and I felt disengaged sometimes.

But every time I felt lonely, I thought about my desire to experience something different from life back in Singapore and pressed on.

I started striking up conversation with the locals both in and outside the office and was surprised at how warmly they welcomed me. I was struck by their friendliness and their efforts to make me feel at home.

I even travelled with them to explore the Kashmir Valley and navigate the snow-capped mountains in Gulmarg.

Overcoming my fears opened a whole new world for me, as I learned that language differences did not stop me from becoming good friends with many of them.

My interactions with them also gave me valuable insights into India's culture and work ethic. My team mates were hardworking, preferring to eat lunch at their desk rather than take a one-hour lunch break.

I found that the way to gain their respect and acceptance as part of the team was to demonstrate that I, too, was willing to put in the hard work and effort required.

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To expand my skillsets and networking opportunities, I also chose to embark on an internship outside the realm of my immediate career plans.

This was why I took a leave of absence from my studies to participate in the Nielsen Fast Forward Program in Singapore for six months. It was my first taste of a full-time job as the intensive programme lasted longer than the typical 10-week internships most students do.

Through the programme, I got a good sense of what makes the fast-moving consumer goods sector tick.

I got to try the various methods Nielsen uses for its market research, ranging from traditional ones (eg, capturing data from households/individuals) to advanced ones (eg, capturing data using special devices and technologies).



The writer (second from right), with his twin brother Barry, during their internship at Nielsen as innovation practice analysts. Photo courtesy of Darren Yuen

At the same time, I enjoyed working with people of diverse backgrounds and this taught me how to foster long-term relationships as I became friends with many of them. It was really eye-opening to work together with people who come from different nationalities and across different time zones as well.

During my internships, I always strived for excellence in whatever I did as I believe in the importance of giving my all, even for tasks that may seem minor or inconsequential.

My advice to those seeking internships is this: Always be open to learning, unlearning and relearning. Stay hungry for success and always think of how you can add value.

All my internships allowed me to develop different perspectives that I would never have gained from my university courses. Looking back, it was one of the best decisions that I have made in my life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Darren Yuen is a business associate with a consulting firm. He graduated from Singapore Management University with top honours (Summa Cum Laude) in Business Management, majoring in finance and strategy.