

Transcript of work placement interview with Vera Okojie

VERA: My name is Vera Okojie and I graduated last year in 2020 doing a BA philosophy degree with a work placement.

BARNEY: Hi Vera, thanks so much for coming back to speak to us about your experience of the work placement. So can I begin just by asking you where you did your work placement and what your role was?

VERA: I did my work placement at Microsoft and my official role was a Partner Development Manager intern.

BARNEY: How long did that last for and at what point did you do it in your degree?

VERA: I did it in my third year, and I did it for a whole year at Microsoft.

BARNEY: Microsoft sounds like quite a daunting place to apply to, at least to me, for any kind of role! How did you go about applying for that role?

VERA: I had already been doing some research on careers, and I did some spring weeks and different internships. I came across this role on a site called Rate my Placement and I just thought, why not? So I researched Microsoft, I researched the placement year, and I then started the application process. In doing that I started to connect with people at Microsoft via LinkedIn, and that really helped me to understand exactly what Microsoft was like to work at. It also boosted my application because then people could say, oh, I've spoken to her, or I could talk about speaking with other people. Eventually the last stage is a CV, you go through some application questions, a video interview and then a final assessment center. I really enjoyed the assessment center and after that yeah, it just seemed like a really good fit and luckily I got the job offer.

BARNEY: Fantastic, so once you actually were doing the role, what were the main responsibilities you had? What were the main things you were doing on the placement year?

VERA: Three key things I'd say. So number one, as an intern anywhere, a lot of what you're doing is research. I was in a sales function, but sales particularly for partners of Microsoft, so other businesses—what we call B to B, or business to business. I researched those businesses to understand how we could work with them better. Second thing, what you're doing a lot of the time is communications, like drafting emails and newsletters and such. The third bit is client interaction. I was really fortunate, and was given a new responsibility on the placement year to actually manage some accounts for Microsoft, so I ended up working with some of the clients and that was really, really cool as well. This involved constant communication, and letting them know how we would work with them better on our plans and strategies for the next few months. So yeah, there was a mix of different things I did.

BARNEY: I think you started to answer this question already, but were there ways in which the skills you picked up from studying philosophy were helpful when it came to fulfilling those kinds of responsibilities?

VERA: Absolutely. The big thing I always say to people who ask me, 'how did you go from philosophy to somewhere like Microsoft?', is that it's all about transferable skills. The top three skills I'd point out are, first of all, data analysis and being data literate. You know, in philosophy we're looking at complex literature and then coming up with a way to simplify it and then communicate it back in an easy way to understand. That skill set is super transferable. A lot of what you're doing, especially in the technology industry or corporate businesses, you're looking at information and presenting it back to a client, or even internally to gain buy in for it, and to be able to do that convincingly is such a skill, and in philosophy, that's what you're learning and doing in your essays. The second thing is communication. As I said, you have to speak about complex information. Sometimes we used to get verbal assignments, where you had to actually talk through your argument and that is super useful to be able to come to a business setting and be able to go through your points and give that back to a client or internal person to influence them. And then finally, it's teamwork. Seminars and different things you do within philosophy require you to work with other people, and if you are able to do that, you are able to succeed in any role you go into.

BARNEY: So what was the main thing that you felt you learned on the work placement? What did you gain from that experience?

VERA: I think it's something that I'll take on for the rest of my career, which is that you're constantly learning, and learning is good. I think being a philosopher—'cause you know, being a graduate I am one!—learning is like fundamental, and it's literally what created philosophy. You know, the love of learning, the love of knowledge, so the ability and passion to want to continue to learn will only help you succeed. That's the only reason I was able to get the responsibility to manage accounts on my placement year. Any success I had, it was because I always wanted to learn and pick things up and constantly carry on learning. So just enjoy learning and constantly learn. Learning is really, really invaluable.

BARNEY: I mean, I'm just struck by how true that is in my career as well. I've had exactly the same thing. It's all about that ongoing process of learning and problem solving, and studying philosophy is so good those ways.

VERA: So good.

BARNEY: So you did your work placement year, then you came back to Warwick and finished your degree. Congratulations again for doing that! How has your career panned out since then, and has the work placement you did at Microsoft had an influence on what you've done subsequently?

VERA: Yes, yes, absolutely. So when I finished at Microsoft I actually then went to Google, and once again kind of carrying on from my tech kind of background, I did a kind of similar

marketing and sales role at Google. When I came back to university I thought I want to do something tech focused, but I want to solve problems with businesses. So I looked into different industries and how they were impacted by tech, one of the industries being finance, so I looked into what is called Fintech and now I currently work in that industry—I'm even in the office now! I'm at Visa Inc as a Fintech analyst as part of their rotation programme. I'm currently on my second rotation in consulting and analytics, and just going back to what I said about transferable skills—all that data analysis, teamwork, communication—I'm using that day in and day out in this role, so you know the placement and my degree has really set me up very well.

BARNEY: If you were confronted by a philosophy student who's thinking about doing a work placement year, what would you say to them?

VERA: I would say, number one, breathe! Because I think it can come off intimidating to say you want to go from maybe an arts background to any kind of placement, any company. So first just breathe, breathe, relax and you can do it, that kind of inner confidence, talk to yourself, you can do it. Second of all, research, research, research. I think that's another big skill to pull out as a philosopher. You are super good at research. Use that skill as you are applying. Whether that be just desktop research or speaking to people, that can also be research as well and have some questions to ask people. Do your research and find out what appeals to you. I've already mentioned one of the websites that really helped me, Rate My Placement, to look at opportunities. Another website I'd always recommend is Bright Network. I think they're really good, so just go there, do your research. Finally, it's just be curious, like I said about learning things and being a philosopher helps, be curious. Keep finding out more things. If one thing doesn't work, so what? Try something else. You know, when you're in your degree now, you have the ability to try different things. You have that flexibility, so make the most out of it. The work placement is an excellent opportunity to just discover what you like, and maybe don't like, and then you can go from there, and ultimately go into a career that you really, really enjoy.

BARNEY: Vera, thanks so much. That's been really, really helpful.