

Starting Your Internship in the US

Franziska Weitz and Willi Votava

Students at the University of Applied Sciences Aschaffenburg

Internship in Project Management at SSI Schaefer, Indianapolis (USA)

An internship in the United States is the perfect opportunity to do both, gain work experience and get to know the “American way of life”. But how do you organize your internship abroad? What should you be aware of?

Describing the US in one sentence is very difficult. Only a few countries contain as many opposites as the United States. There is Los Angeles with glamorous Hollywood, VIPs and super rich people, countryside like Texas or Ohio where the people are more conservative and down to earth, and busy cities such as New York, the city that never sleeps, a city that runs one of the most important financial markets in the world. But even in that one city the opposites are present everywhere. Rich and influential people live right next to poor, homeless people on the streets in front of their houses. It’s hard to combine all aspects of the so called American way of life. The only way to get a feeling for it is to step onto a plane and experience it on your own.

The Visa

Getting a visa can be very complicated if you want to do it on your own. Since internships are handled as an educational and cultural exchange, you have to apply for the “exchange visitor visa” (J-1 visa). Usually the company you are doing your internship with engages an exchange organization to handle the visa process. They give instructions for every step in the process and provide you with all necessary information.

Financial Aspects

Whether you are getting paid for your internship or not depends on the company, but there are also other possibilities to get financial support like scholarships. When planning your finances, you have to consider things like visa fees, costs for travelling, accommodation, living, recreational activities and health insurance. In some cases, companies pay for most of these costs, but since you are also there to experience the country, you have to think about additional costs, for example, for travelling in your spare time. The most important thing when it comes to money is to have a credit card. Nearly every shop accepts credit cards and sometimes you can only pay by card, for example at gas stations or parking meters. Banks are offering special cards for students, so you can get extra benefits like withdraw money without fees or additional discounts when renting a car.

Student ID Card and Driver’s License

As in many other countries outside the European Union, documents like your student ID card are not accepted. To get discounts and financial benefits you should apply for an international Student ID Card, which sometimes can already be included in your credit card. In the US, your European driver’s license is only valid in combination with an international driver’s license. You can apply for one at your local administration office at home.

Communicating and Business Behavior

In the US, people always ask you how you feel when they say hello, which sometimes can be very strange for Europeans. But don't worry, it's a pure phrase that simply belongs to the welcome. When you're asked "Hi, how are you?" it is not necessary to talk about your emotional state. A short "Fine, how are you?" is enough. Americans use phrases in many situations, so it can be hard to differentiate if they really care about something or it is just politeness and courtesy.

Americans like going to restaurants. If you go out with your new colleagues, do not rush into the restaurant and find a place, instead wait for the waiters to assign guests to the tables. When leaving tips in the US, a higher rate is appropriate than in Europe, because most

waiters only earn their living from tips. As a rule, you should add around 15 to 20 percent. If you are in a restaurant for a meeting, do not be surprised when you seem to not really get down to business: anecdotes and small talk come first. Numbers and facts are not as important as in Europe – Americans like to talk about sports, while tricky topics such as religion and politics should be avoided.

During our stay, we visited many different parts of the US. While talking to locals, we learned a lot about American traditions and their way of life. As for every foreign country you have to prepare yourself before having a business trip or vacation. Getting to know the cultural differences and appropriate behavior is essential to do business successfully.



Franziska Weitz (2nd from left) and Willi Votava (on the right).