



The Benefits of Work Experience

A guide for students and graduates



Why Work Experience Matters

Work experience is one of the most consistently valuable things a student or graduate can do to improve their career prospects. Employers say it matters. Research backs it up. And the graduates who have it find the transition from study to employment significantly easier than those who do not.

This guide explains what work experience actually gives you, why employers value it so highly, and how to approach it in a way that gets the most from the time you invest.

The Numbers

Around 66% of employers say they prefer graduates with relevant work experience over those without. Between 40% and 50% of employers who offer placements and internships go on to recruit those students into permanent roles. All Step placements and internships are paid and project-focused.



What Does Work Experience Actually Give You?

The benefits of work experience go well beyond having something to add to your CV. Here is what you actually gain from doing it.

Real Skills That Employers Are Looking For

University develops academic skills. Work experience develops professional ones. These are not the same thing, and employers know it.

The skills most commonly cited by employers as lacking in graduates are precisely the ones that work experience builds: time management without a timetable to follow, communication in a professional environment, working to real deadlines, handling feedback, and contributing effectively in a team.

These transferable skills apply across every sector and every role. Developing them during a placement or internship means you can demonstrate them convincingly in future job applications.

Commercial Awareness

Commercial awareness is consistently one of the qualities employers say graduates lack most. It means understanding how a business actually operates: how decisions get made, how different functions connect, what drives performance, and what success looks like in a real organisation.

You cannot develop this in a classroom. Even a relatively short work placement gives you direct exposure to it, and the ability to talk about it confidently in interviews is one of the most powerful assets you can have when applying for graduate roles.

Confidence

Starting a professional role for the first time is daunting for most students. Knowing how to conduct yourself, how to communicate with colleagues and managers, how to ask for help, and how to navigate workplace culture are all things that take time to learn.

Work experience gives you the chance to develop that confidence in a lower-stakes environment, where it is expected that you are still learning. Graduates who have done placements or internships consistently report feeling significantly more prepared for permanent employment as a result.

A Professional Network

In many industries, who you know matters as much as what you know. Every placement, internship, or voluntary role is an opportunity to build genuine professional relationships: with colleagues, managers, clients, and contacts in other organisations.

These connections are often more valuable than they initially appear. A reference from a placement employer, a recommendation passed on through a contact, or a direct conversation about a job opening can all come directly from relationships built during work experience.



Clarity About What You Want

Many students and graduates are not entirely sure what they want to do. Work experience helps you find out in the most direct way possible: by doing it.

You might discover that a sector you thought would suit you does not, or that a role you had not considered turns out to be exactly where your strengths lie. Either outcome is genuinely useful. It is far better to find that out during a placement than after committing to a graduate scheme or a job you are not suited to.

Putting Theory Into Practice

One of the consistent findings from students who have done placements is that returning to their studies afterwards is more productive. Having seen how academic theory applies in a real workplace context, they engage with their coursework differently and with greater understanding.

A Stronger CV and Better Interview Performance

A CV with relevant work experience on it stands out to employers immediately. It demonstrates initiative, commitment, and an ability to apply knowledge beyond the classroom. Graduates with work experience are not just more competitive on paper: they are more compelling in interviews.

Real-world experience gives you specific, concrete examples to draw on when answering competency-based interview questions. Instead of hypothetical answers, you can describe actual situations, what you did, and what the outcome was. That makes a significant difference.

DO	AVOID
✓ Treating every placement as a genuine job	✗ Treating it as temporary and holding something back
✓ Keeping notes on what you achieve throughout	✗ Waiting to be given tasks rather than showing initiative
✓ Networking across the organisation, not just your team	✗ Staying only within your immediate team
✓ Asking for feedback and acting on it	✗ Waiting until the end to find out how you are doing
✓ Connecting with contacts on LinkedIn during the placement	✗ Leaving without staying in touch with key contacts
✓ Asking for a reference before you leave	✗ Assuming a reference will be offered without asking
✓ Being clear about your goals and what you are looking for next	✗ Leaving your next steps vague and undefined

Types of Work Experience

Work experience comes in several forms. Understanding the differences helps you choose what is right for your situation.

Internships

A graduate internship is a fixed-term paid placement, typically lasting between three and twelve months, completed after or just before finishing your degree. It is structured, project-focused, and usually offers the clearest route into permanent employment. Over 80% of Step graduate internships lead to a permanent role with the host company.

Sandwich Placements

A sandwich placement is completed as part of a degree programme, usually in the year between your second and final year of study. It typically lasts twelve months and gives you the chance to apply your academic learning in a real workplace before returning to complete your degree. Students who have done a sandwich placement consistently perform better in their final year and enter the graduate job market with a significant advantage.

Shorter Placements and Project Work

Not all work experience needs to last a full year. Shorter placements, consultancy projects, and employer-set briefs are increasingly common, particularly as universities build more work-integrated learning into their programmes. Even a few weeks of structured, meaningful work experience adds genuine value to a CV and gives you practical examples to draw on.

Voluntary Work

Voluntary roles are often underestimated as work experience. In practice, they develop exactly the same professional skills as paid placements: teamwork, communication, responsibility, time management, and the ability to work within an organisation towards a shared goal. For students who have not yet secured a formal placement, voluntary work is a practical and worthwhile alternative.

All Step Placements and Internships Are Paid

We believe that if you are contributing meaningfully to an organisation, you should be paid for it. All Step opportunities are also project-focused, which means you have a genuine brief to work on and something specific to show for your time. Visit www.step.org.uk to see current opportunities.



Things To Think About Before You Start

Before committing to a work experience opportunity, it is worth thinking through a few practical considerations.

Location and Relocation

If a placement is in a different city, think carefully about whether relocating is practical for you. Consider the cost of accommodation, travel, and day-to-day living on a placement salary. Useful sites for finding short-term accommodation include Rightmove, SpareRoom, and EasyRoommate.

If you are commuting rather than relocating, plan your route in advance and build in extra time for the first few days. Arriving late on your first week makes a poor impression that takes time to recover from.

Time and Commitment

Think honestly about how long you can commit to a placement and whether you have any existing commitments that could affect it. Employers invest real time in training and supporting their placements students, and they expect a reliable commitment in return.

Also consider what comes next. If there is a possibility of being offered a permanent role at the end of the placement, is that something you would want? Knowing your own answer to that question early makes conversations with the employer much cleaner.

What You Want To Get From It

The clearer you are about what you want from a work experience opportunity, the more likely you are to get it. Think about the skills you want to develop, the sector or function you want to explore, and what you hope to be able to say about the experience when you finish.

Students and graduates who go into placements with a clear sense of purpose tend to perform better, ask better questions, and leave with more to show for their time.

Before You Accept

Before accepting any placement or internship offer, make sure you understand what the project or role involves, who your line manager will be, how feedback will be given, and what the pay rate is. A well-structured opportunity should be able to answer all of these questions clearly



Work Experience Checklist

Use this before and during any work experience opportunity to make sure you are getting the most from it.

Before You Start

- ☐ Understood what the role or project involves
- ☐ Confirmed the pay rate and any practical arrangements
- ☐ Thought through any relocation or travel requirements
- ☐ Set clear personal goals for what you want to achieve
- ☐ Updated your LinkedIn profile to reflect the new role

During The Placement

- ☐ Treating every day with the same professionalism as a permanent role
- ☐ Keeping notes on projects, achievements, and skills developed
- ☐ Asking for feedback at the midpoint, not just the end
- ☐ Networking beyond your immediate team
- ☐ Connecting with contacts on LinkedIn as you meet them

Before You Leave

- ☐ Asked your manager for a reference or LinkedIn recommendation
- ☐ Updated your CV with specific achievements and examples
- ☐ Had a conversation about next steps, including any permanent opportunities
- ☐ Stayed in touch with key contacts after finishing

Ready To Find Your Work Experience?

Step Recruitment offers paid, project-focused placements and internships for students and graduates across the East Midlands and beyond.

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