ARTS CO-OP CONNECT

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All About The Private Sector

SFU Arts Co-op students across the province are making a difference in private businesses. Read on for personal accounts of career exploration by current Co-op students.

Igniting Passion

Carmen Wilson
Ignite Technical Resources

Working in the private sector for the past two semesters has been a unique experience. As a Recruiting Coordinator for Ignite Technical Resources, one of Canada’s fastest growing companies, I learned new skills as well as polishing existing skills. These included excelling in Microsoft Office and perfecting my professional demeanor. Ignite’s open-concept office created a fun and productive environment. Team-building activities like Friday morning games made for a friendly and collaborative atmosphere. We also had regular meetings and social events to celebrate reaching our monthly goals. I felt like a part of the team from day one.

I assisted the Account Managers and Recruiters in getting job applicants and preparing candidates for submission. My responsibilities included posting jobs, calling references, formatting resumes, and managing social media marketing. I also did special projects for the VP Operations such as data collection for statistics and updating the database.

The coolest thing I did at Ignite was recruiting someone first-hand: my replacement. I communicated with Co-op advisors, and then sorted through the 40 student applicants to find the top 10. Next I got to experience interviewing from the other side, as I interviewed the top applicants. From there, I selected the top 3 for interviews with the VP Operations, who made the final decision. In my last week at Ignite, I trained the chosen Co-op student to replace me as the Recruiting Coordinator for the next two semesters.

As a Recruiting Coordinator, I learned a lot about the business of recruitment. It’s a win-win-win situation, as a candidate gets a good job, our client gets a great employee, and Ignite profits while making the candidate and client happy. I didn’t know much about recruitment before this Co-op job, but now I look at it as a lucrative and rewarding career possibility.
I had a great experience during my work term at TFG Global Insurance, a global insurance brokerage, working as a marketing assistant and creative writer. TFG Global Insurance manages the insurance plans of many different expatriates and companies as their employees travel abroad. My employer needed a full overhaul on his marketing content. The majority of my work focused on TFG Global Insurance and its two main subgroup companies, Expat Financial and Travel Insurance Now!com. Expat Financial is able to source insurance plans for high risk areas of the world.

I filled many roles, including web design, graphic design, brochure design and writing articles for website content and the blog. I also filmed, animated and edited several informative videos for advertising on the web. I was able to work with a professional recording company and voice actors for the audio content of the videos. Coincidentally, the voice actor we ended up recording for our videos was also a professor at SFU - small world! I redesigned and updated the TFG Global Insurance, Expat Financial and Travel Insurance Now!com websites and logos.

While working on these projects, my employer showed me the inner workings of the global insurance business. There were many meetings with clients from varying companies so I got to quickly learn how dozens of different businesses functioned. Doing extensive research, I learned more about the insurance business in order to write better articles. I became much more informed on global news as is necessary to be knowledgeable about current insurance conditions. I wrote many informative articles about traveling abroad and the status of high risk countries for web content. I enjoyed my work and the experience I gained on the job immensely. Working as a technical designer has allowed me to gain experience in many different businesses during my coop terms and I look forward to seeing where I will end up next.
As I'm penning this article I'm wrapping up my third semester here in Waterloo interning with the infamous BlackBerry who has become continuously visible in the media as strategic reviews and restructuring are underway. This year working for BlackBerry has provided me with exciting opportunities to both observe and learn at close distance to the centre of action, and has convinced me that it is still worthwhile to obtain work experience with BlackBerry despite what you hear on the news.

My title is Statistical Methods Analyst, working primarily with the handheld software release management team, which supports the coordination of release activities across different domains to ensure software releases meet quality targets. A part of my responsibility is to help maintain and produce reports to support teams and senior executives in the decision-making process, and to monitor development, bug-fix and run test activities. Early on in my Economics career I made the decision to focus on Econometrics after consulting with departmental advisors as well as those already in the field. It has meant a heavier-than-normal workload and a few more hours burying my head in numbers and equations, and familiarizing myself with Statistical language and software (such as ‘R’) and producing scripts to run regressions and doing other manipulations. But my efforts certainly paid off when the more technical nature of my courses opened up more possibilities and opportunities in my career choices. The nature and responsibilities of my role overlap very heavily with those of a quality assurance analyst, and those in Arts with an analytical head and a technical bent would find themselves very much qualified and ready for this kind of position if they plan their courses strategically.

There is no such thing as a “typical day” in my position. Each day comes with new challenges because of the changing business needs. Most tasks would involve going into the organization’s internal defect tracking system and pulling relevant information using some kind of query language. The data would then be manipulated using various statistical techniques with various tools to obtain quality information that supports various decision making processes. Because of the highly collaborative nature of our work and often involving other teams, a task would typically start with a meeting to obtain relevant information and requirements; specifics would then be determined which would eventually culminate in a deliverable to meet or exceed their expectations.

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As the organization transforms itself students have the advantage of observing the impact of the various restructuring activities and how it affects team activities from a relatively safe position. As people watched the departure of some of their team members whom they’ve worked with, and in the face of such negative publicity in the media, nothing but their immense pride of working for such an iconic organization would keep them going and staying faithful to their duties. What has stood out to me is the importance of transparency and clear communication from the leadership which helps to stabilise and inspire confidence, especially during challenging times. Taking initiative, being versatile and adaptable are key to surviving a storm of such scale, and skills that you acquire on the side, even ones you do not consider relevant to your current position, could prove to be valuable to your own team as well as others in an ever-changing climate.
Advice from Arts Co-op Student - Alison Tan

Samantha Grandinetti
SFU Arts Co-op

For Alison Tan, a fourth year SFU student studying History and Communication, Co-op has been a way to explore career paths in her areas of interest and become familiar with the job search process, all while completing her Bachelor’s degree. Alison is currently working on her third Co-op placement at Ausenco (an engineering firm in Vancouver), as a marketing co-op student. Her previous work terms include a marketing-communications position with SNC-Lavalin (an environmental engineering consulting firm), as well as Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) as a marketing-communications assistant. Alison had much to say about her experience with the Arts Co-op program and staff.

Q: How instrumental have the Arts Co-op staff been in helping you achieve your goals?

A: Very instrumental, especially at the beginning. Being someone who was new to the job search process, I was really proactive in taking advantage of the guidance that we have available. I would seek out meetings to discuss job prospects, and just to figure out, what are my interests suited to? What kind of jobs should I be looking for? When I started getting interviews, I would almost always do a mock interview beforehand. I remember [my Arts Co-op advisor] meticulously going through my resume, my cover letter, and showing me what she thought would be my interview questions, which turned out to be very similar to what [AAFC] gave me. Basically, she gave me the best preparation I had ever had.

Q: Where do you see yourself in 5 years? Is that different than where you saw yourself before completing a Co-op work term?

A: With the positions that I’ve had, I haven’t sought out “working with engineers” or “environmental causes” - it’s just how it has worked out. I’ve interviewed for a lot of varied positions, and I think I always had an open mind, but Co-op opened it even more. Going into Co-op, I thought, “even if I never get a coop job, it will be good that I’ve applied for jobs and learned about the job application process.” You really never know what opportunities come up and what you might be interested in. It’s so important to keep things in perspective; never rest on your laurels or think you don’t have a chance. You just have to do the best you can with what you have. You don’t control who the competition is, or what an employer thinks of you. Be accepting of different opportunities that you didn’t think of in the first place.

Q: What from your academics have you been able to apply to your work, and vice versa?

A: I’ve never been afraid to go for something “outside my field” because I guess a lot of [my skills are] transferrable. I would say that it’s my academic work ethic that transferred to my professional work ethic, rather than the other way around. I am fortunate enough to be academically successful, and I think it has more to do with the fact that I take my job as a student seriously, and I’ve been able to transfer that to my working life. When I take on a position, I come to understand the structure of how things work, respect my peers and respect my superiors. I don’t think there’s a substitute for hard work.