



Handbook of best practices for a successful internship

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1. Benefits of the internship

The mandatory internship you are about to complete is an invaluable opportunity to develop your career.

- **Your transversal skills will grow**

The internship will allow you to develop your technical skills and, above all, your transversal skills, such as your ability to communicate and work in a team to develop a product, service or project.

- **Vous serez familiarisé-e avec les processus de travail en entreprise**

The internship will give you a better insight into the structure and organization of a company. While companies vary widely in type, size, and culture, there are many commonalities in the way departments work together around their different functions: e.g., research and development, sales, consulting, project management, quality, production, management, etc.

The knowledge you gain in this company will be transferable to other environments.

- **Expand your professional network**

The internship will help you build your professional network: every person you make professional connections with during the internship will be a source of future information and opportunities. Today, tools like LinkedIn make it easy to keep in touch with these people.

- **You will add value to your CV**

The internship will appear on your resume and help you find your next job. It will give your portfolio a professional edge that complements your academic education.

For any future application, you will be able to select the relevant elements of your internship that will be of interest to the future recruiter.

- **You will have clearer criteria for your future career choices**

During your internship, you will discover tasks or environments in which you feel naturally comfortable or interested, and others in which you feel the opposite of what you like or can do well.

This will give you clues as to the types of jobs and environments where you have the best chance of expressing your potential and flourishing, and will help guide your future choices.

Above all, do not be discouraged by the stress and obstacles that are normal when you are making progress or facing new environments and challenges. On the contrary, use this experience to discover where your natural talents lie, which will be the source of your motivation if you use them well.

2. EPFL support during the internship

- **The internship is part of your master program at EPFL**

During the internship, you remain a full EPFL student; the internship is an academic project and an integral part of your curriculum.

Of course, EPFL will not supervise your internship, as you will have a supervisor within the company, but the School will have validated the topic and the company and will decide, at the end, whether the internship is a success or not. This decision will be based on the company's evaluation and on the reports that must be submitted according to the guidelines of your section (see point 6).



• Difficulties may arise during the internship

It is normal to encounter difficulties at work as everyone has different perspectives and priorities.

In general, these differences of opinion are dealt with through discussion, meetings and reorganization so that solutions can be found and progress can be made together towards a common goal.

In this context, you will need to learn and deploy your organizational, communication and collaboration skills.

• Help find solutions

Your internship supervisor is responsible for supporting you in this process, thanks to his or her experience and position. However, you remain the main actor in the search for solutions, together with your supervisor, a colleague or possibly the Human Resources department, depending on the situation. This is the time to use and strengthen your interpersonal skills (see also points 3 and 4).

• Inform the School of any major blockages or disruptions

If, despite your best efforts, you are unable to improve the situation, or if you find it impossible to communicate with your supervisor, you should inform the School.

As a general rule, if you encounter an obstacle or malfunction that seems abnormal and beyond your control, the School must be informed. In fact, you made this commitment in the internship agreement you signed.

• Confidential support guarantee

The person to contact if you have any concerns is the Internship Coordinator for your section.

The internship coordination within your section guarantees:

- confidentiality of the exchange: the company will not be informed of the content of the discussions, unless you request it
- tips to help you manage the situation
- the fact that your request for support will not influence the success of the internship. The School is there to facilitate your learning and will not penalise a request for help when your attempts to solve the problem yourself have failed.

Finally, in serious cases (fortunately extremely rare), the School may terminate the internship if it deems the situation unacceptable. Details of how to terminate an internship are set out in the agreement.

- **Resources and courses available at EPFL**

In the rest of this document, you will find some tips on communication and organization. However, we recommend that you deepen your understanding of these concepts by attending one of our courses. The Transversal Skills and Career Center runs courses on transversal skills, including the "10+ techniques for successful communication and organization at work" course. For further information, please contact your section's internship coordinator or the [Transversal Skills and Career Center](#).

There are also credited courses on these subjects in some Bachelor's and Master's programs. And even a podcast in french ([Ma carrière, mes collègues et moi](#)).

Take advantage of the time you have at EPFL and during your internship to develop these transversal skills, which are very important for your future career.



3. Integration into the company

- **The way you are welcomed into the company will be different**

Some companies, often the larger ones, welcome new trainees in a highly structured and organized way. Others, usually smaller ones, do it in a more improvised way and provide less support for the first few days.

Whatever the situation, it is your responsibility and in your best interest to integrate quickly into the company and the team.

- **Be part of the team**

The other employees have been working together for a long time and form a team that you will need to fit into. Do not hesitate to meet people to introduce yourself and explain what you will be doing in the coming months and in which team.

If you are asked to share social moments (lunches, breaks, aperitifs), try to make yourself as available as possible, at least for the first few days or weeks. It is very important to bond quickly if you want to be accepted into the group.

For some of us, this step comes naturally. For others, it is less comfortable and does not seem necessary because we think that only our technical skills count.

Nevertheless, teamwork remains essential for the smooth running of projects and the company. It builds cohesion and efficiency. Being part of the team is very important, as is making the effort to do so. Being on the outside of the group could be detrimental to the quality of your work within the company.

• Ask questions

The team you are about to join know each other well and have been working in this environment for a long time. They will not think of telling you everything, not because they are withholding information, but simply because they have absorbed the information so much that they have forgotten that you do not know it.

So do not be afraid to ask questions. There is no such thing as a stupid question: if it seems relevant to your job and if you have not found the answer by consulting the resources provided by the company, it is probably a perfectly legitimate question.

Most people will be very happy to answer and help you if they feel that your questions are coherent and that you have made an effort to answer them yourself first.

Remember that there are closed questions (is it...) and open questions (how, when, why, what, etc.). Only open questions invite your interviewer to give details. So choose the right wording.

Do you want a clear “yes” or “no” status? Use a closed question, not an open one. Conversely, do you want the person to elaborate on their answer? Use an open question, not a closed one.

And do not hesitate to ask a new question, bouncing off the answer received.

***Your curiosity will
save you a lot of time
in your work.***



4. Communication and collaboration with your internship supervisor and the team



The proper questioning skills described in the previous paragraph will be important throughout your internship, not just during the integration phase. But there are other you can use as well.

- **Active listening**

Asking questions is good, but listening is just as important. Too often, we listen mechanically and miss information. It is normal: we have automatic attentional filters that are tuned to our basic assumptions.

When the topic is important, new or sensitive, adopt an "active listening" approach: i.e. focus on what the other person is saying, suspend your references and judgments, and give back what you have understood. It is an "exhausting" way to listen because it takes energy, but it is important to use it when the situation warrants it to avoid loss of information and misunderstandings.

- **Communication channels: meetings, emails and informal exchanges**

The usual means of exchanging ideas in the workplace are meetings, emails and informal, spontaneous discussions by word of mouth or chat. We usually have our own preferences: some of us love impromptu discussions, others hold meetings as soon as a problem arises, and others send lots of emails.

Do not blindly follow your preference, and think about your goal to choose the best way to communicate.



• The pros and cons of the meeting

- The meeting is an effective tool for creating synergy and tapping collective intelligence. It also has the advantage of being announced in advance, so it is not perceived as an interruption and participants are prepared for the exchange.
- However, it must be well managed if it is not to be a waste of time for participants. Ineffective meetings are very costly to companies: too many people are tied up for too long without adding value.
- To avoid wasting time, the purpose of the meeting must be clear and the participants carefully selected. It must be facilitated by someone who ensures that the objective is met and that the contributions of the participants are of high quality.
- A useful meeting must be followed by actions on the decisions made during the meeting. The minutes summarize decisions and actions, with deadlines for completion.
- Writing minutes after (or during) the meeting may seem tedious, but it is essential to keep track of what was decided together and to ensure that actions are followed up.



• The pros and cons of email

- Email has all the advantages of the written word. It is easy to archive and retrieve. It does not interfere with people's work because the feedback is asynchronous.
- Email is not suitable for delicate situations (emerging conflicts) and problems that are too complex or too long to describe.
- In general, people receive too many emails in companies and either read them very quickly or... not completely, or... not at all. So think before you send one more email. And if you do decide to send an email, keep it short and clear.
- Choose the main recipient and copy the others (unless it is an information email). And above all, make it clear what you expect the person to do (e.g. action, deadline, reply, etc.).
- Do not forget that in many cases, a scheduled meeting (even a very short one over the phone) can be a good substitute for an email.

- **Pros and cons of informal discussion (including collaborative chat tools)**

Informal discussions (verbal or via chat) are spontaneous and friendly, but you'll get an unprepared person responding to you with little perspective on the subject and, above all, you will cause an interruption in their concentration.

And do not hesitate to send an email or a written note to your interviewer summarising the main points of the discussion, to check that you have understood each other correctly and to keep a record of the discussion.

- **Test different exchange modes**

Use this time in the company to observe and test. Observe the work of the meeting owner and participants. Some meetings are well run and useful, while others fail to converge and waste time.

What could you improve in your email copywriting to maximize its usefulness?

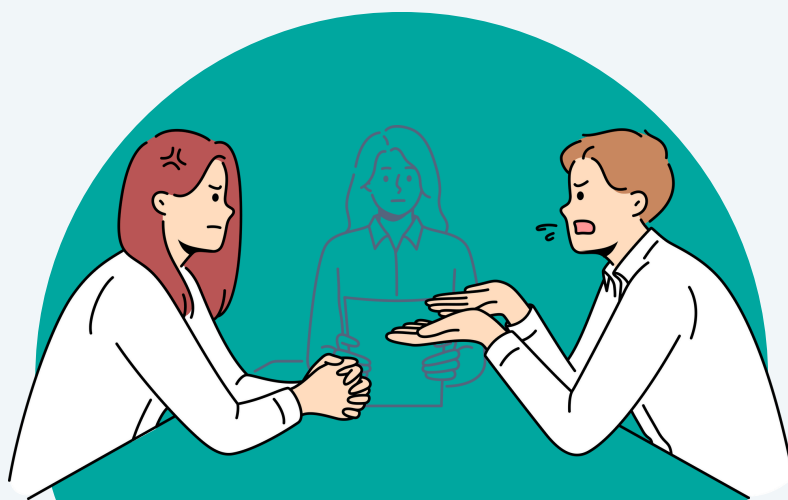
Ask yourself **BEFORE** you send an email, have a meeting, or visit someone: Am I using the best method for my goal?

- **Preventing conflict**

You may find yourself disagreeing with a colleague or supervisor about the next step in your work. This is normal and not a problem, as long as these differences of opinion are handled professionally and the work can continue.

The problem in these situations is that we are often under stress and fall into unhelpful defensive reactions. The risk of escalation is then very high, leading to ever-increasing relational problems and, in extreme cases, to dismissals, resignations or simply a lot of wasted time and energy and a bad atmosphere at work.

To avoid and prevent these situations, you need to apply some conflict management techniques early on, before the problem escalates.



• Conflict management techniques in brief

We describe a few techniques here, but recommend that you take the "10+ communication and organization techniques at work" course offered each semester by the [Transversal Skills and Career Center](#) to learn more about them

The following steps are essential to overcome the conflict and continue working together.

- Get out of defensive mode by reconnecting with what's important to you (your values, your goals).
- Find common ground with the other person. Despite the disagreement, it is very likely that your intentions or goals are not that different.
- Isolate the points of agreement and mention them.
- Talk about the points where you disagree, but sincerely try to understand the possible benefits of the other's solution (yes, yes, there can be some!).
- Talk about your feelings in "I" and avoid judgments in "You". E.g. "I am worried / concerned because I am afraid this approach will not produce the desired results..." rather than "Again, you do not understand".
- Honestly believe that this person is a "good" person, it is just that the circumstances are not ideal for you to work together.
- Agree on the next step and the alternative scenario if the next step does not work.

Of course, these solutions are easier to write than to live! If you are convinced that you are right, or that you are the victim of an injustice, or if you are dealing with people who are not very receptive to your concerns, these solutions will not work like magic. They will remain difficult to implement, but they are worth trying.

We do not have much choice: doing nothing will be even worse and will eventually lead to a break-up.

Your internship supervisor also has a role to play. In an ideal world, this person would make sure that the goals and vision are well aligned with the skills and interests of each team member and the company.

Do not hesitate to talk to him or her if you feel the situation with a colleague is becoming too conflictual. With his or her experience, he or she will be able to give you good advice.

• **Manage your supervisor**

If the problem concerns your internship supervisor, it is even more complicated to solve because you are afraid of the consequences, given the subordinate relationship...

The truth, which is very difficult to accept, is that you also have to "manage" your supervisor. In other words, you have to use the right communication techniques, work on your arguments, listen carefully, etc., in order to make progress with this person.

If, despite your best efforts, you still disagree with your manager, he or she has the right to ask you to do the work because of the authority relationship. You must then do the work as instructed. But you may find that certain aspects of his or her solution make sense and are interesting, and that you can discuss the progress of the work again at another stage of the project and come to an agreement!

In most cases, managers are open to dialog. However, you may encounter exceptions: people who are unpleasant or not forthright. Think of them as challenges that will help you improve your negotiation and communication skills. If the manager is perfect in every way (assuming such a person exists...), you will make less progress.

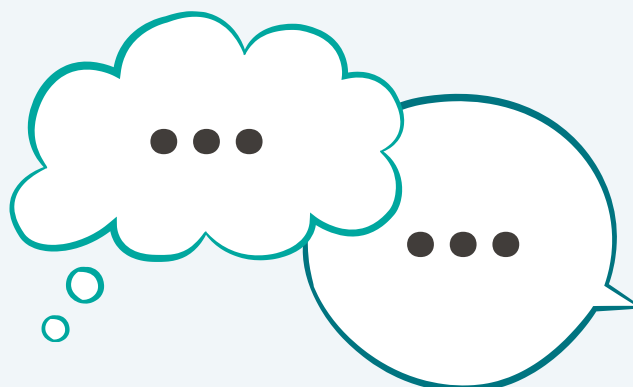
• **Contacts with HR**

If you feel that your manager's behavior is unacceptable and in violation of workplace rules, you should immediately report it to your Human Resources department and to EPFL (see point 2).

If you feel overwhelmed by the situation and have already tried to resolve the problem directly with your manager, you should contact the company's HR department.

It should be noted that in smaller structures there is no HR department, but the HR function can be performed by the company management itself or by people in charge of administration.

This paragraph gives a pessimistic view, which fortunately is not representative of the majority of cases. Feedback from our internships shows that in the vast majority of cases the supervisors are experienced and professional, and that when things are not going so well, a few simple adjustments can quickly improve the situation.



- **Organize reports and show off the work you do**

The team needs to know your results. Take the initiative to share your results and ideas. Sometimes we forget to do this because of lack of time, modesty, fear of disturbing others, or simply because we think our work is obvious to others.

Unfortunately, what you do not see does not exist for others. So remember to let others know about your results and ideas!

Sometimes the company is very well organized so that information is shared with all interested parties. But sometimes it is not.

Take the initiative to determine the format and timing of feedback. This is also a point to discuss with your colleagues and manager to understand how and when they expect you to communicate your progress.

- **Have a solution-oriented mindset**

When you talk about your work, try to talk about solutions, not just problems or risks. Adopt a constructive mindset even when the challenges are difficult. Every human organization has dysfunctions, and we are committed to solving them, not just identifying and complaining about them.

5. Labor law and ethical standards

In a company, all employees are bound by an employment contract, which in turn is subject to the laws of the country in which they work. While these laws vary from country to country, they generally reflect similar contractual obligations of the employee to his or her employer.

- **Duty of confidentiality**

Employees are required not to disclose information to which they have had access within the company with anyone outside the company. Do not tell everyone you know about the details of your work.

This interdiction is particularly important for sensitive information such as trade secrets (product technology, strategy, etc.) or information about the organization or other employees.



Confidentiality applies not only to verbal exchanges, but also to documents and storage locations. Do not store sensitive information at home on personal computers (unless you have the company's permission).

If you need to send an internship report to someone at EPFL, remember that this person is external to the company and ask your supervisor to review the report before sending it to EPFL.

• **Duty of reserve**

Employees have a duty of reserve to the Company. He or she must speak about the Company with care and respect.

The law expects employees to exercise restraint in expressing their personal opinions in writing and orally within the company. The duty of reserve is intended to maintain organizational stability. Differences in opinions should be expressed with reserve and managed in a professional and non-destabilizing manner.

• **Social network**

The duty of confidentiality also applies to social networks. Any student who criticizes the company or speaks out against it on social networks (even private ones) is liable to swift and severe sanctions by the company. As a general rule, do not post any information about the company (without its consent) on social networks.

• **Company rules and discipline**

In addition to your employment contract, the company has probably provided you with documents explaining their safety rules (IT, laboratory, factory, etc.) and discipline rules (working hours, rules for using equipment, rules for remote work, dress code, etc.).

These documents must be read carefully and their instructions must be followed.

Anyone who violates these rules risks being penalized or even dismissed. The School may also penalize unprofessional behavior, if proven, by failing the internship.

• **Remote work**

Remote work is limited to ensure sufficient exposure to work teams and the company environment. Your company has an agreement with EPFL not to exceed a certain amount of telecommuting (usually less than 2 days per week). The goal of the internship is to develop your collaborative skills, and it is important that you do not remain isolated at home to achieve this goal.

• Using EPFL resources

It is not possible to borrow EPFL resources (software, laboratory access, etc.) to work for the company. However, the company can contact a laboratory or department to request expertise, which is usually invoiced.

6. End of the internship

• Documentation for the company

At the end of your internship, plan to leave useful documentation for the team who will use the results of your work in the future. An academic report may not be the best solution. Discuss this with your supervisor and vary the format according to the people who will use your work.

For example, a process data sheet for production workers, a summary diagram for computer architecture, or a set of slides for a non-technical department.

In addition to format, ask yourself the message question? What do I want to leave as a "takeaway" so that my work will be useful after I have left my job?

• Internship report for EPFL

The School will send you an online evaluation form asking for your opinion about the company's organization and your self-assessment of your performance. You will receive this form two weeks before the end of your internship. You may be asked to provide further documentation by your section: some sections may require an additional report, or even a presentation.



• Work certificate

For internships in Switzerland, the law requires the company to issue a work certificate. This document summarizes your main tasks and gives an assessment of the quality of your work. If you feel that a task is missing or is not worded in a way that you feel is fair, you can discuss the matter with your manager or HR, who will agree (or not) to modify it. Note that a reference must be "sympathetic" but respectful of the duty of truth.¹

¹ https://www.seco.admin.ch/seco/fr/home/Arbeit/Personenfreizugigkeit_Arbeitsbeziehungen/Arbeitsrecht/FAQ_zum_privaten_Arbeitsrecht/arbeitszeugnis.html

In other countries, there is no such thing as a reference, but you can ask your manager for a letter summarizing your duties and his or her opinion of the quality of your work.

• Keep in touch

Keep in touch with your colleagues, for example on LinkedIn or with a few emails after you have left. Remember to thank the people you worked with!

Even if these people were "forced" to work with you at the company's request, some of them were probably very generous in sharing their experiences to help you get ahead. That deserves a word from you.

If you can, and if you want to, why not organize a little farewell party? It is sure to leave everyone with fond memories.

7. It's up to you!

A successful internship will bring you much more than just a success mark on your transcript.

You will walk away with enhanced skills, including transversal skills (communication, collaboration, etc.) plus a solid professional network. You will also be better equipped to find your first job, thanks to a better understanding of the work place.

This success is worked on from the first day, through the integration phase, to the last day, when you hand in your work and say goodbye to your colleagues.

To maximize your chances, put the above tips into practice, if they make sense to you, and take the courses the School offers on these topics.

Bear in mind, too, that the working relationship between you and the company implies legal duties on your part, such as reserve and confidentiality. If difficulties arise, remember that this is normal and try to work through them. You make a lot of progress when times get tough, even when it is not pleasant!

However, if the situation seems inextricable or abnormal, do not hesitate to contact your [section's internship coordinator](#), who will help you without penalizing you and in complete confidentiality.



8. Master projects in industry

The Master project is a research project supervised by an EPFL professor and subject to academic rules different from those of an internship.

However, if the Master project also validates the company experience (in cases where no internship has been done before), the advice and remarks in the document are fully valid (except for the point on confidentiality in point 5). For the rest (academic success of the research carried out during the Master project), please refer to the guidelines of your section.

9. Essentials in a nutshell

The 15 golden rules for maximising your chances of a successful internship are summarised below. However, we advise you to go beyond these general statements and refer to the parts of the document that describe the techniques with the details and nuances that will make all the difference.

The 15 golden rules for maximising your chances of a successful internship

1 **Develop your transversal skills:** In addition to your technical skills, focus on your social and communication skills, which are essential for teamwork.

2 **Integrate quickly into the company:** Take the initiative to meet your colleagues, introduce yourself and attend social events to build connections.

3 **Ask questions:** Do not hesitate to ask questions to get the information you need, even if it seems obvious to others.

4 **Listen actively:** In addition to asking questions, practice active listening to understand what you are being told without interpreting too quickly.

5 **Use the right channels of communication:** Adapt your communication methods (meetings, emails, spontaneous discussions) to the objective and situation.

6 **Prevent conflicts:** Use conflict management techniques, remain professional and seek joint solutions before the situation gets out of hand.

7 **Have a solution-oriented mindset:** Do not limit yourself to presenting problems, propose constructive solutions to move forward.

8 **Maintain a positive attitude in the face of obstacles:** Do not be discouraged by stress or difficulties. See them as opportunities to learn.

9 **Take the initiative to communicate results:** Share your ideas and results with the team and your manager on a regular basis, even when you are not asked.

10 **Respect company rules:** Read the rules carefully and comply with them regarding safety, use of equipment and confidentiality. Remote work is also restricted by agreement with the School.

11 **Respect confidentiality and discretion:** Do not divulge sensitive information about the company, either externally or on social networks, and speak about the company with caution and reserve.

12 **Contact the School in case of difficulties:** If you encounter any obstacles or major problems that you cannot resolve with your company, contact the EPFL internship coordinator in your section. The School guarantees confidentiality and support without compromising the success of your internship.

13 **Document your work well:** At the end of the course, leave clear and appropriate documentation so that your results can be used effectively by the company.

14

Stay in touch after the internship: Maintain your professional network after the internship, for example via LinkedIn or email.

15

Take advantage of the courses and resources offered by EPFL: Take courses offered by the Centre for Transversal and Career Skills, such as "10+ techniques for effective communication and organisation", to deepen your transversal skills and maximise your chances of success during the internship and in your future career.

Learn more

For more information, we invite you to visit the internship website or contact your internship coordinator.

go.epfl.ch/infos-stages

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