

Winning that coveted co-op

It takes a certain knack to nab a good internship

Presented by



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Della Rollins for National Post

The return to school this month for many university and college students across the country also signals the launch of recruitment for Co-operative Employment opportunities.

Known colloquially as coop jobs, the positions enable students to get hands-on experience in their chosen profession as part of their education, while also collecting a paycheck.

Many of the professions compete intensely to win over the students with top marks. The financial profession, for instance, takes groups of students out for dinner to make preliminary selections based on how they might fit the workplace culture.

To assist students, Stern Cohen LLP, a Toronto-based business advisory services firm, prepared five vital tips for students seeking co-op positions through job fairs and follow-up interviews.

"There's a real difference between the students who come prepared and give a good interview and those who do not," says Graham Williams, CA and partner at Stern Cohen.

"I'm sure we've missed out on a number of good students because they just didn't interview well," he says. "On the other side, we've had students who interviewed extremely well but when they start working for us, we're wondering who the person is.

"Be yourself. We're looking for traits you can't teach like character, attention to detail and work ethic."

Building up a resume with job experience relevant to a professional career is imperative, he says. "Although camp counselling, life guarding and tutoring are good experiences, it doesn't prepare them for a professional environment."

Students should be prepared to ask insightful questions at a job fair or interview about the workplace culture, the firm's turnover rates and even what the recruiters like about the firm.

Mr. Williams says he looks for students who can communicate well and show an interest in entrepreneurship to work well with clients. "Accounting is just a means to an end, so being good at math is not what I'm looking to hear in an interview."

Students should look and sound like a professional, speak clearly and be concise, he says.

Most students attend a workplace for four months or more in the last year or two of university. Scott

Doherty is currently fulfilling his co-op experience at Stern Cohen. He was selected after attending the dinner outing the firm arranged for 14 students from Waterloo, Ont.-based Wilfred Laurier University in January 2008. He admits making a good first impression is "not for the faint-of-heart."

"Grades are important, but if you're an A student but you can't make conversation during a dinner or an interview and you get hired, they're going to find out soon enough that you're not who you came off as during the interview," Mr. Doherty says.

Wilfrid Laurier -- in a partnership with University of Waterloo, University of Guelph and Conestoga College -- will host three job fairs for students and alumni this year. The participation by the four Ontario educational institutions renders the job fairs the largest in Canada. The first fair scheduled for Sept. 30 has 175 employers registered so far. The second fair in February provides soon-to-be graduates with employment prospects, and a new fair featuring "green" technologies will be launched in March.

"It's critical for them to research the employers before they attend because ... it's not possible to speak to all," says Jan Basso, director of co-operative education and career development at Wilfrid Laurier.

The educational partners provide seminars, distribute flyers and run a Web site at www.partners4employment.cato help students make the most of meetings with prospective employers at the job fairs.

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INTERVIEW DON'TS

What not to say and do is often just as important as what to do.

Here are some of examples of the worst moves seen by Stern Cohen LLP: - When asked why you want the job don't say "because it's good money." - Do not bring friends or parents (yes this actually happened) to sit in the lobby while you are interviewed because "you have plans afterward" or "because my Dad won't let me drive downtown yet." - Do not say your past job "was great because you didn't have to work too hard." - Do not exaggerate experience on your resume. Cutting your neighbour's grass does not mean you were a sole proprietor of a landscaping company. - Do not hand in samples of past work or documents that show lack of professional judgment ... such as a resume with your Facebook page instead of email address.

Source: Financial Post