

PREPARING FOR THE U.S. WORKPLACE

A Guide for MSU International Students

Whether you have been in the U.S. for one year or many, life as a student is different from that of a full-time employee (often referred to as “the real world”¹ by Americans). One of the most important skills to use in your first few months at work is observation. The workplace has its own culture, which can vary from company to company even in the same field. That said, here are some general guidelines to consider:

- Build a strong first impression: be punctual in your arrival to work, return from lunch break promptly, be on time for appointments, dress neatly and appropriately (find out if there is a dress code before your first day) don't make lengthy, numerous or unnecessary personal calls, and don't be the first to leave at the end of the day.
- Utilize company resources, such as the employee handbook, website or training workshops offered by the company (“in-house”). The human resources office can be a good source of information on company policy as well as the state and federal laws that impact your status as an employee. These resources will help you learn about the company's culture.
- Actively participate in staff meetings. Like the U.S. classroom, verbal input is often desired whether it is offering a new idea or reinforcing a suggestion made by another.
- Volunteer to serve on committees. This is a good way to learn about your colleagues in a different setting. Also, some companies encourage employees to participate in community work outside the office setting. Find out if your company has a favorite charity that it supports. Finally, the company may have sports teams it sponsors for recreation, such as softball. Being part of a team with colleagues in a casual pastime is another ideal way to interact.
- Be prepared for diverse workforces, for example, approximately 50% of U.S. workers are women. You will have colleagues from many racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The U.S. workplace is very sensitive to sexual harassment and other inappropriate behavior. Although you may not intend a comment to be inappropriate, a colleague may interpret it as such. There can be serious repercussions to an employee's job and future with the company, depending on the particular situation. Definitions of unacceptable behavior may vary from company to company.
- Do not gossip about your own or others' personal lives. Office “grapevines”² tend to be faster than email. Something you may have told someone in confidence could become information shared by many. Be discreet as to how much personal information you reveal. For example, if you need to take a day off to help a sick parent, you may not wish to go into the details of their condition, depending on the situation.
- Schedule your time off well in advance. Though you may be ready for a vacation after your first week, it is likely you won't be eligible until several months - or a year later. Depending on the work environment and pace, it is advisable to request vacation days 2-4 weeks in advance, whenever possible.
- Use office property in a responsible manner. Make sure if you take materials home, they are used for office work at home - and returned to the office the next day.
- Likewise, use office technology in a responsible manner. Treat email as formal correspondence, with correct spelling, punctuation and grammar. Do not “surf the web” for pleasure while at work – nor should you store documents of a personal nature on an office computer. Finally, do not load computer games onto an office machine.
- Understand how Americans view their employer, for example, the days of working at one company lifelong have largely passed for the majority. On average, Americans change jobs 4-6 times in a lifetime.

- “Networking”³ is a valuable tool for your professional development. Volunteer work, professional association membership and conference participation may be ways to expand your connections within the company and the field.
- Use your MSU connection! As an alumnus, you are able to access the resources of the Office of Career Development – whether you are in an active job hunt or are interested in updating your resume. Also, remember to stay in touch with faculty and classmates, as they progress in their careers as well.
- Be aware of American body language. In general, Americans value a lot of eye contact during a conversation. It is routine to shake hands with someone upon introduction.
- Treat staff at all levels as important. In fact, you may find a secretary may greatly impact the quality of your work life. Also, when dealing with persons of high status, the secretary often serves as the “gatekeeper”⁴ to access that person. Finally, in keeping with American views on personal mobility, it is not unusual for someone in a support staff position to later be promoted to a professional job.
- It is important to learn colleagues’ names as soon as possible. On the first day, take a notebook to jot down such information. It is routine in most companies to call the boss and colleagues by their first name. Normally, companies evaluate a new employee within six months of arrival. This is a way to gauge your strengths and weaknesses. If your company doesn’t offer this formally, you may wish to ask your supervisor for this opportunity. Many Americans value “constructive criticism.”⁵
- Dating a colleague is not advisable. Some companies have explicit policies against this. Think very hard before you pursue a social relationship with a co-worker, since if it ends in an unpleasant manner, you will still be interacting with that person professionally.
- If you decide to change jobs, it is advisable to have a new one secured prior to resigning. Depending on the company, 2-4 weeks advance “notice”⁶ is expected before departing. You will need to consider your specific situation to determine whether or not to inform a current employer you are job hunting. If the company culture values loyalty or is highly competitive, you may wish to keep your search private for as long as possible.
- Be sure to maintain copies of all important correspondence and documents you both receive and produce. Start immediately to create a logical file system, so that you can easily access such items.
- When working on a document on the computer, which is important or will be used long-term, be sure to back the item up on disk, in addition to saving it on the hard drive.
- Music in the office environment can be a routine – or controversial – issue. If the workplace allows and/or encourages music, be sure to play any radio at a low volume, so you do not distract or offend your colleagues.
- If you have a conflict with someone at the office, it is usually best to try to resolve it directly with that person. If you are unable to do so, the next step would be to speak with your boss. If the situation still cannot be resolved at that level – or if it is an ongoing conflict with the boss – you may wish to use the assistance of the personnel office.

Source: Office for International Students & Scholars, New York University

¹ “The real world” – is often used to infer that the college environment is protective and it shields students from problems they will encounter upon graduation. More recently, it is also the name of a popular TV series on MTV.

² “grapevine” – is a term used to describe how information is transmitted from one person to another, often in the sense of rumors.

³ “networking” – is when people make alliances, often at the professional level, which can be ways to pass on information to each other, find out about recent developments, job openings, etc.

⁴ “gatekeeper” – is the person who controls the communication access for another person, often of higher status.

⁵ “constructive criticism” – is when feedback is given in a way that points out the problems, but also works with the individual to help them come up with ways to correct them.

⁶ “notice” – is when an individual informs a company that s/he is going to resign.

RESUME & INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Just as there are cultural differences in education systems and social life, there are cultural differences in what an employer expects during the interview process. This guide is designed to help international students in the U.S. understand what these cultural differences may be, help them create a U.S. appropriate resume, and prepare for a successful interview process.

RESUMES

A resume for a U.S. employer is a concise, attractive marketing tool that summarizes job skills, accomplishments, and academic background relevant to your employment objective. It is NOT a detailed chronological list of academic and formal work experience.

You should include:

- Full Name (*given name, family name*)
- Contact Information in the U.S.
- Career Objective (*optional*)
- Summary of Qualifications (*optional*)
- Education (*highest degree first*)
- Relevant Experience (*most recent experience first*)
- Leadership Experience (*optional*)
- Honors & Awards (*optional*)
- Languages (*other than English*)

You should NOT include:

- TOEFL Score
- Photograph
- Immigration Status
- Age
- Hometown/Home Country
- Marital Status
- Race/Ethnicity
- Religion
- Personal Interests or Hobbies

INTERVIEWING

The most difficult thing for many international students during the interview process is selling themselves. The U.S. is a highly individualistic, direct culture where employers expect you to show confidence in yourself and enthusiasm for the job. To do this, you must openly discuss your goals and accomplishments in order to convince them you are the best candidate for the job. Many international students feel boastful and disrespectful when trying to discuss their qualifications in such an individualistic manner, but this is one of those situations where it is important that you practice expressing yourself confidently without sounding arrogant. Learning to find the appropriate language is often difficult, so it is very important that you take advantage of the programs your career center provides, such as practice interviews.

Interviewing DOs:

- Be on time
- Maintain eye contact
- Anticipate questions regarding competency and experience
- Openly discuss your accomplishments and skills
- Be direct and give specific examples that demonstrate your experience
- Be ready to discuss your strengths and weaknesses
- Know the organization (*shows initiative and interest*)
- Follow-up your interview with a thank you note

Interviewing DON'Ts:

- Be late
- Disclose age, race, marital status (*it is illegal for them to ask you such personal questions*)
- Answer questions indirectly
- Avoid responding to questions that require to you talk about your accomplishments and personal career goals
- Treat anyone you meet differently based on education, job title, sex, age, etc. (*politeness and respect are shown to all employees a candidate meets, whether a receptionist or CEO*)

DISCUSSING YOUR IMMIGRATION STATUS

Although it is illegal for a potential employer to ask you your race, nationality, or immigration status, they can however, ask you if you are authorized to work in the U.S. You are not required to offer the information if not asked about your employment eligibility, but it is very important that you are able to explain it if necessary. Not all employers are familiar with the work authorization associated with various immigration categories, so the more

knowledgeable you are about the employment options available to you; the more confident you will feel about the discussion. The Office for International Students and Scholars (OISS) can help you to understand your work authorization options. Contact information can be found on the first page. Additionally, OISS hosts walk-in hours from 1-3 p.m. Monday through Friday each week.

Most importantly, emphasize the positive. Especially as more companies are going global, it is an advantage to many employers to have a bilingual employee and/or an employee familiar with work abroad. The fact that international students have lived and studied in another country shows determination and resourcefulness. Convey to the interviewer challenges you faced and overcame in this process. Be prepared to explain to your potential employer how hiring you offers more advantages than disadvantages.

CHALLENGES YOU MAY ENCOUNTER

No job search goes exactly as you plan. Successful searches require preparation for the cultural expectations of U.S. employers as well as addressing potential concerns. Challenges you may encounter include:

- **Language:** Finding the right words to express yourself professionally in a language that is not your first can be difficult. Take advantage of all your campus resources (Career Services Network, English Language Center, OISS programs) to practice your English and the vocabulary you need to make a positive impression on an employer in the U.S.
- **Hiring Complexities:** When your student work eligibility expires, in order to continue working in the U.S., your employer will be required to sponsor you for a 'change of status' to a work visa. The transition to another visa status requires careful planning well in advance of the expiration of your current immigration status. Not all employers have their own immigration department, therefore it is important that you are aware of the time it will take to change your status and be proactive in making sure your employer is aware. Because of this, as well as the costs involved in changing an employee's immigration status, some employers hesitate to hire international students. This is why you must be prepared to demonstrate what you can bring to the organization as well as the benefits of hiring a non-U.S. citizen.
- **Commitment:** Some employers fear international employees will return to their home country soon after the employer has invested time, money, training resources, and possibly sponsoring him/her for a work visa. It is important to show the employer your loyalty to the company and how you are an asset to the company's overseas operations.
- **Animosity:** Some Americans feel that by hiring an international student employers are taking jobs away from U.S. citizens. Due to the current economy, this sentiment may be more pronounced right now. You should be able to demonstrate how your skills and knowledge will be an asset to the company. Also, research diversity and its benefits in the workplace. If you are pursuing a degree in any of the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) fields, you may also want to arm yourself with statistics that show international students are the majority of graduates in many of these fields.
- **Location:** International students often limit their job search to the east or west coasts (California, Seattle, Boston, New York, Washington D.C., etc.). The competition for these jobs thus becomes very intense. Be open to all locations, especially Southeast Michigan. Michigan is the first state to create a program specifically to recruit international students to live and work in the Detroit area. The **Global Talent Retention Initiative of Southeast Michigan (GTRI)** is being developed as a resource to connect employers in the Detroit area with international students seeking internships and full time employment during their practical training period.

Prepared by the Global Talent Retention Initiative (GTRI), adapted for Michigan State University by the Office for International Students and Scholars (OISS).



**Global Talent
Retention Initiative**
of Southeast Michigan

To get the latest information on SE Michigan employment opportunities for international students,

'LIKE' us on

facebook

www.facebook.com/MiGTRI

HOW TO TALK TO EMPLOYERS ABOUT YOUR IMMIGRATION STATUS

The job search process can be a daunting process, especially for international students. If an employer is not restricted from hiring foreign nationals or does not specify who is eligible to apply, consider submitting your application. It is important to follow a few guidelines during the application and interview stages:

If a company says they don't hire international students, it may still be okay to apply. While some employers cannot hire international students for certain reasons (U.S. governmental contracts), when employers say they don't hire international students it may mean they haven't hired any *yet*. In order to convince prospective employers, it is *your responsibility to educate them* about the process of hiring an international student. Keep in mind that they still may not hire you. It is recommended that you first target organizations with a history of sponsoring individuals for H-1B (temporary worker) visas.¹

Be knowledgeable about your work authorization options: You need to know the benefits and restrictions of your particular immigration status and be able to discuss comfortably (depending on your visa type) Academic, Curricular, and Optional Practical Training (AT, CPT, OPT) and H1-B visas, among other possible visa types. The more knowledgeable you are about your employment options, the more confident you will feel and appear during the discussion with your prospective employer. You should also practice responses to potential questions such as "Are you authorized to work in the US?"

Know the appropriate time to reveal that you are an international student: If your interviewer asks about your visa and work eligibility, answer directly and honestly. If your interview is coming to a close and the visa issue has not been mentioned yet, it is a good idea for you to bring it up casually. You can say: "I would like to mention that I am on a student visa and will need to briefly discuss my legal employment options with you if I'm hired. My international student advisor has explained the procedures that exist for my lawful employment." By bringing up the topic yourself, you are showing the employer that you are motivated to get the job and that you are ready to assist them with the procedure.²

When interviewing you should emphasize the positive: It is an advantage for employers to have a diverse group of employees. That fact that you have lived and studied abroad shows your confidence and resourcefulness. Convey to the interviewer challenges you have faced and overcome in this process. Be prepared to explain to your potential employer how hiring you offers more advantages than disadvantages.

¹ <http://www.myvisajobs.com/>

² Adapted from Marcy Cohen, Director of Rutgers-New Brunswick University Center for International Faculty and Student Services

Frequently Asked Questions

How do I answer when I am asked by an employer if I can legally work in the U.S?

(F-1 Student)

- Start by explaining that you are legally able to apply for your own work authorization through your university while you are on an F-1 visa at no cost to them (using either Curricular or Optional Practical Training). Utilizing this practical training may allow you to work anywhere from 12 to 29 months (or more if you combine CPT and OPT together), depending on your major.

(J-1 Student/Scholar)

- Same as the F-1 student though the time you have available may differ and, in certain cases, you must get permission from your sponsor to work. If you are not sure, please check with the Office for International Students and Scholars (OISS).

Please refer to the [OISS website](http://www.oiss.msu.edu) for more information under “[Employment](http://www.oiss.msu.edu)” [www.oiss.msu.edu] You can also share with the employer -“my work authorization can be renewed for another three to six years with an H-1B temporary worker visa.” Avoid saying the word “sponsor” when talking about the H-1B application process, instead use “petition”.ⁱ Explain to the employer that they “petition” for the visa and you are the beneficiary. **Note:** An H-1B petition *does not* require an employer to test the labor market, meaning they do not have to prove there are no qualified U.S. citizens or Permanent Residents available for the position.

It may also be useful to explain that you do not need a “Green Card” in order to work in the U.S. and that an H-1B visa is different from this.

Will you now or in the future require sponsorship for employment (E.g. H-1B visa)?

Yes! Many employers will ask this because they need to know whether a petition for H-1B is needed. Following the question above, explain that you will require an H-1B petition to work for up to six years after you have exhausted your F or J visa options. The legal fee for applying usually runs from \$1800 to \$3,500 with additional filing fees paid to the U.S. government.

Additional Resourcesⁱⁱ

Please note that OISS does not specifically endorse the following resources but rather provides them for educational purposes.

- **MyVisaJobs** - Reports for H1B Visas and Visa Sponsor Profiles [<http://www.myvisajobs.com/>]
- **GoinGlobal** – Provides information on employers who have petitioned for H-1B visas as well as cultural and networking information. [<http://www.goinglobal.com/>]
- **Global Talent Retention Initiative of Michigan** – Lists employers interested in hiring international students and posts available positions and provides information to employers as well. [<http://www.migtri.org/>]
- **American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA)** – Offers a “find a lawyer” option. [<http://www.aila.org/>]
- **United States Citizenship & Immigration Service (USCIS)** – Check out the “Services and Benefits” Section [<http://www.uscis.gov>]
- **International Student.com** – Check out the “Job Search” section. [<http://www.internationalstudent.com>]

ⁱ University of Buffalo, Job Search Guide for International Students

ⁱⁱ Brown University Career Development Center “Tips for International Students: Handling the Visa Question in U.S Job Interviews”

EMPLOYER'S GUIDE TO HIRING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Many employers are concerned about liability issues related to the employment of international students in the United States due to changes in federal laws governing noncitizens. Getting permission for international students to work in the U.S. is not as difficult (or as costly!) as many employers think. Most students are eligible to accept employment under certain conditions. The most common methods of hiring international students include Practical Training (Academic, Curricular, or Optional) and the H-1B Temporary Worker Visa.

BENEFITS OF HIRING INTERNATIONAL TALENT

- International students bring cross-cultural competencies and multiple language skills to your organization.
- Hiring an international student not only brings diversity but also introduces a new perspective for creativity & problem-solving.
- Many international students demonstrate maturity, flexibility and dedication and can share business practices of other cultures and help your organization adapt to new challenges globally.
- The students' diversity of prior work experiences coupled with academic excellence provides innovative approaches to business.
- Demonstrate outstanding characteristics that are appealing to top employers: knowledge of other cultures, multiple language capabilities (including English), and ability to contribute in a teamwork-centered environment.
- Students also exhibit high quality skills such as leadership, independence, and ability to adapt to change.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

Contact the **Global Talent Retention Initiative of Michigan (GTRI)**

www.migtri.org | info@migtri.org
Ave. Ste 275 East Lansing, MI 48823 | (517) 999-3382

Majors eligible for the 17-month extension:
<http://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/stem-list.pdf>

What Employers Should Know?
http://ois.njit.edu/docs/what_employers_should_Know.pdf

Guide to Hiring International Students
<http://www.creighton.edu/careercenter/employers/guidetohiringinternationalstudents/>

	Curriculum Practical Training (CPT) F-1 visa holders	Optional Practical Training (OPT) F-1 Visa Holders	H-1B Visa	Academic Training (AT) J-1 visa holders
Process	<p>CPT can be done prior to completion of study.</p> <p>Student applies for approval from their host institution. Students can request to work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part time - maximum of 20 hours/week while school is in session (there may be exceptions) • Full time when school is not in session (21 hours or more/week) 	<p>Can be authorized for full-time employment after completion of studies (definition of completion varies by degree level)</p> <p>Student files OPT application with their host institution</p> <p>Approval is granted by the U.S Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)</p> <p>Student must obtain Employment Authorization Document (EAD card) prior to starting work</p>	<p>Work visa available to foreign nationals who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have at least a U.S Bachelor's degree or foreign equivalent • Will be working in a job that requires at least a Bachelor's degree <p>There is no need to advertise the position and no need to determine if U.S workers are available to fill the position</p>	<p>AT can be done Before and After completion of study</p> <p>Student applies for approval from their host institution</p> <p>Students are eligible to work anywhere from 18 to 36 months depending on length of study.</p>
Employer Requirements	Provide Offer Letter and/or other job specifications	<p>None</p> <p>Student must present EAD card to employer on the first day of work as proof of authorization.</p>	<p>Submit visa petition to USCIS.</p> <p>Employer must post notice for 10 days at the worksite stating they are hiring an H1-B worker, providing information about the position</p>	None
Timing	Approval takes 3-10 business days	Approval takes 2-3 months - students can apply 90 days in advance of their program completion.	On average 5-6 months. Employer can request expedited processing for an additional \$1,225 and can take up to 15 days to approve.	Approval takes 3-10 business days
Cost	No cost to employer or student	<p>No cost to employer</p> <p>\$380 paid by student</p>	<p>Ranges from \$2000-\$3500 and includes: Base Filing: \$325 ACWIA Fee \$750 for employer with 1-25 full time employees, \$1500 for 26 or more full time employees Fraud Prevention and Detection fee: \$500 Public Law 111 Fee: \$2000 - if more than 50 employees Attorney Fees if applicable</p>	No cost to employer

For more details about U.S. Work Authorization Options for International Students, please refer to the Office for International Students and Scholars (OISS) website at Michigan State University: www.oiss.msu.edu/students/employ under Related Links