

What an experience!

Working in the vacation

After a year's hard work at university what is the best way to spend that well-earned summer vacation? Perhaps lazing beside a pool in some sunny clime, trekking through jungle swamps, or working in a local pharmacy? The answer, in the opinion of pharmacy recruitment executives, is that if you have any real intention of making your career in the profession you should spend at least part of your break getting yourself some pharmacy experience. I spoke to a number of people responsible for vacation and preregistration recruitment in the hospital and community pharmacy sectors, and to a university careers advisor. They told me about the kinds of experience provided, how to get a vacation placement in the first place and then how to get the most out of it.

Work programmes

The larger community pharmacy companies all offer a structured programme, varying from four to eight weeks in length. Many hospitals also have formal vocational experience schemes, based on portfolios designed by NHS education and training regions. Work programmes are tailored to the level of students' work experience rather than the stage they are at in their university course so, for example, a third year student working in a community pharmacy for the first time would be put on a level one experience programme. All vacation programmes provide a workbook or manual for the student to work through during their placement. These contain materials on clinical topics, including chronic diseases, and in community pharmacy programmes on responding to symptoms and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines. Work skills such as time

management, interpersonal relations, etc, are also covered, and all material is orientated towards on hands-on practice rather than theory. All programmes also now include lots of practice in dispensing calculations. The tutor is normally the branch or department manager, who also monitors the student's progress and sends a report on performance to the personnel or recruitment department at the end of the placement.

Securing a placement

Competition for vacation places is strong — there are at least four, and for some placements up to eight, applications for every place — so it is important to make yours effective, especially as most employers do not interview but select purely on the basis of the application form.

Apart from making the application form really count, how can you maximise your chances of securing a placement? The message from employers is to be flexible. Generally, they are overwhelmed with applications to work in the large metropolitan centres (London, Birmingham, Manchester, etc) or near universities where schools of pharmacy are situated. Applicants who choose less popular areas, at least as a second choice, are more likely to find a place.

Employers also advise that if you cannot obtain a placement via a company or hospital region central recruitment scheme, it is worth making a direct approach locally. Some community pharmacy branches may be able to take on and pay for a student from their own rather than the company's training budget; the branch manager is the person to see about this. Some hospitals are not part of an organised vacation training

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scheme, but again may be able to take on students on an individual basis. Some hospitals may not be able to afford to pay a student but will take one on for unpaid work experience. Independent community pharmacies also often take on vacation students, and while not all have structured programmes they all provide valuable and relevant experience.

What about the job?

Once you have got your placement, your objectives in the job and those of your employer could be quite different. As well as earning some cash to get you through the summer and set you up for the academic year ahead, you will be aiming mainly to get a flavour of what working life is like in a particular branch of the profession, or a particular company, to help you decide on your future career. But if you also aim to impress your employer with your hard work and initiative you will be lining up closely with your employer’s objective, which is to assess you as a potential preregistration trainee and future long-term employee.

Unlike your university, your employer will not be looking so much for academic achievement as for personal qualities and skills. Your tutor is likely to have to complete an appraisal form at the end of your placement to send to the personnel or recruitment department, summing up your performance. He or she will be looking for someone who is committed, enthusiastic, hard-working, eager to learn, focussed on self-development, has good communication skills, interacts well with both patients or customers and staff, and who can work as part of a team.

You will also be judged on your self-management qualities, which include initiative and drive, your ability to seek out sources of knowledge and experience for yourself and to plan and organise your time. Your tutor will also be checking on how well you have completed your workbook or manual, and keeping an eye on the mundane, but important, things such as your attendance record, punctuality and appearance.

What to choose

Many students will want to use the three summers available to them to get experience of different pharmacy environments, hospital as well as community, or perhaps different community pharmacy companies. Some may even be able to sample work in the pharmaceutical industry. Places here are scarce but are occasionally advertised, and you should keep an eye on your careers or vacation opportunities notice board.

Vacation placement employers do not mind you extending your experience elsewhere, but do not seem to value it particularly. Some community pharmacy companies put more store by commitment to the company, and are likely to be more impressed with you as a long-term prospect if you work for them in all your vacations, and possibly part-time during term time as well. However, none insist on this, and say that when it comes to prereg applications they are happy to consider any student who has spent at least part of their vacations acquiring skills that can be applied to the pharmacy workplace.

With at least four applicants for every placement there are bound to be some students who, try as they might, are unable to get one. And there may be others who are looking to broaden their horizons beyond pharmacy during one of their vacations, at least. You should choose what you do bearing in mind the skills that you want to acquire, although most

general workplace skills are transferable to pharmacy. Having spread your wings a little you may even find that what you did during that vacation is what you would like to continue as a career after you qualify. The table below gives some of the vacation opportunities outside pharmacy and how to go about getting them.

Goals

To sum up, to get the most out of your summer vacations you should have the following goals in mind:

- ▶ To gain some experience of what working in pharmacy will be like, preferably in more than one environment during the three summers available to you
- ▶ To acquire some of the workplace skills you will need once you have graduated and will be working full-time, to stand you in good stead for your prereg placement and make you a better employment prospect
- ▶ To earn some money to help you through the coming academic year
- ▶ And, just as important as the others, to have some holiday to recharge your batteries and get refreshed ready for the next academic year.

TABLE

Vacation opportunities outside pharmacy

- ▶ Look on your university’s career service’s vacation vacancies list or file, there are many opportunities on offer. The careers adviser will help you and offer advice.
- ▶ Vacation internships. Usually eight week placements, often project based, offered by large companies such as the clearing (high street) banks, large retailers (eg, Marks and Spencer, John Lewis, etc), accountancy and law firms, etc. Advertised via the university.
- ▶ Office based ‘temping’ jobs, usually obtained via employment agencies.
- ▶ Temporary work via specialist employment agencies (eg, laboratory work, foreign language work for bilingual students).
- ▶ Jobs found through friends or family.
- ▶ Work on special projects (eg, wildlife, environmental conservation).
- ▶ Voluntary work for charities. Unpaid, but valuable experience and worthwhile.
- ▶ Unpaid work shadowing.