

Finding an Ideal Fit

BY LORI GILMORE

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to work for a breed association or a state cattlemen's group? Maybe a career in sales or marketing would be the ultimate. Perhaps your lifelong dream entails placement in production agriculture.

If you want to gain a competitive edge or if you're still uncertain of your future, an internship can help you "try on" a prospective profession. Whether it's done during the summer, a semester or spring break, participants can learn new skills and at the same time demonstrate abilities in the working world. While some schools require it, any pre-career work experience can strengthen a resumé.

"An internship is a wonderful opportunity for a student to get a sneak preview of a potential job or career opportunity," says Charles Olson, assistant dean for academic programs for career development and placement at the University of Illinois. "It also helps students learn about their own personal likes and dislikes."



LORI GILMORE PHOTO

■ Matt Caldwell

Matt Caldwell tested several internships prior to discovering a path that best suited his expectations.

"After talking with my advisors, I realized I needed work experience," says Caldwell, now a regional manager for the American Angus Association. His duties require him to cover a three-state territory of Colorado, Kansas and Oklahoma.

While many may put off pursuing a formal internship until their college days are numbered, Caldwell sought out his first job much earlier. He signed on as a crop scout after his freshman year at the University of Missouri.

He admits he accepted the initial position primarily for the money, but after that searched for career-building opportunities directly related to his field of interest. In all, this northeast Missouri native completed four internships while working on an undergraduate degree in animal science.

Caldwell's other "real-world" assignments included traveling the state promoting the corn checkoff for the Missouri Corn Merchandising Council; conducting a follow-up study to the Missouri Performance-Tested Bull Sale for the state's beef improvement association; and assisting commercial producers in forming the MFA Alliance Advantage program.

While the first three were carried out during the summer, the Alliance Advantage internship coincided with the fall semester of his senior year. That meant juggling a job along with course work. That particular position later led to additional part-time employment during his final college term.

According to Caldwell, not only did the internships help him bolster his resumé with a variety of industry experiences, but they all served as great networking opportunities.

■ Paula Meeker

Paula Meeker, a senior majoring in agricultural economics at the University of Illinois, witnessed firsthand a medley of agricultural careers through a unique summer internship. During the summer of 1998 she participated in "Opportunities for Women in Production Agriculture and Related Areas" offered by Carol Keiser, owner of C-Bar Cattle Co., Carlinville, Ill.

"Like the title says, it involved opportunities — different opportunities," Meeker says. Meeker, who grew up on a diversified grain and livestock farm near Mason City, Ill., found out about the internship from college friends.

Some days were spent working at Keiser's 2,000-head-capacity feedlot, while others involved traveling with local agricultural sales representatives. Networking and meeting leaders on industry tours served as an important component of her summer activities.

Growing up in central Illinois raising Angus, Meeker already had a cow-calf background. She expanded her education by working at Keiser's backgrounding feedlot.

"When we first started, we had to process, tag and give all the vaccinations," she says. "Other days we carried out basic chores — feeding and treating sick ones."

Another part of Meeker's responsibilities included placing the cattle in another feedlot. That involved researching and deciding to which feedlot to send the 600-pound (lb.) animals. "I called various feedlots and asked about their feeding and management practices," she says. In order to determine where to send the cattle, she had to figure feed rations and processing and treatment costs.

"I had to do a lot of marketing to decide where we should send them," she says. "I had taken one marketing class before that, but it hadn't prepared me for 'real life.'"

■ Moriah Olson Pohlman

To build on her meats science knowledge, perfected by her participation on Texas A&M University's 1997 meats judging team and on-campus job with the meat science department, Moriah Olson Pohlman of Laramie, Wyo., pursued an internship with the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program.

"Internships can help prepare you for the 'real world' more so than just sitting in a classroom," says Pohlman, formerly of Hereford, Texas. In fact, she supplemented her animal science curriculum with hands-on learning secured through two industry positions.

For five months in early 1998 Pohlman left Texas to work as the CAB Program's first marketing services intern. Some of her responsibilities at the Wooster, Ohio, headquarters included developing the Program's 20th-anniversary cookbook and writing promotional literature.

"I learned a lot about marketing," says this former National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) Board member. "As an animal science major, it was like getting an additional degree."

At the conclusion of her marketing apprenticeship, Pohlman immediately took on a summer assignment with Freedman Food Service, a large Dallas-based distributor. There she was able to get a firsthand glimpse of the foodservice sector and the role the business plays in getting beef to the consumer. Her duties ranged from working on the production line to sales and product return.

■ Susan Waters

"There are a lot of good people who have taken the right courses and made good grades; however, when it comes to hiring, we look beyond that," says Susan Waters. She understands the value of industry experience — both as a former intern and now as an Association staff member



Regional Manager Matt Caldwell completed four internships while working on an undergraduate degree in animal science.



Paula Meeker witnessed a medley of agricultural careers through a unique summer internship called "Opportunities for Women in Production Agriculture and Related Areas."



Susan Waters interned at the American Angus Association prior to becoming a full-time employee. As director of communications and public relations, she now hires interns for summer help.

responsible for hiring summer help. Each summer the American Angus Association employs three interns to assist in public relations, junior activities and the *Angus Journal*.

When interviewing candidates, the Association's public relations director looks for industry experience and involvement in extracurricular activities. "It shows initiative and a willingness to set goals and put forth the effort it takes to reach them," she says.

Waters says she reconfirmed her career direction through her two internship experiences. As a college senior, she worked for the Missouri Cattlemen's Association. After graduating from the University of Missouri, Waters became the Association's first public relations intern. Prior to that, she developed writing skills by working on campus for the *Columbia Missourian* newspaper and sharpened her verbal communications as a livestock judging team member.

"I am confident if I had not interned at the Angus Association, I would not be where I am today," Waters says. "They gave me a lot of responsibility and an opportunity to experiment and grow with the position." Two years after completing her internship and after working for an advertising agency, Waters became a permanent Association employee.

"They had a good understanding of my skills and abilities and knew that I would fit well with the team," she says.

■ Dan Moser

While some employers use internships to screen future applicants, not every summer job will lead to full-time employment. Perhaps, like Dan Moser, Manhattan, Kan., you'll find that a certain type of job isn't a perfect fit.

Moser, now an assistant professor in the department of animal sciences and industry at Kansas State University, changed his career direction after completing an internship.

According to Moser, working for ABS Global the summer prior to his senior year served as a valuable eye-opening encounter. He was hired to travel a four-state region to meet with ABS semen customers and to collect progeny information for the company's genetic-trait summary.

"I found I really enjoyed working for the company and their customers and studying genetics," Moser says. Yet, after meeting the demands of the position, he admitted that he learned a lot about himself.

Prior to that, Moser visualized ideal future employment involving extensive travel. "After living out of a suitcase in a rental car all summer, I gained a new perspective," Moser says. "The best lesson I learned that summer: It wasn't something I wanted to do the rest of my life."

Illinois' Olson advises students not to feel bad if, after completing an internship, you discover the job isn't for you. "The most beneficial experience is that you avoid the wrong career path," he says. "That is



Mariah Olson Pohlman was the first marketing services intern for the Certified Angus Beef Program.

the whole purpose of an internship — to help you sort out what you think is going to be best for you."

Moser went on to receive his undergraduate degree at Kansas State, then he pursued both a master's degree and a doctorate in beef cattle genetics from the University of Georgia. After



Dan Moser thought he wanted a career that would involve extensive travel. A summer internship changed his mind.

holding a faculty position at the University of Nebraska, Moser is now back home on staff at Kansas State. Today he advises students and assists with the department's internship program.

Finally, Olson urges students not to turn away opportunities based on the title and whether

college credit can be received.

"Don't get hung up on the fact that the company has to call it an internship," he says. "The main goal should be getting practical experience in an industry that you have interest in learning more about. And any experience you can get will be beneficial." **AJ**

Devising a game plan

Even if graduation seems far off, it's not too early to start looking for "real-world" work. The following are some helpful hints to help you gain a competitive edge.

- Start exploring job possibilities several months in advance. It's not too early to start looking for a summer internship during the fall semester. According to Charles Olson, over the last two years 75% of on-campus interviews for Illinois' College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences students occurred in the fall.
- Ask questions — turn to your academic advisor and other faculty members.
- Talk to your peers about their previous experiences. "Seniors just completing internships are often the best sources of what opportunities are out there and where the good jobs really are," says Dan Moser of Kansas State University.
- Register with career services or your college or campus office that coordinates job placement and internships.
- Talk to everyone you know. Some of the best internships are found by word of mouth. American Angus Association Public Relations Director Susan Waters suggests telling others you're thinking about getting experience in a particular field. Then ask if they know of any opportunities or people to contact for more information.
- Make informal industry contacts. Let these people know you're interested in securing employment.
- Compile a list of companies you're interested in pursuing. By the end of the fall semester, you should have this completed.
- Develop and continuously update your resumé and cover letter.
- Listen for class announcements, look at bulletin boards and turn to the college Web site for the latest in job postings.
- For those employers not coming to campus to interview, start sending inquiry letters early in the spring semester.
- Follow up with a phone call to express your interest in the position.

Remember, more than likely the perfect opportunity won't find you; you'll have to take the initiative and search for it.

— by Lori Gilmore