CEO Singapore 2017 – Reflection Essay

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During my sophomore year summer, I spent around two months working for Clifford Chance, a London-based Magic Circle law firm, in their Singapore office. I was placed in the Human Resources department where I worked closely with around six other members of staff to assist and take responsibility for various ongoing projects, the main one being the management of 17 law students’ Summer Internship Program. I am going to use this essay to reflect on the unfamiliarity of my experience this summer: I travelled to Singapore having never been to any part of Asia, to work in a department I was completely unfamiliar with, and in an industry about which I knew nothing. Considering each of these three factors, I am going to highlight the most significant things I learnt, and explain how each of them has influenced how I hope my career will develop, and how this will change the way I look for and take up new opportunities in the future.

The chance to live in Southeast Asia for three months was an incredibly formative experience. Despite moving abroad for university, working somewhere completely unfamiliar is not something I have really considered with any seriousness: once I graduate, I generally envisaged returning home to the UK. Working and beginning to integrate in a culture so different to my own has started to change my opinion about this. While the culture between New York and my rural UK home is obviously very different, they are comparatively quite similar, particularly the ways in which people study and work. I think this had made me underappreciate how much I can learn by seeing how people work in a culture which is totally different to anywhere I have previously lived. One thing that was particularly noticeable and beneficial to people’s work in Singapore was the necessary collaboration between people of different backgrounds and cultures. This was particularly important in the environment I was working in because of the diversity of the clients
we worked with. Having a work culture with such rich diversity and collaboration was important in driving up standards of work, because it allowed all members of a team’s strengths to be put forward, while generally not leaving their weaknesses exposed. The culture, and the way of working I experienced in Singapore was different from anything I had previously experienced and show me the advantages of working abroad, and the enjoyment and satisfaction that can come from that. Overall, my experience in Singapore has made me far more open to the prospect of working in cultures I have no experience or understanding of.

The next fundamental area of unfamiliarity I would like to discuss was the department I worked in. My understanding of Human Resources before this internship was rudimentary: I had previously worked in organizations that incorporated HR departments. My only real perception of HR was the layman idea that it is almost an add-on to businesses making a fuss of non-urgent issues. Despite my rather skeptical perception of HR, I really enjoyed the work I completed in my role. I think what was most pleasantly surprising was the breadth of my work: I was involved in the hiring and development of mid-level lawyers, but was also able to lead a program for a group of 17 undergraduate law interns who were applying for a Training Contract with Clifford Chance. The contract is extremely competitive and prestigious, and as a result I found it very rewarding to be able to manage this internship and have my opinion heard by partners in applicant discussions—especially when I heard how much it meant to the interns who were accepted. In general, I finished my internship very satisfied with the work I had completed because it felt valuable and long-lasting. Before I started working with Clifford Chance, I did not envisage going into HR as a career, and this remains true now. Part of the reason for this is that something important to my career choice is the chance to work front-of-house, dealing with clients for example. This is because this is where my achievements would be most easily recognized and appreciated.
However, having worked in a business support department like HR and feeling satisfied and valuable doing so, a career in a more backseat role is now something I would be more open to.

The final area of unfamiliarity I would like to touch on was the industry itself I worked in. I had no knowledge or experience working in corporate law before this internship, and it was not something that appealed to me as a career. Having surrounded myself with lawyers of diverse backgrounds and seniorities for the last few months, it does not appeal any more than it ever did. However, what was useful about my time at Clifford Chance in a broad context was that I started to understand why law does not appeal as a career. Throughout my internship, I was pleasantly surprised by the level of interaction I got with various lawyers, however I think there exists a huge level of superiority running through law firms and I found this somewhat unpleasant. However, I would not go so far as to say that such strong hierarchy would turn me off a career altogether. What I found myself thinking throughout my internship was that the reason the hierarchy is problematic in a law firm is because it is the most senior lawyers who are client-facing, which means a sense that those lower down the hierarchy are unimportant manifesters. In a law firm, where the senior lawyers are those who sit at the top of the hierarchy and are the client-facing staff members, there appears to be a tendency to disregard the value of the staff lower down because the business would not instantly fall apart as it would if those lower down the hierarchy dealt with clients.

Overall, the experience I had in Singapore was fantastic, and I learned so much about several different factors concerning my career that I have outlined above. While I think it’s very unlikely that I ever work in HR or in Law, I would consider working in Singapore, and the experience there, and at Clifford Chance specifically has significantly increased the range of work environments I could see myself in.