

Internships: The competitive world of work experience

By **Lindsay Baker** BBC News

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When it emerged that government adviser and former Dragon's Den judge James Caan had given his daughter a leg-up with an internship in his own company, accusations of hypocrisy followed, as Mr Caan was meant to be championing social equality.

But for those young people whose parents let them "find their own way" in their careers, **as Mr Caan advocated**, what is the chance of getting such prized work experience?

Competition has never been so fierce for internships, it seems. Westminster School recently ran into controversy with an auction where work placements at top companies, Coutts Bank among them, were on offer to the highest bidder.

"I've done nine internships. Now I just need to find a job"

Yara Silva MA student

"You can't leave university now without some work experience," says Ollie Sidwell, founder of ratemyplacement.co.uk, who recently had one desperate father call him offering to pay for his daughter to do a placement with the site. "So many people get degrees, you have to stand out. And now 61% of graduates end up working for the company they have interned for. It's how it works now."

"Competition has grown massively," agrees Simon Pullin of milkround.com, a website specialising in opportunities for young people. He estimates that for the most popular sectors - IT, marketing, and business - there are at least 100 applicants per internship.

"The company gets a chance to vet the intern during their time there, and see if they might fit in permanently." James Caan promoted fairer access to job opportunities for young people

'Get a grip'

"I would rather hire someone as an intern who has had the initiative to research the industry, rather than someone who's been touted out by a parent"

Heather Finlay Director, Sainted PR

It is especially important in the current climate, Mr Pullin adds, where there is competition for graduate-entry jobs "from people with more experience who may have been made redundant".

So it is no surprise then that some parents want to help pull strings for their children.

For Gus Baker, head of Intern Aware, it is "pointless to moralise about parents wanting to give their children the best chance".

"We're never going to be able to stop that, it's a natural instinct," he says. "But the big businesses need to get a grip, and make sure that they are hiring the best person for the job, not just the person who happens to have connections.

"And they need to pay them properly too," he adds. "It's bad for business to rely on people from a narrow pool - it leads to 'group think.'"

'Who you know'

Many major institutions and businesses are tightening up their policies to root out nepotism, it seems.

'Three-year waiting list'

Rhiannon, 17, from near Swansea did work experience at a publishing company after meeting its staff at a writing workshop.

"I tried to get one with the local newspaper. It is not a very big one, but the waiting list was just ridiculous. I was told they had absolutely no space for the next three years - even to shadow someone for a week. It was insane.

"Work experience is a huge part of my personal statement for applying for university. I need to show that I have an outside interest in the subject I want to study and to show I have real world experience in it, not just an academic interest.

"If parents have a business, then they take on their child or their child's friends. It is really hard because you might have the enthusiasm and the qualifications for it, but if someone else is related to them or knows them, they will have the upper hand on you.

"You have to really put yourself out there. I am going to see if I can work in the Welsh Assembly next year. I am going to start emailing people this summer to try to organise something. It is always good to have talked to people beforehand so that you have got contacts for next year."

As Mr Sidwell puts it: "Banks, law firms, the whole market is changing. It used to be who you know, but that's not the case any more."

Now internships are a core part of recruitment policies, he says. "It's a pipeline for candidates coming in, and each line manager will now have an intern as part of their team."

An internship with financial services organisation Deloitte is a particularly hot ticket. It has won awards and topped surveys for its recruitment schemes.

For every 350 second-year student placements, they receive 10,000 applications, which need to be sent a year in advance.

Rob Fryer, its head of student recruitment, says the system guarantees fairness.

"Every candidate goes through the same application process regardless of their background," he says. In other words, there's no back way in.

Interns are not left making the tea or standing about aimlessly, he says. "They'll go to client sites with their team, do stock takes, in some cases deliver presentations and partner pitches. That way they get an insight into what we do, and we can gauge their potential. In a sense it's like an elongated job interview."

Top employers talk of "rigorous" assessment programmes. For Barclays, another top-rated employer, the process can begin almost a year ahead of the start of the internship.

Websites open for applications in August or September for the following year's graduate intake.

"In an effort to beat their competition to the best talent, firms are reviewing applications earlier and earlier and on a rolling basis, so waiting until the deadline can sometimes be too late," says Jane Clark, head of campus recruitment at Barclays Investment Bank.

Top tips for getting an internship

- Research and identify organisations to focus on, rather than applying to loads - fewer, carefully considered applications will increase your chances
- Apply early and tailor your application to the placement
- Get under the skin of the companies you're applying for - demonstrate knowledge and understanding of their culture and values
- Think about how appropriate your experience and personality is for the role
- Mirror the way in which employees at the organisation dress and communicate, as first impressions count
- Network with potential employers who you've met, perhaps on campus or at events, on social networking sites - most organisations have official Twitter handles and LinkedIn groups
- Don't be afraid of rejection - it may take a few applications before you find the right role to suit you - keep a positive mind and learn from your mistakes

By Ollie Sidwell, founder, Ratemyplacement.co.uk

'Passion and knowledge'

In the end, says Yara Silva, 22, an MA student of magazine journalism at City University, it comes down to determination. "I applied incessantly to every magazine or newspaper I could think of, dozens of them," she says.

Best big firms for internships

1. Barclays (banking)
2. Grant Thornton (accountancy)
3. PricewaterhouseCoopers (financial services)
4. Linklaters (Law)
5. Ernst & Young (financial services)
6. BDO (financial services)
7. GSK (pharmaceuticals)
8. KPMG (financial services)
9. Deloitte (financial services)
10. Morgan Stanley (investment)

Source: ratemyplacement.co.uk

"Some never replied but some did. During my time at university I've done nine internships - around 18 weeks of work - as well as working as an editor on the uni paper, and I'm lucky I could live at home and do that.

"I learned so much, and wouldn't have felt ready to start my career if I'd not done that. Now I just need to find a job."

Corinna Pyke, the marketing director of Borough Wines, recruits most of her interns from a wine institute. "They come with an existing passion and knowledge about wine," she says. She avoids taking on the children of friends as a favour, as they are not as motivated.

"It's like having another job, finding their kids projects and explaining everything. They end up being annoying."

The need for motivation and perseverance is underlined by Heather Finlay, director of Sainted, a PR business in the highly competitive music industry sector. She receives many requests for work placements and some of the successful ones have gone on to full-time jobs at the company.

"I would rather hire someone as an intern who has had the initiative to research the industry and send me an email themselves, rather than someone who's been touted out by a parent.

"When people come through that way, it's not the same. They have been handed it on a plate and they don't have that hunger, that fire in their belly."

You're hired: Now here's how to be the perfect intern

- When you start an internship, they will want to see a positive attitude and an eagerness to learn and develop
- Throw yourself into the mix and seek out all the possible opportunities at your disposal
- You can also see your internship as a tool to find out where your strengths and weaknesses are, so you can look to develop and grow in these areas
- Network as much as possible, get to know those you are working with, you never know what opportunities may arise
- Push for your own project, something you can get your teeth stuck into and make your mark on

Source: Laura Smith, milkround.com