



Why Do a Graduate Internship?

Everything you need to know
before you apply



Not sure what to do after graduation?

You are not alone. Many graduates finish university knowing what they have studied but not yet knowing what they want to do with it. Others know exactly what they want but cannot get past the experience barrier that so many entry-level job descriptions seem to require.

A graduate internship is one of the most practical solutions to both problems. It gives you real commercial experience, a chance to test a role or sector before committing to it, and a structured way into the job market that does not rely on having the perfect CV already.

This guide explains what a graduate internship involves, why it is worth doing, and how to get the most from one.

Step internships

All Step graduate internships are paid, structured, and project-based. Over 80% of Step graduate internships lead to a permanent role with the host company. Register your profile at www.step.org.uk to access current opportunities.



What is a graduate internship?

A graduate internship is a fixed-term work placement, typically lasting between three and twelve months, designed for students who are about to graduate or recent graduates who want to build their commercial experience.

Unlike a work experience placement or a casual job, a graduate internship is structured. You will usually have a defined project or set of responsibilities, a line manager who supports your development, and clear objectives for what you are expected to achieve during your time there.

Graduate internships are available across almost every sector and function. Marketing, finance, HR, engineering, operations, IT, and many others all regularly recruit interns through Step.

What makes a good internship?

A well-structured internship gives you real responsibility, not just administrative support tasks. You should have a clear brief, regular feedback, and a genuine opportunity to contribute to the organisation. If you are researching internships, look for ones that describe specific projects or outcomes rather than vague 'exposure to the business'.

How is a graduate internship different from a placement year?

A placement year is completed as part of a degree programme, usually in the penultimate year of study, and typically lasts twelve months. A graduate internship happens after you have finished your degree.

Both are valuable, and the skills developed are similar. The key difference is timing. A graduate internship is for people who either did not do a placement year, want to change direction after graduation, or need to build more experience before moving into a permanent role.

Are graduate internships paid?

All Step graduate internships are paid. You will receive at least the national minimum wage for your work, and many roles offer more depending on the employer and the nature of the project.

Unpaid internships still exist in some sectors, but they are increasingly rare and carry legal risks for employers. If you come across an internship that asks you to work unpaid for more than a week or two of shadowing, it is worth checking whether it meets national minimum wage requirements.



DO	AVOID
✓ Checking the internship has a defined project or role	✗ Treating it as temporary and holding back
✓ Asking about supervision and feedback processes	✗ Waiting to be given tasks rather than asking
✓ Confirming the pay rate before accepting	✗ Assuming it will not lead anywhere permanent
✓ Treating it with the same professionalism as a permanent job	✗ Neglecting to keep records of what you achieve
✓ Networking actively throughout your time there	✗ Staying only within your immediate team
✓ Asking for a reference or recommendation before you leave	✗ Leaving without telling people what you are looking for next

Why do a graduate internship?

The benefits of a graduate internship go well beyond simply having something to put on your CV. Here is what you actually gain.

You get past the experience barrier

The most common frustration graduates face is being told they need experience to get a job, but needing a job to get experience. A graduate internship breaks that cycle.

After completing an internship, you have real commercial experience to talk about in interviews. You have specific examples, actual results, and a context that makes your skills tangible to an employer. You are no longer relying purely on university work to demonstrate what you can do.

It often leads directly to a permanent role

Over 80% of Step graduate internships turn into permanent positions with the host company. Employers use internships to identify people they want to keep, and interns who perform well are frequently offered roles before the position is ever advertised.

Research from the Institute for Student Employers shows that 34% of graduate hires had previously interned for the same company. That is not a coincidence. Employers prefer to hire people they already know can do the job.

Think of it this way

An interview tells an employer what you say you can do. An internship shows them what you actually do. That is a much stronger basis for a hiring decision, and it works in your favour as much as theirs.

You build genuine professional skills

University develops academic skills. An internship develops professional ones. These include how to communicate in a workplace, how to manage your time when there is no timetable to follow, how to handle feedback, and how to contribute in a team where people are working to real deadlines and real outcomes.

These are the soft skills that employers consistently say graduates lack, and an internship is the most direct way to develop them.

You find out what you actually want to do

Graduating without a clear career direction is more common than most people admit. A graduate internship lets you test a sector or role before committing to it. You might discover that marketing suits you far better than the finance career you had planned, or that a small company environment fits you better than a large corporate one.

That kind of discovery is genuinely valuable. It is far better to find out during a six-month internship than two years into a graduate scheme.

You build a professional network

The people you meet during an internship, whether colleagues, managers, clients, or contacts in other organisations, can be the most practically useful thing you take away from the experience.

Make it a deliberate part of your internship to build those relationships. Connect with people on LinkedIn. Ask managers for a brief conversation about their career path. Stay in touch after the internship ends. A professional network built early pays dividends throughout a career.

You gain commercial awareness\

Commercial awareness is consistently cited by employers as one of the qualities most graduates lack. It means understanding how a business operates: how decisions are made, how budgets work, how different functions connect, and what success actually looks like in a real organisation.

You cannot learn this in a classroom. An internship gives you direct exposure to it, and the ability to talk about it convincingly in future interviews is one of the most powerful assets you can have.



Making the most of your internship

Getting an internship is the first step. What you do during it determines how much you actually benefit.

Treat it like a permanent job from day one

This sounds obvious, but many interns hold something back because they know the role is temporary. That is the wrong approach. Employers notice attitude and effort immediately, and those who commit fully are the ones who tend to be offered something at the end.

Turn up on time, meet your deadlines, ask good questions, and take your responsibilities seriously. The internship is, in effect, a very long job interview.

Ask for feedback regularly

Do not wait until the end of the internship to find out how you are doing. Ask your manager for informal feedback after your first few weeks, and again at the halfway point. This shows you are invested in improving, and it gives you the chance to correct anything before it becomes a problem.

Keep a record of what you achieve

One of the most common mistakes interns make is leaving without being able to articulate what they actually did. Keep notes throughout your internship: projects you worked on, problems you solved, results you contributed to, and skills you developed.

This material is invaluable when updating your CV, preparing for future interviews, and asking for a reference at the end of your placement.

Network deliberately

Your immediate team is not the only part of the organisation worth knowing. Ask to meet people in other departments. Attend any company events or meetings you are invited to. Connect with people on LinkedIn during the internship, not just at the end.

The relationships you build can lead directly to future opportunities, either within the same organisation or through referrals and recommendations further down the line.

Be clear about what you are looking for

If you want to be considered for a permanent role, say so. Do not assume your manager knows you are interested. Have an honest conversation towards the end of your internship about your ambitions and whether there might be an opportunity to continue.

Even if there is no permanent role available, a strong reference and a clear expression of interest cost you nothing and could open doors later.

Graduate internship checklist

Use this checklist before and during your internship to get the most from the experience.

Before you start

- ☐ Confirmed the internship is paid and the rate is clear
- ☐ Understood what the project or role involves
- ☐ Asked who your line manager will be and how feedback will be given
- ☐ Updated your LinkedIn profile to reflect the new role

During the internship

- ☐ Keeping notes on projects, achievements, and skills developed
- ☐ Asking for feedback at the midpoint, not just the end
- ☐ Connecting with people across the organisation, not just your team
- ☐ Treating every day with the same professionalism as a permanent role
- ☐ Being clear with your manager about your interest in a permanent position

Before you leave

- ☐ Asked your manager for a reference or LinkedIn recommendation
- ☐ Updated your CV with specific achievements from the internship
- ☐ Connected with key contacts on LinkedIn
- ☐ Had a conversation about next steps, whether at this company or elsewhere

Ready to find your graduate internship?

Step Recruitment is a leading provider of paid, structured graduate internships across the East Midlands and beyond.

Register your profile today at www.step.org.uk

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