

Internship at a funeral home

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Yishun Innova Junior College alumnus Marco Chua had a two-week internship at The Life Celebrant Funeral Home. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

Students may benefit from attachments not related to future careers as they expand their skill sets, say educators



Jane Ng
Correspondent

When Marco Chua had to pick a company for a work experience programme organised by his school in 2022, he decided on a funeral home as he was curious about what went on behind the scenes.

Even though he had no plans to go into that industry, he was eager to see what soft skills he could learn.

While some students might shy away from an industry dealing with death as they feel it is taboo, he says he felt comfortable during his two-week internship at The Life Celebrant Funeral Home as he often had conversations with his parents about death.

"My parents are open-minded and feel that any sort of work experience is good. They felt that the experience could be educational for me," says the 18-year-old, who graduated from Yishun Innova Junior College (YIJC) in 2023.

YIJC's head of department for humanities, Mrs Renee Low, says the college tries to include some unconventional attachment options to show students the breadth of possibilities that exists in the world of work.

"By observing how funerals are planned and executed, students will learn the various skills required of event managers. They will also learn about the social and emotional support that grieving families usually need," she says.

Marco says he was involved in the logistics for setting up a funeral

wake and accompanied bereaved families to the columbarium.

"I learnt about the process for sending off a deceased person. It taught me that things are not as easy as they seem and the people who are working put in a lot of hard work," he adds.

He says he picked up logistics and communication skills through his work attachment which can be applied to his future job and even in his daily life.

"I learnt to be more understanding towards others as I had to be able to speak to people who were grieving and be careful with my words. This helped me to communicate better with others," adds Marco, who hopes to be an engineer.

EXPANDING SKILL SETS IN DIVERSE FIELDS

With tertiary students increasingly involved in work attachments, a question that they may have is whether they need to get relevant work experience during internships.

Dr Luciano Lopez, dean of hospitality college EHL Campus (Singapore), has had students who did internships in an industry different from their field of study to challenge themselves and learn something new.

"Students who ventured into a different domain often returned with expanded skill sets and renewed visions for their careers,"

says Dr Lopez.

While job attachments in a specific field of interest can be beneficial, he believes the diverse experiences shape a student more than any specific job attachment.

"Engaging in a variety of roles or projects outside their primary area of interest can provide invaluable insights. It can challenge their preconceptions, expand their skill sets and cultivate adaptability," he adds.

But some educators say there are advantages when students pursue work attachments in their preferred industry.

Ms Yeo May-Fung, associate vice-president of the Centre for Career Readiness at the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), says work attachments are the perfect bridge between the classroom and the real world.

"Having a relevant work attachment on one's resume demonstrates initiative, adaptability and a solid understanding of the industry. This can give one a significant edge over others when applying for one's dream job," she adds.

Mr John Lim, Temasek Polytechnic's (TP) deputy director of student support and career services, says many employers view such work attachments as a pipeline for talent acquisition.

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MARCO CHUA, on what he learnt during his internship at a funeral home

would allow students to see if the workplace culture is a good fit for their personality and values.

"These internships help students find out if they have an over-idealistic view of what a certain job entails," he says.

SKILLS AND ATTITUDES EMPLOYERS LOOK FOR

The World Economic Forum's Future Of Jobs 2023 report rates analytical thinking, creative thinking, and use of artificial intelligence and big data as the top three skills needed in the workforce and will be among companies' skills-training priorities in the next five years.

SIT's Ms Yeo says that in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world where job and skills requirements are constantly evolving, students need to continually adapt and pick up new skills along the way.

"Employers value people with the right mindset and attitude, and the ability to learn, unlearn and relearn. Job roles have become more interdisciplinary and team-based, and transferable skills such as collaboration, communication and critical thinking are highly valued," she adds.

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Give kids space to make own choices

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Dr Lopez agrees, adding that the shift from hierarchical to flatter organisational models also means teamwork and adaptability have surged in importance.

"Today's employers seek individuals who can contribute their expertise and simultaneously collaborate within diverse teams, thereby leading to better organisational performance," he says.

SMU's Mr Lee says there is now a greater emphasis on being adaptable and competent in digital technology, especially when it comes to solving business problems. But one must be able to communicate the strategies well.

"Being technically proficient counts for little unless one can communicate the technical complexity into business action," he adds.

CAREER GUIDANCE FROM PARENTS

Mr Adrian Choo, chief executive and founder of Career Agility International, a human resource consultancy firm, says parents should be aware of certain pitfalls when guiding their children.

Parents who think they are helping their children choose a career may give rise to two problems, he adds.

One, if they adopt an "adults know best attitude", they may push their child towards traditional jobs such as being a doctor, lawyer or engineer, and advise them to find a stable job, hunker down and retire.

But these concepts may not apply any more in today's Vuca environment, says Mr Choo.

The second issue is if parents focus only on looking for a job for their children and neglect to teach soft skills such as communications,



Having a proactive approach towards internships and the experiences they offer can help students take a step closer to their dream careers. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

confidence and resilience, which will ensure that they thrive on the job and enjoy a sustainable career, he adds.

Instead of prescribing a career for their kids, SMU's Mr Lee says parents should encourage curiosity in them and guide them to find what motivates them intrinsically.

"Parents can find a subtle balance between giving their children autonomy and giving feedback," he says, advising parents to give their kids space to make decisions and make mistakes while supporting them.

In this way, their offspring can learn from their mistakes as well as take ownership of their decisions.

Parents can set realistic goals for their children, which may mean taking smaller steps in the direction of their goals, he says.

Also, remember to teach children the value of discipline, hard work and perseverance, he adds, as reaching goals requires strong work ethic and dedication.

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Preparing for internship

Education experts say preparation is key to having a successful internship, whether it is one in a related field of study or in another industry altogether.

Instead of just fulfilling an academic requirement, students who prepare themselves for internship may just find themselves landing their dream career.

1. READ WIDELY

Students can focus on exploring their interests and finding out what drives their passion beyond a well-paying job, advises Mr Benjamin Lee, director of student matters for the Singapore Management University's School of Accountancy.

"One way is to read widely to

know what is happening around the world and the economy, because it will help them to see that many things are interrelated, interconnected and interdependent," he says.

Besides reading, they can also listen to podcasts and TED talks in which people, including industry experts, share thought-provoking ideas, he suggests.

2. SERVE THE COMMUNITY

Another valuable trait is to find time to serve the community, even if it is in small ways, says Mr Lee.

Such involvement helps students develop a deeper understanding of social issues and nurture them into better leaders in the future.

"When our youth are exposed to the needs and challenges of others, it can foster in them empathy and

compassion, and instil a sense of responsibility and accountability," he says.

3. TAKE A PROACTIVE APPROACH

If a student is interested in becoming a programmer, he can speak to someone in that profession to learn about the good and the bad of it.

Find out the skills necessary to thrive and how to acquire them, says Mr Adrian Choo, chief executive and founder of human resource consultancy firm Career Agility International.

Or build a portfolio that aligns with the profession of interest.

For instance, if a student is interested in becoming a doctor, he or she could intern at a clinic or do volunteer work at nursing homes, so that the student can demon-

strate interest to the university that he or she is applying for, he adds.

4. SPEND TIME ON REFLECTION

Dr Luciano Lopez, dean of hospitality college EHL Campus (Singapore), says he would suggest students spend time to think about what they wish to become and the milestones they aim to achieve.

It should be time away from the daily hustle, to think about their aspirations, where they are and the path they need to take, he adds.

"This dedicated 'thinking time' can spell the difference between a fulfilling career and merely going through the motions," he says.