

Episode 9 - Alternatives to an Internship

Buffy: This is Starting Somewhere - a podcast from the University of Melbourne... all about internships - finding one, landing it, and making the most of the experience.

Buffy: I'm Buffy Gorrilla, I was voluntold to go put up drywall for habitat for humanity... and now I'm host of this podcast.

Ben: I'm Ben Pawson, I volunteered three times to get my first post career change job... and now I'm co-host of this podcast.

Buffy: So, we're clearly the best people to help you start somewhere.

Chelsea Parish: The buffalo pulled the minivan out of the mud, So that created a lovely memory for myself, but also for all the international journalists that were there....

it was my job to help to organise this international press tour and invite press from all over the world on a national tour of a country that has very difficult roads, lots of mountains, So we managed, my local colleague and I, to organise this and we travelled through flooded areas, we travelled through rain forests that was pitted with bomb craters. We travelled through rice fields that was absolutely strewn with landmines and bombs that were left over from the war.

at one point we did get stuck in the minivan with about 20 international press, and the only way that we could get the minivan out of the mud and continue on our press tour was to secure the services of a local farmer who had two buffalo.

This lovely man brought his buffalo over and managed to hitch them up to the front of this minivan, and the buffalo pulled the minivan out of the mud, which was a fabulous experience from everyone's perspective, anyone who was an international.

Buffy: We've been yammering on about Internships for eight episodes now, nearly 4 hours of work integrated learning wisdom right in your ears. But what if a straight-up internship is not for you? What else is there?

Ben: From what we found, lots of other things can, as Professor Allan Blackman from Griffith University said back in Episode 1:

Prof Blackman: “ An internship provides a bridge for students from their academic life to the workplace, ideally”

Buffy: But if we can belabour a metaphor for a moment, Professor Blackman doesn't specify what kind of bridge, suspension, beam, truss, cantilever or good 'ole cable stayed, as long as it gets you where you're going.

Ben: So... could we ascribe different experiences to different types of bridges?

Buffy: Sure why not, what would you suggest, Ben?

Ben: Well the legal internships definitely feel like a complex, yet elegant suspension bridge.

Buffy: OK, and what about the hardscrabble portfolio internships at several media companies?

Ben: Ermmm how about the straightforward beam bridge?

Buffy: OK, I think we might have gone a bridge too far with this metaphor.

Ben: Good save, so what did we find?

Buffy: We found a ton of alternatives: volunteer service, industry placements and projects all of which can bridge the gap between uni and work.

We've looked at a few Australian and American examples, but your country certainly has equivalent opportunities. And any good uni will offer clubs, societies and industry projects where you find some ideas that might work for you. Again, Google is your friend!

First up, we found Michael Bergdorf living in the basement of my aunt's house in Duluth, Minnesota. He's working on his medical degree, but before starting that challenge Michael took some time out to participate in AmeriCorps.

Michael B.: I wanted to do an AmeriCorps job to take a little bit of time after college to kind of figure out more direction and orientation in my life, as well as have the chance to, hopefully, give something back to a lot of people who might not always have those opportunities. As long as I didn't have so many social commitments and life commitments, it seemed like a great chance to figure out a lot about myself, and then, be more grounded before taking the next steps.

Buffy: How old are you?

Michael B.: Currently 23 years old.

Buffy: Tell me a little bit about what AmeriCorps is, in your opinion.

Michael B.: AmeriCorps is very, very broad. I think, in general, it's a chance for young people, even not yet out of college, but just young people in general, to take some time out of their lives and to do something that they might not otherwise do and, in exchange, get a lot of amazing experience, an amazing community, and then, some loan forgiveness, which is always a nice thing.

Buffy: Michael will tell us more about his Americorp experience later so sit tight.

Next, Vivian Gleeson, a University of Melbourne biotech grad, currently working at the Burnett Institute, you've hear from Viv before, he stayed within the university system to get his first taste of work.

Vivian Gleeson: They essentially put you in a team of about four people, and you get paired with a biotech company in Melbourne, or it can be in Sydney, or basically anywhere in Australia. The company will give you a real question. They'll be like "Okay, we have this problem and we need you to solve it. You've got this much time to do it, and we'll help you do it and we'll keep in contact." But really it's about how do you solve that problem? This real world problem. It's not imaginary, and for most people it'll be like "Wow, this is the first thing I've ever had to do that will actually have an outcome." And some of the outcomes from these projects are amazing. Like one of my friends who was a year behind me, he's published now out of this project. They wrote it up and it's now in a major journal.

Ben: That sounds pretty sweet, I hear that teamwork is the future and that industry projects are totally real world. I did one and it was a greta bridge, a capstone if you, like, joining the gently stone arches of my academic learning and industry experience... hmm, I'll get my bags...

Buffy: Please... But in non-bridge related seriousness, an industry project or even volunteering might be a less competitive path, if everyone is applying for internships, and your course offers an industry placement it could be a good option to make the jump into the real world.

If you are wondering - how can I sell my alternative experience - we'll explore that later.

So what else have we got?

Ben: Well, maybe more for masters students or if you have a bit of experience are organisations like Australian Volunteers International and its American Equivalent, the PeaceCorps, Buffy went 'on location'...

Buffy: I am in the lobby of the Peacecorps head office in Washington DC. I have just checked in, handed over my passport which always makes me nervous. I am here to meet Erin Gibbs, who is:

Erin Gibbs: "the chief of operations for the office of volunteer recruitment and selection at Peace Corps Headquarters."

Buffy: The Peace Corps is a US government initiative started by President John F Kennedy, with Executive Order #10924 if I am reading this card right. For Erin, what started as a typical Peace Corp service ended up being a lot more.

Erin Gibbs: Personally, Peace Corps service, I really thought when I joined the Peace Corps, I knew I wanted a change, and I was looking for something different, and I totally expected that I would join the Peace Corps, go do my 27 months, and then come back home and continue and pick up where I left off. Then being overseas and being exposed to so many different cultures and different types of people and different ideas and ways of thinking really opened up my mind, and I ended up wanting to stay abroad, so I stayed abroad for nine years and realised I was really interested in other cultures and travelling and really spending time in other countries and getting those people ... it took me almost 10 years before I came back, and then I didn't. I ended up changing my career path as well as a result of my service.

Buffy: And one of the biggest surprises from my time with Erin - you can do the Peacecorps at any age- but you need to be American.

We also talked to the delightful, Nicole Beck, who was a Peacecorps volunteer. Nicole was placed in Fiji and not the all you-can-eat-breakfast buffet -resort Fiji, but helping in a Fijian medical clinic. Nicole explains how the Peacecorps fit into her career trajectory:

Nicole Beck: So it fell post graduate school, after my first real job in social work, I had applied while I substitute teaching. I couldn't find a job in my field, so I figured why not give this a shot. I had done some volunteer work overseas for a few months at a time and just really felt like it was something I would want to do longer term.

Nicole Beck: At that point I had worked in healthcare for about a year in a dialysis clinic, for people who had renal failure or kidney failure, so I was a nephrology social worker for about a year. So my placement was within a healthcare

system in the Fiji Islands at their STI, HIV clinic, working with nurses and other medical professionals, training them on pre-and-post HIV test counselling, just kind of like basic counselling skills and then I would do some of that work myself.

Buffy: Australia has a similar organisation to the Peacecorps. It's called the Australian Volunteers and it's been around since the 1960s.

Chelsea Parish: The Australian Volunteers programme, it's a skilled volunteering programme for all Australians to have the opportunity to go to a country in the Indo-pacific, so our neighbouring countries like Vanuatu, Fiji, Cambodia, in South-East Asia. The countries that the Australian government's working with and supporting to help them achieve their development goals. It is a skilled volunteering programme, and we have many different kinds of Australians going on the programme. All the way from recent graduates and early career professionals, through to your highly skilled retiree expert end of the professional lifecycle.

Buffy: Chelsea Parish is the Returned Australian Volunteer Network manager and a returned volunteer herself - she had a placement in Laos. Chelsea explains why the program could be a good fit for people looking to start somewhere.

CART026: So a lot of our roles are suitable for early career professionals in that you might only need a bachelor's degree and one or two years of experience. They might be generalist positions as well, such as communications officer or business administrations. So you don't need to be a development expert, you don't need to have 10+ years of experience, and you don't need degrees in things like international development or international relations. So it's really those kind of volunteering positions where we require lots of enthusiasm, less experience, but also some solid skills that you would have as a recent graduate with your one or two years experience.

Ben: That sounds amazing and Australian Volunteers has ton of skilled volunteer postings available, so check their website.

Buffy: If going abroad is your thing, or you just are Bi-Lingual Curious your uni course may have options. Here's Warren Freshe who is a Senior Advisor, Experiential Learning, Global Leadership and Employability, at the University of Melbourne with some thoughts on what to look for.

Warren Freshe: The university certainly offers internship subjects as well, which could involve working internationally. That would be credit bearing, so students really need to be aware that, when they're doing their subject selection, particularly in undergraduate, some ... Not all undergraduate courses will do it, but some will.

There's also opportunities for students to study internationally as well, and we have programmes available for that as well. So, there's a lot of support at the university if students are looking outside of Australia and want to expand their cultural awareness that they can do and work overseas or study overseas at partnership universities as well. There's a two-pronged attack there.

Buffy: These opportunities can help you gain similar types of skills to an internship. The variety of pathways were outlined in a research paper authored by Andrew Crain of the University of Georgia.

In the next episode he tells us some surprising facts about the links between doing an internship and getting a job, it's fascinating. But for now Andrew:

Andrew Crain: I started out looking just at internships, but I also asked students about a variety of other things they had done on campus, and a lot of students reported similarly positive outcomes for things like, in particular, leadership experiences or student organisations, extracurricular involvements, that kind of thing. Just anecdotally speaking, I think a lot of students in my work, one-on-one advising students in the career centre at the University of Georgia, a lot of students may not be able to do unpaid internships for obvious reasons. And so things like networking can be really beneficial, or more one off projects, those type of things are becoming more feasible with kind of the gig economy and more freelance work. So there's sort of different strategies students can take to kind of build their resume if they can't commit to a full, full internship experience.

But that being said, I've seen a lot of students at the University of Georgia who have had some very significant volunteer experiences that sometimes they overlook because they ... It doesn't have that title. It doesn't have that formal structure to it. And it's not until I get into that conversation with them as an advisor that it begins to become clear how substantial that experience was and how useful it could be for that student to market themselves. So, often when I'm reviewing a resume with a student, that's something that comes up. Is there anything else that you haven't put on here? What else are you involved with? And as we discussed, sometimes those things come out and we can sort of tease some of those useful things out before they get to the stage of having that conversation with an employer.

Buffy: If there are a variety of ways to bridge the divide between university and the workplace, what about leaping right across? Breaking that down - getting a job straight after university which is still a really popular way to start a career,

and if Andrew's survey is to be believed it's no less effective than an internship.

Ben: Glad my metaphor is finally sinking in..... But I'm interested in what happens to someone who goes straight into a job two or three years later. I want to know if those people who go straight into employment are happy with their choices compared to a student who does two or three unpaid or paid internships.

Buffy: So you never did an internship after your undergrad, how was going straight into the workplace?

Ben: To be honest I probably could have saved 5 years of work by doing an internship in an interior Architect firm and figuring out that it was not for me. But it did give me a ton of skills that came in useful later, but that would be a big 'ole waste of 'what if' type speculation.

You went straight into a job too, from Undergrad right, so same question to you Buffy...

Buffy: I think if I reflect now I had very few goals, during Uni I had a part-time job that morphed into a full-time job after I graduated. I kind of stumbled around a bit, and honestly let my careers chose me - it's only been in the past few years I have been that 'entrepreneur of my own career' that we have talked about. And I like it better this way!

Ben: Indeed, well stay tuned for the next episode! Where we look at turning internships into jobs. In the meantime, we hear from Lauren Berger, the Intern Queen, about something we have not discussed much at all - THE VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP

Lauren Berger: Yeah, before we had an actual physical office here at Intern Queen, we had virtual interns, meaning that they ... we would set their schedule so it was still pretty structured in terms of what days and times they were interning, but they would intern from home, from the dorm room, from their apartment, from their parent's house, wherever they were. We would just communicate with them virtually, rather than have them actually come into a physical office, which is what we have now.

Buffy Gorrilla: Is that just an Intern Queen trend, or is that something you're seeing on a wider scale?

Lauren Berger: I've seen it on a wider scale, especially, as like the blogger trend as really escalated here. If you have a fashion blogger who has a decent size business, who earns a great income, and can use an intern, and can provide that intern with a great experience, she may just work from home. I mean, most fashion bloggers are working from home, they're not necessarily working from an office.

Someone like that, might want to hire a virtual intern that's not going to come in person every day, just communicate with them virtually. I think virtual interns can be fantastic. We've had some of our best interns as virtual interns, however, it's really important that a company sets a lot of perimeters and makes sure that, even though, there's not an office, the expectation is set that, that intern is going to be available and interning between this time and this time.

Ben: Wise words Lauren.

We're on the fence about virtual internships, they need to be managed really carefully to be useful, but if they are, they can be good, Dodgy, who runs the dodgy internships australia twitter feed, explained more about them in our last episode, but it's worth repeating.

Dodgy Intern: Drives me crazy. But then, you could also argue, that a remote internship is providing opportunities to people in regional areas, where there aren't many internships. So, then I start thinking about that. Look, if a remote internship is going to be a legitimate thing, it needs to be so closely supervised. As in, you're talking with your employer, mentor, whatever, every few hours, I would think. And you know, having Skype meetings and all that kind of stuff. So, I think maybe it could be done. I'm yet to hear of anyone who's told me they did a really great remote internship.

Ben: And if you've had a good virtual internship experience we would love to hear from you.

Buffy: We heard from Viv Gleeson earlier about his industry placement. It was a for credit subject which gave him real-world experience plus the benefits and challenges of working in a team.

there are other ways to get involved and gain experience while at Uni, if your schedule allows. It's a safe space to try things which might interest you.

Like Dhanuka Nanayakkara who took time away from his current job as an

Artificial Intelligence consultant with KPMG's Solution 49X team. To tell us about his experience with a University group.

CART012: Dhanuka Nanayakkara: ~~It did, yeah. So, not all of the student run organisations but there are a few in particular.~~ So one of the biggest ones, the Global Consulting Group is an organisation that provides pro bono consulting services to other not-for-profits. It's a fantastic organisation that I'm actually still involved with. So I've been with them for about four years as a consultant student where I really got the experience that I needed to take to my internship and do a really good job there. And then now I'm sort of involved at a national level, helping with their operations.

Ben: What are some of the projects that you've helped out with?

Dhanuka Nanayakkara: Yeah, so it's an organisation consisting both of professionals who are working in consulting who want to volunteer their time to make a social impact as well as students who want to use the skills they're learning at university in a real situation to kind of benefit society and also gain the kind of experience that they would normally get at a job. So, some of our clients have included things like the Royal Flying Doctor Service, Salvation Army, did a project for the UN, which is pretty cool, the Lort Smith Animal Hospital up the road. So, they've done work for a lot of fantastic not-for-profit organisations.

Ben Pawson: So, the project that you did for the UN, can you tell us just a little bit about that?

Dhanuka Nanayakkara: Yeah, so I was actually involved in a different capacity at the time. So, I wasn't on the team, I was more managing their Melbourne operations. But it was more actually helping the United Nations sort of optimise their internship programme. The United Nation's ESCAP, the economic [crosstalk 00:05:21] yeah.

Ben Pawson: Let's just assume you know what it means.

Dhanuka Nanayakkara: Yeah, sure. And yeah. They, yeah, wanted to optimise their internship programme to sort of have the best retention of the best candidates. They weren't really sure in how to do that. So we helped them out with that.

Ben Pawson: That sounds like really good fun. it's kind of an intermediary, you're working on live projects with real clients but it's still very much within the university confines.

Dhanuka Nanayakkara: Yeah, and that's kind of the line that we try to walk is that it's doing real genuine consulting work for real clients, but with the safety of operation

in a university environment. And it's sort of the best way you can gain experience outside of an internship.

Buffy: Thanks Dhanuka - that sounds very work relevant - and I did a bit of LinkedIn stalking and see he did three projects and his responsibilities included managing project scope, setting project roles and tasks, liaising with the client and our professional advisor, presenting formal recommendations, and more. BAM! Skillz!

BEEn: I'd look out for Dhanuka controlling robots in a start-up near you soon. In other start-up related alternatives Professor Colin McLeod, the academic director of the Masters in Entrepreneurship at Uni Melbs gives us another alternative to an internship.

Colin McLeod: I have been involved in starting a number of companies. My wife's started companies. My son started a company, which is running very well.

The reality is that it's an interesting question to ask because there was some research that has come out of the US recently, the National Bureau of Economic Research, a real research powerhouse, that basically said the age of successful entrepreneurs, successful technology entrepreneurs in Silicon valley is 45 when they start their business.

That tells us that experience counts for something. I think if people wanted to start a relatively simple business, like if you're self-employed with a small number of employees, that's a great thing to do.

I think if people want to start producing those really innovative companies, the change-the-world type of companies or even change your local society, then we know that experience actually counts for a lot. Education counts for a lot and experience counts for a lot.

Ben: So maybe get that first star-up out of the way early so you can disrupt something greater, later on. Either way a Grad starting their own business always looks good and failure is just a part of success, not the opposite of success.

Ben: Both the Australian Volunteers and the Peacecorps equip you with skills you may have never realised you need, but are employers looking for people like you, will you stand out when you get back?

Chelsea Parish: I think that's a great question because for early career professionals, for our young professionals who go out and volunteer, what they learn, it's more than solidifying their professional skills. I mean, in any kind of resource-poor environment, you're really stretched and tested when it comes to, "Oh, what can I deliver when I am the resource and there's no way for me to outsource this to another person in the department?", because you are the department.

So you really stretch your technical skills, but within that environment you learn so much about what we call the soft skills. So resilience, cross-cultural understanding, communication outside of a language, I'm talking communication with people who have different experiences and backgrounds and cultures to yourself. Those kind of skills, those resilience and leadership skills, skills around coaching and mentoring people, they're things that back in Australia, employers are looking for. Soft skills are really, really important going forward in your career.

Buffy: Nicole Beck, our returned Peacecorps volunteer seconds Chelsea Parish's thoughts.

Nicole Beck: So the skills I would say I development in those years, were diplomacy skills, cultural awareness, cultural adaptivity, being able to sort of be flexible is really important with the Peace Corps. There are days in which you feel like you're doing nothing at all, so you have to sort of be a self starter, create projects for yourself. And also, just a better understanding of what it's like to be the other, or the outsider. Up until that point I don't I had, had much experience being sort of different or not part of the majority. So it really, it showed me what it must be like to live, not just in a new country but amongst a culture that is so very different from your own. So a lot of empathy and self-awareness were cultivated in those years, as well.

Ben: Foreign Adventures and industry placements are all well and good, but how can these experiences that are not 'internships' lead to meaningful careers or just that first job. Can alternatives to internships give you a leg-up? Vivian Gleeson opens our section on how you can turn your alternative experience into a job just as well as someone who has done an internship.

Vivian Gleeson: These projects definitely lead to certain places. And also, when you're across for your first job interview, and you're talking about your experience, you're not going to talk about what you learned in REG 101. You're not going to talk about Bio Informatics 101. You're going to talk about your industry project, because that is actually what they want to hear. It's a real world problem that you solved, and it's something you can quite easily objectify. You say these were the parameters, this is how I approached it, and this is the outcome that we came to.

Buffy Gorrilla: And it's all done in a group, so you have to work together, as well, as a team?

Vivian Gleeson: Yeah, absolutely. Also the projects are quite large. It would be difficult.

Buffy Gorrilla: Could you walk me through what your project actually was, and your problem to solve, if you can talk about that?

Vivian Gleeson: Yeah. So, our project was.

Buffy Gorrilla: In layman's terms, as well.

Vivian Gleeson: Without going into too many details, it was about competitive intelligence. So, essentially we were looking at a number of assets that CSL had publicly, on their portfolio, and our role was to basically assess major competition, in regards to those assets. But then also looking at lateral indications, so looking at what that asset could potentially do, and then also look at the field that that asset could potentially move into to see if it was entrenched. To see if there were major players in that area. And then basically just kind of right up a big report based on that with some recommendations.

Buffy: But if the skills you acquire in your alternative experience aren't 100 percent linked to your career - how can you sell that? Back to the dulcet American tones of Michael Bergdorf, here's how he was able to dissect his Americorps experience and apply it to his medical school applications.

Michael B: In the end of it, my AmeriCorps job was be able to communicate with people from any different background, meet them where they're at, and then, help them to feel empowered or accomplish goals. So when it came to interviews for medical school, interviews for clinic board applications, anything else, I felt very, very prepared by my experiences and very confident as far as being able to complete those tasks that involve other people really, outside of just making sure that I can get good scores.

Buffy: And at the end of the day, your alternative experience might just be a great icebreaker and that is always helpful, right Nicole?

Nicole Beck: I don't think I can think of one interview where someone hasn't brought that up, either in conversations, saying, "Hey, oh wow, the Peace Corps. I wish I would've done that." Or, "Peace Corps, that's incredible. Tell me about your experience. How would you use some of those skills?" And so, it very directly contributed to a lot of my jobs, a lot of those ... keeping those jobs. I worked internationally, for about four years, after the Peace Corps. Well, I worked in Chicago for five years, and then went abroad, and so, working within international schools in South America. And I think it really helped me to adapt to cultures, again, different from my own, and kind of see myself staying in those places for a longer period of time.

Buffy: There are so many ways to Start Somewhere! And turning all of those ways into jobs is what we'll be discussing in the next episode, so listen up!

