



Job Shadowing: Take a Career Nibble

Sample the workplace to find your cup of tea.

Whet your appetite

Trying to decide on what career is for you? Wondering what you can do with your major post graduation? Ever wish that you could spend a day at your dream company? If you answered “yes” to any of the above, consider job shadowing and shed more light on your future.

Job shadowing, often considered an externship, is an experiential learning opportunity where you spend a short period of time, usually 1–5 days, following—or “shadowing”—a professional throughout his or her workday. Unlike an internship that typically runs longer over a semester or summer and is more hands-on, job shadowing is a short-term stint and primarily observation-based. It gives you personal on-site exposure for an inside view of how things run on a daily basis at an organization.

Job shadowing may or may not be related to your major or career and usually offers no course credit or pay. Still, it is an excellent opportunity for you to sample an organization and test out an industry without making a long-term commitment. Like an informational interview that you request, it provides a unique opportunity to interact closely with an industry professional and ask questions regarding their duties, hours, and personal experience; required skills and qualities; salary and benefits; advancement; trends; and more. Whether you’re just starting out or looking to switch careers, job shadowing allows you to discover if a particular company and culture is the right fit, explore if you are cut out for a certain role, and gain first-hand experience so that you can better determine your career path and industry of choice.

For starters

If you plan to job shadow, you probably already have a sense of the companies or industries that you’re interested in. Compile a list of organizations that you would like to work for, then ask your network of family, friends, faculty, alumni, even colleagues if they know of or can introduce you to someone working in those areas or departments. Research leads via social networking sites. Also, reach out to your campus career services office: it’s a prime source for available opportunities and tips.

Don’t assume it’s a piece of cake

As with anything job search- and career-related, be organized and professional. Start by obtaining the contact information for the individual that you would like to shadow, then write a formal letter. Include an introduction explaining who you are, who referred you, and what you are looking to gain from shadowing. Include specifics about your job shadowing goals, dates and times you are available, and indicate if job shadowing is part of a class assignment. Close the letter by thanking the person for their time and indicate that you will follow up in about a week to discuss. The request to job shadow is a formal, professional document, so proof carefully. Email or mail your request to your recipient. Keep in mind, job shadowing is a career-related interaction. Treat it as an opportunity to sell and present yourself professionally.

Savor the experience

Expect the person you are shadowing to provide you with a general sense of the skills and knowledge that you will need to be successful in your field of interest. Make the most of your experience and time on location: take notes; ask questions when appropriate; and try to observe as much as possible, but be ready to assist if needed.

A job shadow experience can also be a try-out for an internship or entry-level role, so treat it like a prolonged interview. It’s a unique networking opportunity, so dress appropriately, arrive on time, and be courteous. Aim to impress your host. Your work and actions are being observed and you may even receive feedback on your behavior and performance. Score extra points: research the company beforehand; prepare several smart questions to ask the person you are shadowing; and obtain business cards from your contacts.



in a nutshell:

Whether you’re just starting out or looking to change careers, job shadowing can help you determine your next step:

- **You’re a guest. Be respectful of your host’s time and regular business hours**
- **Be prepared. Research the company, its competitors, and your contact beforehand**
- **Be on time, dress appropriately, behave professionally**
- **Learn: observe, listen, take notes, ask smart questions**
- **Gather business cards and send a prompt thank you; you may cross this bridge again**

Think of job shadowing as a taste test rather than a full meal. Use the opportunity wisely—when it comes to your career, nothing beats first-hand experience and an inside view.