

## MBA Summer Internship Series

by David Ohrvall

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Getting off to a good start
- 3) I got the job! Can't wait to go back.
- 4) I got the job! But I don't want to go back.
- 5) No offer. Now what?

### 1) Introduction

Before you know it, "What are you doing for the summer?" will quickly convert to "How was your summer job?" The summer internship goes by fast. One moment you are thrilled to have a summer position; and the next moment you're wrapping it all up. As a savvy MBA, it's time to analyze how to take advantage of each stage of the process. Make plans now to get your internship off to a great start, and stay focused on your main goal—a full-time offer. This article outlines several situations you may encounter, and shows you how to leverage your summer experience into the full-time job you want.

### 2) Getting off to a good start

Five weeks is all you have. I know I'm being a kill joy. But realistically, at about the halfway mark of a ten week internship, firm partners will ask the managers to identify the interns most likely to succeed. The same is true outside of consulting firms: no marketing, financial or industry group is going to wait until the very end of the summer to decide if they want you full time. That means you need to get off to a solid start with your summer. Here are some tips for starting strong.

**Be all business** – Find ways to create value right from the beginning. Soak up the training, learn the tools, get to know the typical outputs, and zero in on successful peers who are 1-2 years into the job. There is a lot of "rah rah" at the beginning of every summer and it is easy to be distracted. As you try to absorb all these things at once, remember the 80/20 rule: most of your value will come from a few things. Personally, I worked for Bain for my summer internship and my most important output was a pricing model that I developed early in the summer. They apparently continued to use it after I was gone. Be ready to make something that leaves your mark.

**But be lots of fun** – While getting down to business you also have to play the game. That is, the game of appearing to enjoy yourself. It may be hard to do because you are SO STRESSED OUT ABOUT GETTING THE OFFER. Some people go a little too far in this category and forget about their work. They become social butterflies, caught up in the office fun, politics and personalities. Striking a balance is critical. Here are a few guidelines:

- **Never miss an event.** If it was planned for your summer internship group or the whole office, you must go. And stay the whole time. Don't let it be known that you showed your face for a few minutes and then snuck back to your cube to do more work. Everyone wants to see if you can balance your work and play, so make sure that you give the fun events adequate time.
- **Never gossip.** Stay above the fray and never say anything bad about your manager, peers, the office or company. Remember, you are just a visitor for the summer. You have no real alliances and anything you say will travel far and quickly.
- **Participate.** If everyone is playing volleyball but you're afraid to play because you're terrible at it, play anyway. Being able to laugh at yourself is a great trait. No one will remember if you can't serve the ball, but they will remember if you sit on the sidelines.
- **Be ready to burn the midnight oil.** Balancing fun with hard work is, well, hard work, so plan to put in extra hours. That may mean you quietly take some work home or start extra early each day to stay on top of things. Avoid falling behind. The summer is very short and it can be hard to catch up. Try to keep your social and family obligations light.

**Focus on your manager** – Your offer decision will rest mainly in the hands of your manager. When I have clients who did not receive a summer offer, their story typically centers on a problem with his or her manager. Their relationship soured due to

differences in personalities, work styles, or an unfortunate client situation. Consequently, the manager would not stand up for him or her at the end of the summer. Make your relationship with your manager a top priority.

**Be a spider** – Since your manager will have to explain his decision to other managers and partners, build a web of people who have seen your great work. If you find yourself isolated by the engagement or client situation, do your best to make others aware of what you are doing. Other senior people in the office can sway an “on the fence” decision. The more connections you build, the greater your chances of receiving an offer.

### 3) Loved my job! Got an offer. I plan to go back. I may interview a little just to be sure.

Congratulations! You’re now part of the Lucky Summer Club. In my experience the only people who plan to go back for sure are the ones who landed summers with the most elite management consulting firms (McKinsey, Bain, BCG) or banks, and who fit really well with that firm’s culture. Everyone else typically wants to upgrade brands, get more money, find a new location or just explore. Assuming you are interviewing lightly and are not that serious about switching to another firm, here’s a game plan that will help you avoid getting pummeled on campus by jealous classmates, while strengthening your position with your new employer:

**Keep it low-key on campus** – OK, ok, we know you had a great time whitewater rafting and having drinks with the managing partner. And, sure, it must be great to know exactly what you want to do, not have to go through interview stress all over again, and not suck up to all the firm reps—but please, chill. Your classmates can only be happy for you for a little while. Like about 5 seconds. So try to stay humble and be helpful. You’re a great resource now for firm information, and of course you’ll make a good mock interview partner. But you’re also an easy target for gossip: “He’s so different since the summer . . .”. Try to stay above it all by keeping a low profile about your success.

**Keep your bridges strong** - You made a lot contacts over the summer; don’t let those relationships go cold. You may not be back at the firm for another 12 months, and it will be easy to forget about you. Keep in mind that a whole new summer class will be diverting the firm’s attention before you even start work full time. Here are a few tips for maintaining strong relationships with your firm.

- 1. Thank-you notes:** A grateful e-mail or thank-you card will go a long way in ending the summer well. Despite your stellar performance, key people had to vouch for you behind the scenes for you to get that offer. Thank them properly at the end of the summer and you’ll keep the door open for more conversations
- 2. How can I help?** If you have said yes to the offer, you now basically work for the firm. You should offer to identify “good” people (your classmates), attend firm functions and keep up with office news. Be a good sport about helping out and you’ll keep the positive momentum going from your strong summer. You can be their eyes and ears on campus and they’ll appreciate the extra feedback about students, events and the general tone at your school.
- 3. Two month check-ins:** Don’t forget to touch base with your best contacts and mentors from the summer. High on the list should be the people in recruiting. It’s their job to ensure that all the candidates say yes to the offer and are still excited about the firm. The HR folks are often the hub of information, so other people in the firm will keep tabs on you through them. If you don’t keep in touch, there’s nothing to talk about. Keep your personal brand established in their minds.

**Interview honestly** – If you plan to interview lightly, be as up front as possible. For instance, if you’d never imagine working for a firm, then don’t waste anyone’s time by going to a cocktail reception or dinner just to hang out. Your false interest is a lose-lose for everyone: it complicates your life, the interested firm is wasting resources on you, and your classmates have less air time with you there. Instead, be very focused on whom you target and be up front about what you are seeking. Because you already have a great offer, other firms will see you as hard to get. In fact, don’t be surprised if they don’t try to pursue you. They know the odds are against them.

#### **4) Liked my job. Got an offer. Honestly, I hope not to go back. Plan to pursue my dream job.**

Welcome to the majority. Most of your classmates will have had a “great!” summer and be ready to talk about the highlights. But when time allows, they will confess that they’d rather go somewhere else for a full time position. It’s natural to use the summer to assess your options and then look for a better job once you’re back on campus. Everyone from your summer firm expects you to “look around” when you return. Your challenge is to keep your relationships strong with the firm while exploring your options with others. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

##### **Stay honest with your summer company**

The truth is you don’t know what you want to do. And almost everyone you’ll deal with understands that feeling and has probably gone through a similar experience. What can be potentially damaging is when a candidate leads his summer firm to believe that he’s ready to join and then drops the “sorry” bomb at the last minute. Be honest about what’s happening. Your summer firm won’t renege on your offer (they really can’t without serious recruiting consequences) and you are being aboveboard by keeping them up to date on your thought process.

##### **Be reasonable in your negotiations**

Big firms have lots of limits: strict salary and bonus bands, structured training and start dates, defined rules about international transfers and consistent policies for promotions. It’s not likely that you will be an exception to any of these rules. Keep your rank and file status in mind when talking to the firm. “Opportunities” may be mentioned or “we’ll try our best” might be said a few times, but honestly, the offer you have in your hand is about as good as it’s going to get. If you push too hard for special treatment you’ll be tagged a whiner from day one and it may take awhile to lose that label. So tread cautiously when negotiating for a new request.

##### **Mine out your experiences while they are fresh**

Since you are interviewing seriously for a better offer, take stock of what you did for the summer. Most of your fit interviews going forward will cover your summer experience, so use it to show off your talents and your ability to work through challenging situations. One of my clients this summer hit a bump in his road to an offer when the mid-term review praised his focus and solid work, but highlighted his need to be a better team player. Somehow his serious focus on output and HBS (Harvard) credentials rubbed people the wrong way. Fortunately after a month of warming up his work relationships and spending more time connecting with the team, everything ended fine and resulted in an offer. And now he has a fresh example for questions relating to his weaknesses, overcoming an obstacle, or confronting criticism. Take the time to think through what you learned this summer, especially the challenging aspects. Pull out as much details as you can now while the examples are still clear in your mind.

##### **Be ready to explain your desire to change firms**

“So why don’t you want to go back to XYZ company?” Get used to hearing this question. You’ll need to walk the fine line of being positive about your summer job (and how great the company was) while expressing your desire for something different. Stay focused on what you think you’ll gain by switching to another firm and try your best to know the unique attributes of the company you’re targeting. Every interviewer likes to hear that his or her firm is great (it reaffirms their own decision to grind it out every day) and it shows that you have done your homework. Feel free to emphasize the specific skills you are pursuing, but be sure to remind the interviewer of the skills you already have.

## 5) Did not like my job. Did not get an offer. What do I do?

Yes, you are in a tough spot. Not only do you not have an offer, but you also probably didn't have much fun this summer and are understandably discouraged about your career. Unfortunately, you can't just forget about it because it's on your resume. A few of my coaching clients landed their dream summer jobs but did not get a full time offer at the end of the summer. We had to strategize carefully how to handle the 2nd year interview season. With lots of planning up front and a few pep talks from friends, you can come out of the process with a great full time job. Here are the same tips I gave them:

### **Write out your side of the story and stick to it**

There are undoubtedly many angles to your summer story. Avoid the temptation to explain everything. You'll only sound overly defensive. Keep your responses brief and straight-forward; you don't want the interviewer to be confused about what happened.

### **Convert your story into 15, 30 and 60 second answers**

You'll hear this question frequently in the fall: "So, are you thinking about going back to (your summer company) full time?" Develop several short answers of varying length to accommodate the level of interest coming your way. Most people are happy with a brief explanation. When the question arises, be ready with some of these topics:

1. What you did wrong and how you have learned from it.
2. What you could have done differently.
3. A few factors that made the summer challenging (e.g. no client map, a small team, an absent manager, an extremely undefined project)
4. How you tried to finish strong and make the best of it

### **Understand the firm's side of the story and what they'll say if asked**

Many industries have a tight ex-MBA network of peers and friends. Don't be surprised if one of your target firms calls your summer company and asks your summer manager what happened. Be up front with your summer company and find out what they will and will not say about your situation.

### **Have a back-up opportunity**

Recruiters are conservative; they like to look for evidence of future success. Even if this new firm loathes your summer company, they will somewhat respect their care and evaluation of you over the summer. Because your summer company deemed you not worthy of an offer, your target company may take on the same opinion. In case you keep hitting opposition in your industry of choice, have a back-up in an area that won't care as much. For instance, a bank may not care as much as a consulting firm that your summer consulting firm didn't give you an offer. Although this second industry may not be as appealing, it is good to be prepared.

### **Put the whole thing into perspective**

Everyone you'll be dealing with this interview season has been through a challenging career situation: a project that didn't go well, a tough boss, a dissatisfied client or a poor review. In fact, during my nine years in consulting I experienced every one of those situations at least once. You will find a good full time job and, in the long run, this summer will not have much bearing on your career.