An Internship of Tests

My 10 weeks at Stylinity introduced me to an entirely new world in software engineering. As a User Acceptance Test Intern, my responsibility was to build an automated testing suite for executing rapid quality assurance tests across the company’s web and mobile application interfaces.

Before I set my foot on the first day of work, that previous sentence made little sense to me, as I was very much unfamiliar with QA testing. However, I believe that what ultimately made the internship at a startup so exciting was the journey taken to conquer the unfamiliar. By the end of the internship period, I had learned something entirely new and made it my own. Even when I was interviewing for the position, I frankly had no idea that I was to be writing code in C# and Ruby, both languages that I had no experience with. Thankfully, the couple computer science courses I had taken at Columbia - notably Advanced Programming in C - had adequately prepared me to face the challenge. Fundamental principles in programming are relevant and applicable for all computer languages, so for me it was a matter of getting familiar with the syntax, or the basic grammar for coding in the new languages.

QA test automation is a powerful tool for software engineering teams to easily check for bugs in the final product. Basically, automated QA tests are computer codes for checking the robustness of other codes. For online web-based applications, this entails replicating user behavior such as mouse clicks and keyboard inputs through a web browser simulator called
Selenium. For mobile, in particular iOS apps, the simulations happen on a testing platform called Calabash. With the automated tests, one can run application features like user login, registration, and search querying tirelessly on the computer. This saves a team from having to place a human in front of the computer manually clicking any buttons until something arbitrarily breaks.

I found my responsibility for creating a comprehensive set of QA tests quite empowering. While the initial learning process proved to be rather daunting, once I had a good grasp of the purpose of QA automation, as well as its design conventions, I enjoyed making tests that I knew were making my team more productive. When my manager approached and told me that my tests helped him catch an unseen bug on the company’s website, I couldn’t help feeling proud of my own efforts. Over the course of the ten-week internship period, I had written several programs for testing the essential features of Stylinity’s homepage and iOS application.

I will also remember that, had it not been for the immense help I received from my colleagues, I could not have achieved so much in such a short period of time. Another advantage of being at a startup, which I was able to discover and experience firsthand, is working as part of a close-knit team. When working in a small team, where there is minimal hierarchy or boundaries (both psychological and physical), person-to-person learning opportunities abound. I found it easy not only to approach my colleagues with quick questions, but also to request impromptu guidance sessions on programming practices. There was no need for formal procedures, such as Outlook calendar invitations that are more commonly used in corporate settings. If a conversation needed to happen with anyone in the team or the company, nothing stopped you from starting one.
In fact, it was from much of the casual conversations that I learned an unexpectedly large amount about the company, and about fashion-tech startups. Over lunch or beer during company happy hours, my colleagues and I would start to talk about new developments for the business, as well as share each other's stories for how we both ended up where we were. And by talking about them under a casual, relaxed atmosphere, I felt that it was easier to establish a sense of trust within a short amount of time. Thanks to the unplanned conversations with my teammates, I learned about what it really meant to be in the position of raising money, that the market for social commerce was still in its infancy, and other perhaps more quirky things about my team (e.g. when you put together a mixed group of software engineers and brand marketers hailing from Eastern Europe to Southeast Asia, the first conversation topic they choose to talk about becomes quantum mechanics and Middle East foreign policy).

Ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, the Startup Internship Program was a chance for me to test my own compatibility with the startup working environment. Admittedly, results obtained from a single sample cannot provide a generalizable answer. Cultures differ across different companies, and being a good fit for one startup didn’t mean that I would be a good fit for all startups. However, I learned that I was capable of working in an organization that had minimal structure, and that I was comfortable with learning entirely new things. From the ten weeks of exploring a startup work experience, I was able to realize not only professional strengths that would help me in the next steps of my career, but also my passion for the startup industry itself.