More Than Just a Job

This summer, I realized that an internship isn’t just a resume builder, which I had naively believed throughout my college education. Of course, I also understood that an internship could be used to gain experience in a particular field, but I had never put much thought into that definition either. In fact, I never realized going into my internship at LP Amina that my most challenging and enjoyable summer laid before me. It wasn’t just the work atmosphere that made me realize this though, it was also the cultural atmosphere that constantly surrounded me, that of Beijing, China.

Living in a city that is completely new to you can take some time getting accustomed to. Luckily, I had visited Beijing several times in the past, as several of my close relatives live there. This would, however, be the first time that I would be working there, as well as the longest period of time that I would spend there. I was already accustomed to the food (overflowing bowls of noodles, giant heaps of rice, etc.), but it was the work experience that took me by surprise. Even though I had never had an internship in the US to compare my experience with (I have only worked as a research assistant in the US), I could tell that the office environment would be significantly different from the US just by observing workers rushing to their jobs in the mornings. Most companies in China require workers to swipe their ID badges when they start work. If they are even a minute off, it would count as a strike, and after a certain amount strikes, usually three, the worker would be fired. Although I had never been late to the office during my
internship, I was nevertheless thankful that our boss did not follow this stringent trend, and instead allowed workers to possess greater freedom in the office. This leniency might also have been attributed to the fact that my company was technically an American company.

What surprised me the most in the office was the rift between the Chinese and American work styles. From my observation, I noticed that several of the newly hired workers during my time there started with the Chinese work style. Their thought process was more focused on the task at hand, methodically going through each problem at a time. In a sense, you could say that the Chinese work style adopted a constantly bounded scope, with no path outside of these invisible boundaries. Over time, these same workers gradually shifted towards the American work style, which devoted less attention to specific tasks, and more attention to set goals and objectives. A clear sense of organization through weekly meetings and weekly tasks made clear which projects were due and which projects should be given greater attention throughout the week. I personally preferred the American work style as it gravitated towards a more driven working environment. The American work style also encouraged asking questions and communication with others, which I quickly realized was a vital part to any internship.

When I first entered the internship, my coworkers were very amiable and approachable. Unfortunately I was not confident enough in my Chinese skills to inquire on subjects that confused me, and instead badgered my department head, an American citizen. As I started working on larger projects that required me to team up with my other coworkers, I quickly realized that they felt the same way about me, finding it a little daunting to speak with me in English. During my second week working on said projects, however, it became apparent that both sides (my workers and I) realized that the language barrier did not prevent us from working efficiently with each other. Instead, it was beneficial in that I was able to teach them English,
while improving my Chinese at the same time. Of course, I also greatly appreciated the weekly Chinese tutoring courses offered by LP Amina, which enhanced both my casual and professional vocabulary.

By the end of the internship, I was close with most, if not all of my fellow coworkers. Not only would we frequently discuss problems and goals, we would also meet up outside of the office, and chat about each other’s cultures. After a few weeks, I reflected on the mindset that I had possessed coming into the internship, and was thankful for the self-improvement that I had attained each step of the way. This improvement was also partly due to the company culture; for example, departments frequently held company lunches for all of its workers. These lunches are presented in opposition to custom lunch habits in a Chinese office. In Chinese companies, it is common to see department bosses eat with each other and rare to see these heads eating with workers in their own department. Therefore, I felt like LP Amina provided its workers with greater attention, which exponentially enhanced the experience that I had gained.

Apart from the social side, I was also able to use what I had studied in engineering courses (at a surprising rate too) and juggle several tasks at once. Over time I started working later hours, sometimes working until eight when our scheduled time to get off work was six. This was due to the enjoyment that I had for my job as well as the greater responsibilities that I was given near the end of the internship. The insight that I had gained from working on engineering problems and learning how to productively complete several tasks at once was therefore also a large part of my experience at LP Amina. The sector that I felt I had improved the greatest however, was learning how to get along and work effectively with others. For that, I am thankful to have worked in a different culture, which constantly motivated me to reach out not only in the office but also with teammates and coworkers in general.