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## International Organizations and United Nations

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### Getting a U.N. Internship

There are many ways to get an internship, but below are some recommended steps, based on my experience of getting a U.N. internship.

*Note:* Across the board, U.N. internships are unpaid.

1. **Start now.** Think about what you want to do for your internship. Consider how it will meet your academic requirements and career goals. Check out which U.N. organizations, agencies and programmes are doing the kind of work you'd like to do. Visit websites, read reports and conference summaries, stay abreast of U.N. in the news, and talk to as many people as possible who may know something about which United Nations organizations are doing work that you want to do. Use your contacts to find more contacts. Don't be afraid to email and even call people that might help you.
2. **Figure out where in the world you'd like to do your internship.** Geneva is a major hub of United Nations organizations, but it is by no means the only place you could do a U.N. internship. A good way to determine where you want to go based on where the U.N. organizations are headquartered is by visiting [U.N. System](#) web site. Many organizations also have offices in many parts of the world, so check each specifically. Other types of organizations to explore include U.S. government and international non-government organizations (NGOs).
3. **Internship, study-internship or paid job?** If you would like academic credit for your internship, consider a study-internship program. There are several in Geneva and other locations that offer courses in combination with an internship placement. If academic credit is not an issue, see "Working at International Organizations in Geneva" for the differences between professional and general positions.
4. **Apply.** For a summer internship, it's not too early to start sending applications during the fall semester. (That said, the internship I got was one I applied to March 1st.) Basically all organizations have intern programs and each has its own specific application form, process and timeline. Check each organization's web site for specific information and instructions.

Get your CV (long résumé, which is standard for most international jobs) in order and learn how to copy/paste efficiently! The International Center has books that give examples of CVs for use in Europe. Fill out as many applications as organizations you would like to work for, whether that's 2 or 20! Most applications are accepted by email, but you may actually have to handwrite some and send them via regular mail. Others may be completely online.

Note that the application process for the United Nations Headquarters Internship Programme differs from most of the other organizations within the U.N. system.

For the most part, you will be applying to the organization and not to a particular department or person within the organization. Most organization HR offices put all received applications, on an ongoing basis, into a database or, in some cases, into an actual physical binder. Employees of the organization are encouraged to check these databases if they want an intern. This system, combined with the fact that many U.N. employees don't know or think about finding a \*free\* intern this way(!), makes the next step crucial if you're going to stand out.

5. **Follow up.** Within a week or two after you've sent an internship application, follow up on it with an email. Don't send a generic email to the HR department of the organization. Instead, target your email to someone working in the area, division or section where you want to work within the organization. Finding such a person may take some effort, but check the organization's website thoroughly, check the names on reports published by the organization, and even call the organization if need be.

Once you've found the right person/people, send them a \*short\* email that includes: who you are; that you want to intern with them based on what you know about their work; that you understand the internship will be unpaid; a bit about your qualifications, degree or experience; and that you have submitted your official internship application to their HR office.

Believe it or not, they may not know that they want you (and can get you for free) until you contact them!

6. **Repeat step 4 as necessary.** You may need to be politely persistent. U.N. employees are busy people too, so don't pester, but don't give up if you don't get a rapid response.
7. **Handling the offer.** When you hear back from a department or person interested in having you intern with them, be responsive and forthright. In many cases they will have to write up a specific work plan and make other efforts with their HR department on your behalf, so be very clear about your desire to work with them so as not to make them do unnecessary work.

With that said, you can indicate your interest and ask to see a work plan before you finalize your decision. And while you're interacting with an organization over a pending offer, you can add some urgency to other potential offers or organizations that you haven't heard back from. As in any professional situation, do not string anyone along unnecessarily and do not burn bridges with a person or organization that you may later want to work for.

8. **Funding.** Not really much advice here, except to say that the earlier you line up an internship, the earlier you can apply for funding. Most funding application deadlines come in February and March and require specific information about what you'll be doing during your internship.

The U-M International Center help you with potential funding opportunities. See **Funding Undergraduate and Graduate International Internships**.

9. **Enjoy and make the most of a great professional opportunity!**

**Working at International Organizations in Geneva**

Despite the often discouraging articles printed on the difficulty of finding work at the U.N. and other similar NGO's in Geneva, it is possible to find a well-paying job or an interesting internship. Much depends on your goals, however, and it helps to speak some French and/or another official U.N. language. Even so, English is the working language for most U.N.organizations. An unpaid internship or a contract appointment may help you land the job you're looking for.

The U.N. and most of its sister organizations' personnel work from a bi-level system consisting of P-level (professional) and G-level (general service). Despite what one might expect, higher G-level positions can pay better than lower P-level positions.

*P-level professional positions*

P-level professional positions range from P-1 to P-5 and consists of the many program officers, specialists and advisors who do the "nitty-gritty" at the organization. A Masters degree and several years of relevant experience are usually required for such positions, especially for P-3 and higher. Read more about P-level positions, including salary and benefits here at [http://www.un.org/Depts/OHRM/salaries\\_allowances/salary.htm](http://www.un.org/Depts/OHRM/salaries_allowances/salary.htm).

Unless you have contacts, be prepared for disappointment, because the U.N. and its sister organizations (ILO, GATT, etc.) do not typically hire without a list of significant recommendations and publications. Furthermore, personnel departments can be short with people who are just looking for advice, and they typically won't interview (even informally) unless they have a position open for which they have advertised. Nonetheless, if you can withstand some frustrating informal interviews, you may meet someone who could eventually help you with advice or a job somewhere else.

If professional experience is what you want, it would be good to start with an internship (which are unpaid, but fairly easy to find) and see where it leads. The only disadvantage is that you may have to pay your own way in Geneva for up to 4 months. It is possible to live cheaply in Geneva despite the expensive city. The contacts you make, the knowledge of the system you gain, and the resume filler you acquire from an internship may inspire someone to hire you. Keep in mind, however, that many organizations have a policy requiring all interns to wait six months before applying to any vacancy, so you may need to look outside the organization you're interning with.

*G-level general service positions and their advantages*

G-level positions offer another opportunity to break into the U.N. system, and they are often easier to get than P-level jobs. Read more about G-level positions, including salary and benefits at [http://www.un.org/Depts/OHRM/salaries\\_allowances/salary.htm#gs](http://www.un.org/Depts/OHRM/salaries_allowances/salary.htm#gs)

Contrary to what it seems, short-term contracts -- 1-3 months, usually to fill in for someone on leave -- are the way to go, because they allow you to jump from department to department and from organization to organization. (What better way to check out about the workings of the many different international organizations and what they do!) They are also paid on the salary level of the person for whom you are working. This makes working in Geneva a BIG advantage!! Short-term contracts are numerous, as many full-time workers need coverage for holiday time or leave of absence. Once you have landed one job, usually the contacts you make help you to find another placement within one month. (Of course, it depends on you. You must be persistent and patient.) Furthermore, you can often make contacts that will put you into a paid internship doing what you wanted to do in Geneva in the first place.

Getting your first position, however, is the tricky part. You can try online searches, you can use contacts or you can try an in-person search. If you are on-site, here are some suggested strategies. Start with personnel departments, but don't expect them to get you anywhere. Typically they will give you a typing exam (the better you do, the better your chances) and then file your application away with 3,000 others! Thus, I suggest the following: all organizations have directories in their phone booths. Simply go into their building, find a phone with a directory and browse through it. Find department heads and any other titles that look promising. Call them, or better yet, go by their main office and give a resume with a cover letter to the secretary. Departments wishing to hire short-term help are not required to go through personnel and usually they don't. Going through personnel means a lot of paperwork, time and energy that department heads don't want to deal with. By making yourself readily available, job opportunities often arise.

If nothing transpires, ask these departments if you could meet with anyone for an informal interview (where you get to ask the questions and you get the advice). It doesn't really matter who it is, at this point. Even if you explain your situation to the secretaries, sometimes they know who's going out of town and needs coverage, or they have heard from other secretaries in other departments. Always ask whomever you are speaking with to circulate your resume for you. Whenever you make a contact (and a contact can be just about anything in these organizations) ALWAYS use their contacts too: ask your contact if he/she knows anyone else that can help you or if he/she will circulate your resume. The above advice can also help in finding P-level positions or internships.

### **Geneva Organizations**

Below are several websites that list Geneva-based organizations. It's up to you to do the research and seek out the contacts that can help you find the job you're looking for.

- [U.N. System of Organizations](#)
- [U.N. Human Resources Management](#)
- [Geneva Briefing Book](#)
- [International and Non Governmental Organizations in Geneva](#)

- Geneva International Forum
- About the U.N.

### **U.N. Jobs Listings**

The resources below provide information about current vacancies and how to obtain employment with the U.N..

- U.N. e-Staffing System
- U.N. Organization current listings
- U.N. Jobs (not affiliated with U.N.)
- U.N. Competitive Exam

*Organizations to try that have offices in Geneva*

Institut Henry Dunant

International Commission of Jurists

International Labor Organization (ILO)

Comité Internationale de la Croix Rouge (Committee of the Red Cross)

General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)

International Trade Center (ITC)

International Telecommunications Union (ITU)

U.N. Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

U.N. Economic Commission for Europe (ECE)

U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

United Nations Office at Geneva (UNO)

World Health Organization (WHO)

World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)

World Meteorological Organization (WMO)

### **Miscellaneous Tips**

- If you hope to find well-paying secretarial work in the hopes of making contacts to lead to more other professional work, make certain that you have two resumes: one stressing your clerical experience and one stressing what you REALLY want to do. It also helps if you can have both a resume in French and in English.
- Hone up your language skills. Concentrate on the six official U.N. languages — English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic and Russian.

- To eat cheaply go to the supermarkets just across the border in the French villages - you will save over 50%!
- Good luck, and remember that this is only advice. You may find different circumstances (hopefully better ones). But we hope this gives you a place to start.

*Last reviewed: 5/07*