

A Three Month Investment, a Lifetime of Returns

The building was located in the middle of a relatively wealthy residential neighborhood in the city of Zapopan, bordering cities with Guadalajara. I thought it was a home and was tempted to ask the taxi driver to find the 'real' location of the American Chamber of Commerce. Upon entering the gated building, I introduced myself to Gabby Garcia, the receptionist at the time. She welcomed me as if she were expecting me to arrive and told me to take a seat, as my soon-to-be boss was still in a meeting. She asked me to arrive at 10am the first day, and it was 10:15 when she walked out of the door and greeted me. After exchanging names, Sarai showed me my working space, and then took me around the office to meet my co-workers. At the time, she had another intern working for her as well. I thought Abril was an exchange student as well, but she was a senior at a nearby university studying international business. That day, Abril became my mentor. She showed me how to search the member database and how to organize the information so that it served the intended use and helped me identify important newspaper articles to copy and store in a binder. I left work at 3pm that day, instead of 5 since there was not too much work to be done.

I suppose that I was most surprised that there was no set agenda for my internship. I was expected to help Sarai complete any projects that she had. She even asked me how long I will be interning for, in which I assumed she already knew. That was the first difference that I noted between an American internship and the one that I was about to perform in Mexico.

The biggest challenge at my internship was finding a way to be resourceful to the organization. Unlike many accounting internships in the U.S., working for the American Chamber of Commerce provided me with a lot of free time due to the lack of structure of the internship. As much as I loved the tranquility of a stress-free work day, I began to crave productivity. After one month into my internship, I discussed with Sarai possible projects that I could do for the department of commerce. We agreed that creating a project that would provide feedback to the department and help improve it would be best. I struggled a lot with this project as I could not think of too many ideas to suggest that were tangible ways of improving the department, however, after completing the internship, I had enough exposure to make suggestions. By evaluating the chamber of commerce's events, internship opportunities, employee training, and membership, I gave a solid presentation to the general director and Sarai. The president later asked for a copy.

In general, I felt that due to the nature of the job, it was best to spend my free time working on requirements for school, develop relationships with my coworkers and work on the project. My advice to future interns is for them to find a way to add value to the organization and take control over their project.

Professionally, the greatest benefit of my internship was experiencing the difference in the business culture and how it integrates into international business. By planning the Trade Mission in Seattle, I learned how to cater to both Mexican and American companies. I learned that quite often, we need to follow up with American businesses for coordination and cooperation of hosting the event while we needed to follow up with the Mexican companies to ensure timely responses and deadlines. I learned how to communicate by telephone in Spanish and the proper phrases to use when

asking to speak with a specific person or when requesting for certain information. I believe that it will become useful once I graduate and join the business world. I am studying accounting and international business and by understanding the difference in the business cultures, I can appeal to a broader audience and accomplish business negotiations more effectively.

Personally, the greatest benefit of my internship was learning to assimilate with my coworkers. I fit well with the office culture and I made great friends. Going to work everyday meant that we took time and enjoyed the work day. We spent mornings greeting each other in the kitchen while pouring coffee. In the afternoons, we all gathered around the table and ate lunch together, everyone contributed to a discussion. Frequently, after work we played soccer together, went shopping, or had drinks at a nearby restaurant. It bonded us closer and we were able to work better together in the office. By developing these relationships, I never felt alone and now that I have returned back to Seattle, I continue to keep in contact with them.

I received little guidance by my mentor onsite and my professor on campus. At first, my mentor, Sarai, focused much of her time on her own work and I often had to ask for ways to be of assistance. This surprised me at first because I expected the same attention from my mentor as I had been given in past internships, however, as time passed, I learned that my mentor has constant interns from all over the world and for her, my arrival was normal, whereas for me, it was an experience far from anything I had done before. Over the course of my internship, Sarai and I became friends and learned the working habits of one another. This strengthened the department and we were able to carry out tasks as a team.

My professor on campus provided even less support because he was out of town almost two months. In order to compensate for the lack of support, I stayed in contact with Monya Lemery and an advisor at the business school at UW. They answered questions that I had, and helped me with requirements and deadlines for school.

My weekdays basically consisted of the same pattern. I arrived at work by 9:10 am, just five minutes earlier than everyone else and began reading the newspapers in search of any articles relating to U.S. and Mexican business. Generally, this took some time as I had five different newspaper prints to look through. If any work remained from the day before, I continued that. If not, I helped Sarai return client requests, follow up with any upcoming deadlines, and prepare the logistics of our next event. Generally, I found the time to check my personal emails and research information for my own essays and projects that I had for both the chamber and for UW. We generally had one-hour lunch at around 2:30 in the afternoon and finished work by 5:30 or 5:45pm. Then the rest of my day was free for me to spend exploring a new side of town, playing soccer with my coworkers, or going shopping at the mall.

I spent many weekends traveling with a friend from the U.S. She lived in Morelia and we would coordinate our trips together to meet in another city. I highly recommend that students take the time to travel the country because as with the U.S., one city differs from the other both aesthetically and culturally and helps gain a full understanding of Mexico.

Guadalajara reminded me a lot of Iran, the country where my parents are from, in which I have visited several times. I suppose this was the reason for why the vast differences between Mexico and the U.S. did not surprise me as much as it would have

had I not seen Iran. I imagined that my stay would be rather easy, as I could understand most of what was said to me and I could communicate simple ideas. However, since I still lacked the confidence and skill to speak and understand with ease, I tried to avoid attention. Over the course of my stay, I began to integrate well and I started to view the country as a resident, not a foreigner. It led me to see the faults of the country and not just the positive side. I began to understand why the country is still considered a third world country even though it harbors many resources and much wealth. I think this is a valuable observation and helps intelligently evaluate a country and perhaps the kind of resource I could be for the nation in the future should I choose to return and work.

The first three weeks I understood about 65% of the language. I struggled mostly because of the difference in the culture of the language. While listening to a conversation, I often had to search for the essence of the topic because instead of reaching the point directly, they spoke around the theme. I felt confident to speak, however, the biggest difference between my language ability at the beginning of my trip and the end was the phrasing of my sentences. I learned to 'sound' Mexican by using a lot of their common phrases. Although I still had a slight accent, I spoke very fluently and understood 95% of the language.

I wish I had been more excited about my trip before I arrived. This trip was the first time that I had spent so much time away from my family, living alone. There were a lot of unknown factors prior to my arrival including my housing situation, the level of my language abilities, locations, etc. I did not worry myself about either of these factors, however, I also lacked the excitement of going on such an amazing trip. Some things that I did not know before my trip, and yet happy that happened were the friendships that I

developed with my coworkers. I did not think that we would grow so close. It made leaving the country much more difficult than I had imagined, and I learned how important people are in my life.

If future interns will be living in Guadalajara, I recommend they travel around the city by bus. The taxis in Guadalajara are generally more expensive than most places in the entire country. The busses are quick, inexpensive, and convenient to ride. Aside from the busses, prices are generally comparable with those in the U.S. Food and entertainment are slightly cheaper in Mexico than in the U.S. however other consumer goods can even be double the price we would pay in the states.

Mexico is a country that always has some entertainment available regardless of the day of the week. I recommend students take advantage of that by visiting the Mariachi houses, VIP movies at the Movie Theater, Sunday markets, etc. This kind of culture doesn't exist in many cities in the U.S., and so it is a valuable experience to gain.

Looking for housing can be difficult while done remotely. I searched online prior to my arrival on the local newspaper sites of Guadalajara. I established some contacts and when I arrived, I went to visit the locations. Distance relative to work is very important and students should consider the bus routes a heavy factor in their living arrangements. I moved out of my home stay after my first month because it was too far from my work and there were no convenient busses. I moved three blocks away from work and I had such a great time there.

Apart from technical recommendations, my greatest advice to future interns is for them to fully immerse themselves into the country. By trying to 'live' like Mexicans do, students will learn to approach daily routines from a perspective unique to what they are

used to. This later integrates into an understanding for problem solving techniques and helps students establish better connections with a new culture. And in today's style of business negotiations, it is essential to communicate with that understanding.