

## Intern's agony

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Whether you're just entering the working world, or you've been a part of the water-cooler group for 20-plus years, chances are you've either been an intern or working graduate student, or you've come into contact with one.

You may have even had a graduate student or an intern in your charge at some point during your career.

Internships and graduate-work experiences vary widely. While many report that they discovered a rewarding and challenging workplace and a lifelong mentor, others discover that being an intern is, well, hell.

Time and time again, the underling-supervisor relationship is a difficult one to manoeuvre.



Susan Pinker, a Globe and Mail careers columnist, recently ran a column about some of the horrors involved in being the researcher underling to a professor who mistreated that person: **Grad students should confront bad supervisors.**

She found that she had a huge response to the column. Many interns, summer students, grad students, and others starting out in the working world had had similar problems. And, conversely, sometimes being the supervisor to an untalented or arrogant intern can be a difficult situation.

**Ms. Pinker answered readers questions earlier in an on-line discussion about the difficulties, triumphs and issues faced by both interns and grad students and their supervisors.**

**Scroll down to read the questions and answers.**

*Please note: Ms. Pinker will not respond to individual career problems or questions. This discussion is to be a general overview of the intern/supervisor relationship.*

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and newspaper columnist who writes about social science for the daily press. Her interests range from interpersonal and ethical issues in the workplace, the subject of her Problem Solving column, to writing profiles and features on mental health, education and culture for The Globe and Mail, The Montreal Gazette and the Canadian Medical Association Journal, among other publications. Susan's writing has been recognized in awards from the Periodical Writing Association of Canada (2002) and the Canadian Medical Association (2000), and she has been nominated for the John Alexander Media Award (2000) and the Aventis Pasteur Medal for Excellence in Health Research Journalism (1999). An experienced clinician who has seen thousands of clients since 1982, Susan balances writing with part-time clinical practice, and lecturing at the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University. She is currently writing a book on sex differences in the workplace, to be published by Random House in 2007.

*Editor's Note: globeandmail.com editors will read and allow or reject each question/comment. Comments/questions may be edited for length or clarity. We will not publish questions/comments that include personal attacks on participants in these discussions, that make false or unsubstantiated allegations, that purport to quote people or reports where the purported quote or fact cannot be easily verified, or questions/comments that include vulgar language or libellous statements. Preference will be given to readers who submit questions/comments using their full name and home town, rather than a pseudonym.*

**Allison Dunfield, globeandmail.com, writes:** Hi, Susan, and thank you for taking part in today's live discussion on the issues faced by interns, graduate students and their supervisors. I'm wondering, first of all, if you could discuss what you think an intern or a graduate student should try to get out of their experiences. And, what should the supervisor or employee assigned to guide this person through their role gain from the experience, or try to gain?

**Susan Pinker writes:** Hello Allison: Thanks for asking me to address the hot topic of the relationship between graduate students and interns and their supervisors. Since a question about a prickly, insensitive PhD supervisor came into the Problem Solving column a couple of weeks ago, I have been inundated with mail from people in universities around the world with similar concerns. This is clearly not a Canadian problem. But I think that Canadian students and academics are perfectly situated to address it from a pragmatic perspective. Universities in Canada are supported by taxpayers and as such, should provide a fair degree of transparency to their primary constituents -- their students. Both grad students and their prospective supervisors/departments should have the means to get better-acquainted before they embark on a long term project together. But more on that later.

What an intern or graduate student gets out of their training experience is all about goal-setting. Clearly a summer internship is less of a commitment than a doctoral program, so the goals should be more modest. Still, the intern should have a good idea of why they're pursuing the experience, especially given the fact that summer internships are often unpaid. Is it about networking in your field of interest and establishing contacts? Learning a technique or new skill? Giving to the community? Adding to your variety of work experience? It's not a bad idea to write down your goals at the outset, and even discuss them with your supervising staff member. That would also be a good time to ask the supervisor about his or her expectations of you, the intern or summer student. Many problems could be avoided if these issues were set out at the beginning of a the training relationship. Then, at the end, you should go back and evaluate. You can't do this if you don't know what why you accepted the position.

As for graduate students, this is much more complex. One's goals should be long-term, even if the learning process itself is a goal. In the immediate future, it's essential to spell these out and run them by your future doctoral supervisor to see if they mesh with his or her vision of your place in the universe. I'm not joking. Once you become a graduate student, the lab or discipline where you will work becomes your whole world. It's worth checking out its climate very carefully first, via former students, e-mailing and meeting the professor and visiting the department. The more information you get in advance, the better. Some universities even post their graduation rates by department on their websites. Kudos to them for transparency.

The supervisor's role is to communicate their expectations clearly to the student/intern, establish structured timelines to avoid frustration, and hopefully transmit some of their accumulated knowledge to a keener. I've always found that having to teach a subject or skill ensures that I've filled in my own gaps in the area. Not only that, I sometimes meet very interesting and challenging students. The idea is to get something out of the process aside from cheap labour.

**Ottawa Grad from Ottawa, Canada writes:** I'm a graduate student about to complete a short term internship with the federal government. Things have gone quite well, but uncertainties resulting from the change in government have left my potential prospects to carry on working for this office uncertain. My CV has been passed on to other divisions within the same agency but nothing has yet come of it. What is the best way to keep in touch with my current supervisors or to build upon this experience once my placement has come to an end without anything tangible to show for it?

**Susan Pinker writes:** Dear Ottawa Grad: A good experience as an intern in government or any large institution is nothing to sneeze at. Even if you don't emerge with a job offer in hand, I disagree that you have nothing tangible to show for your stint there. Assess everything you've done during this internship. Write it down for future reference. And if I were you, I'd ask my supervisor to sit down with you before your internship ends so as to give you an informal evaluation. If your ego can stand it, ask him or her where you did well, and what you still need to learn. This can be immeasurably helpful as you plan your next step. As for keeping in touch with your current supervisors, nothing prevents you from meeting with them informally from time to time just to keep in touch. About 23 years ago I had a great boss, who was the administrator in a school where I was the psychologist — just learning the ropes, I might add. We still meet for lunch about twice a year and this relationship has enriched my professional and personal life. The same goes for a supervisor I had way back when. Eventually, if you keep up the contact, you become peers and can discuss issues on the same level.

I don't know what stage you are at in terms of your graduate program.

**Tom P. from Victoria, Canada writes:** Hi Susan. I have a question from the other side of things. I'm a professor supervising several grad students. Although most are extremely bright and hardworking individuals, one of them is a real slacker. On top of that, he is rude and arrogant to the other grad students, and to me. I think that he thinks he is talented enough to breeze through this process without doing much work. How does one handle a student like this? I do think that he is smart enough but he's not applying himself. Is it in my best interest to put him in his place?

**Susan Pinker writes:** Dear Tom: There's almost nothing more bedeviling and frustrating than dealing with a student like this. You have my sympathies. I think you have to give him some feedback, and fast.

But I wouldn't do it alone, and I wouldn't do it to put him in his place, as you put it. Instead, I would discuss the issue with someone in your department whom you trust, perhaps the head of the graduate program or the graduate studies coordinator. Jot down the concrete problems, both substantive ones, like not meeting deadlines or slacking, as well as issues of courtesy and lack of social awareness. These too are extremely important for graduate students, who remember, will be the university professors of the future. Then ask to meet with this student, along with the other faculty member (with whom you've discussed the issues first) to give him feedback, both positive and negative. There must be something this student is doing right (does he have good ideas, does he use a nice font?). Make sure that you give him these positive points. At the same time, mention your concerns; rudeness and arrogance won't get him, nor will slacking. Especially if he shows some intellectual promise, these style issues might scuttle his chances. But this meeting should not be a one-off. Meet with him monthly to keep track of his progress, and keep good records, just in case.

**Sue S. from Winnipeg, Canada writes:** I'm wondering what your thoughts are on taking unpaid internships. I have several opportunities in the hopper this summer, but they are all unpaid. Is it better to live on macaroni and cheese and get experience, or would I get more respect in the workplace as a paid intern? Should I hold out for one?

**Susan Pinker writes:** Hi Sue: It's hard to answer your question without knowing what your discipline is and what you hope to achieve during your internship. In general, it's my view that unpaid internships are a form of exploitation; as long as students are providing a service that is worth something to the employer, he or she should get paid, even if it's an honorarium. Paid employees do get more respect. Having said that, I'm aware that unpaid internships are common, especially in the arts (and I dare say, in psychology). Even though I like macaroni and cheese, I try not to work for no pay. It's a bad precedent to set. But I think you have to decide if this is training that is worth the money that you would forego had you worked elsewhere. If it is, consider it a trade-off.

**Bruce MacNeil from Canada writes:** Why would anyone intern? It is not reasonable to ask someone to work for free. Attending university we had a co-op education program where people would be paid to do work. Alongside the co-op program were people in other programs where very capable students would vie for an intern position where they would largely be abused and not paid. Ridiculous --and a violation of labour standards and laws.

**Susan Pinker writes:** Bruce: Hear, hear. I agree with you. Now, if only the universities hosting and setting up these internships would make that a prerequisite. I'm sure that practices vary widely by discipline. It behooves those offering internships in any setting to consider that students offer skills and have expenses and student loans.

**Alec from Saskatoon, Canada writes:** I'm wondering whether you think as the owner of a medium-sized company, you think it's more beneficial to have interns coming in throughout the year, or only in the summer. Is there a benefit to the employees to having some young blood in the office year-round?

**Susan Pinker writes:** Alec: That's a great question, because it touches on the boons of mixing teachers and learners in your workplace as a matter of course. Until now, many of the questions filtering through have come from students pondering issues of hours, pay and establishing mutual respect when you're the low man, so it's nice to hear an employer's perspective.

I think your idea of having "young blood" in the office all year could enhance the experiences of your long term staff. Are there any hoary faces who could use a little rejuvenation in the form of passing on what they know to an eager new recruit? As long as you have the resources to select carefully — many students are easily overwhelmed and couldn't handle a part-time internship while they're in school--and as long as you don't pawn off an embittered burn-out on a fresh young face, this could be valuable. Indeed, some

universities, like the University of Waterloo, have co-op programs that rotate students in and out of the classroom during the academic year, so the job demands wouldn't be competing with term papers.

**Sean L. from Headingly, Canada writes:** As a graduate student, what is reasonable in terms of hours worked in a week? Obviously the expectation is to work hard and for the most part, long hours, but is there a limit? Or should grad students put their work above sleep and a life, for a long-term payoff?

**Susan Pinker writes:** Hi Sean: All graduate students have to work hard and put in long hours. The grind is legendary. However, there is indeed a limit. You should definitely not give up the ingredients of a reasonably healthy existence: enough sleep, food and decent social contact.

Many students become overworked and isolated and pay with their mental health. Suicide has become a serious problem on the university campus, so much so that one American school, George Washington University, recently turfed a depressed student who sought professional help, because they dreaded the PR disaster of another student lost on their watch. All this to say that I can't specify how many hours are reasonable, but I can say that if your health is paying the price, it's too much.

**Susan Pinker writes:** Thanks, Allison, for hosting this discussion. What I found most interesting was the focus on particulars: how many hours, should I say anything, should I take this job, should internships be seasonal, etc. Having been in each role: summer intern, grad student, grad supervisor and currently supervising research assistants, I do think there's an overarching theme. Communicating goals and establishing regular check-in times to evaluate is essential. In industry they call these benchmarks. Students and interns have to decide at regular intervals what they hope to learn, and ask for feedback, even if it's scary. Their goals might change as they go along. They should keep track. After all, they are trying their professional faces on for size. They absolutely must look in the mirror. And supervisors must keep in mind how and what they are communicating to their students — the benefits can be reciprocal. I think that's all for now.

**Allison Dunfield, globeandmail.com, writes:** And thank you, Susan, for taking part today. I think we got a good variety of questions from both underlings and some supervisors on how best to handle their situations. Thank you for your thoughtful answers.

To our readers, that is all the time we have today, but please check back for future discussions.

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