

Volunteering Real work experience By Kate O'Dea



Kate surveys a student attending the Careers Fair 2003

The myth

A majority of people go to university because they are driven by the idea that gaining extra skills and knowledge in their degree will lead them to landing a good job in their field of interest. If only it was so easy! Most of the time, simply having the right technical qualifications is not enough.

What is really needed?

Employers want to see that you have communication, organisational, leadership and team skills. These types of skills may be shown if you have for example, a part time job, play a sport or have an interest, such as performing as part of a band. However, now a days it is also not that often that job advertisements will go without saying, "Experience is necessary," "Experience is preferred," "Must have proven ability in.....".

What to do?

If you're like me and want to give yourself the greatest opportunity for landing your dream job, you will not only get your degree whilst you are at uni, but you will also be trying to get some kind of work experience in your field, even if it is not directly related. Lets face it guys we are not at uni 24/7 (most of us) and we get holidays and lots of them! So we may as well be making something useful of them. The easiest thing to do is to volunteer. Volunteering is not only a great way to demonstrate that you have skills (especially initiative!) but it allows you to get 'hands on experience'.

How to get involved?

Keep your options broad and think laterally. If you're willing to spend some time looking into it you will soon become familiar with the broad array of organisations that you can volunteer for which will give you useful experiences.

My personal - hopefully happily ending story:

Since I am interested in gaining a position in the environmental sector, I like to volunteer with Conservation Volunteers Australia (CVA). Mid year, I spent a week at Kangaroo Island where our project was lead by Mike McKelvie and Peggy Rismiller. Mike and Peggy live at an environmental research school based at Pelican Lagoon. Mike has a degree in biology but is a professional photographer, Peggy researches echidnas. One night whilst relaxing around the fire I had mentioned to Peggy that I was applying to Western Mining Company (WMC) to gain vocational experience. It turns out that Mike has worked in the past with a photographer who is now working for WMC doing GIS work for their major conservation project. This led to a conversation with Mike that led to a conversation between his friend Clive and myself. By doing so I was able to gain further information about WMC. But sneakily I also asked Clive if I could help carry his photography equipment (suggested by Mike). Ok, it doesn't sound fantastic, but this is what I mean by lateral thinking here. If I work with Clive, then I have an opportunity of being able to get inside experience and knowledge of WMC's project as well as being able to meet WMC employers, hopefully making myself known. Even if I don't met anyone I'm sure it is still going to impress in the WMC interview.

So whilst volunteering you could also strike it lucky. But even if you don't there is still so much more one can gain and learn through volunteering. My time at Pelican Lagoon was spent tracking echidnas through native bushland, collecting seeds, constructing solar powered heating, planting, discussions about the island's ecology, political and environmental issues and much more! Volunteering is a great way to learn.