

Getting an internship (« stage ») at the European Commission August 2009

Adeline, an MSc Risk Analysis student at King's College University of London, has just obtained a six month 'stagiaire' placement with the European Commission in Brussels. We asked her how she went about it.

The European Commission, based in Brussels (though certain specific offices are located in other countries), organises two 5-months internships every year, one starting March 1 (summer internship) and one starting October 1 (winter internship). Applications should be submitted 6-8 months in advance. All the details are on this website: http://ec.europa.eu/stages/index_en.htm

There are two selection stages:

- 1) the preselection, which is an internal process (you are not contacted) is an assessment of your application along a certain number of criteria such as nationality (there are quotas per countries), relevance of studies, motivation, grades, etc...The rules are changing for the next selection (summer 2010) and are getting more transparent.
If you are preselected, your profile will be added in the Virtual Blue Book (VBB), which is an online system gathering all preselected candidates.
- 2) The selection process is done by the services of the different Directorate Generals (DGs) of the Commission. Usually 1 out of 4 preselected candidates on the VBB gets chosen. This step can involve a telephone interview, though it is not always the case. To me it is the most complex and opaque phase of the procedure.

The actual content of the placement is not necessarily very specific. If you have a phone interview with a unit, they might explain what your role will be. I eventually got chosen by a unit I did not speak to, therefore I have no idea what my precise role will be, except for the usual 'administrative and research support' function.

What would your top five tips be for those wanting to get a stagiaire?

- 1) *Think carefully about your choice of DGs in your application.* When you submit an application, you are asked to choose 3 preferred DGs in which you'd like to work. Pick those which are relevant to your studies, especially if you have some

sought-after competences, such as scientific skills, IT, etc...Keep in mind that many applicants will be students in EU-related subjects (EU politics, economics etc...) hence it is important to highlight your differences. Although I have a master in EU studies, I am convinced that I have eventually been picked because I am currently finishing an MSc Risk Analysis at King's, which to them is something unusual.

- 2) ***Rank your choice of DGs in a clever way.*** It is said that most trainees get their first choice (also my case). I was interviewed by people from my 2nd and 3rd choices, and they all asked me to justify my ranking.
- 3) ***Lobby.*** There have been many debates about whether or not you should lobby the Commission once you are on the VBB. I think it is useful but only if done carefully. Do not send the same standard email to all units, but only pick the ones you would really like to work for, and try to send something short and tailored. Emails are usually sent to heads of unit, though it is actually impossible to find out who is selecting trainees. Heads of units are really busy people and I am almost certain that they do not have the time to take care of these matters and delegate to a policy officer in the unit (these are the people who might phone you up for an informal interview). But to identify the policy officer in charge of trainee recruitment in each unit is impossible, so I would hope and ask the head of unit's secretary to forward my email to the person in charge.
- 4) ***Find out when the DGs are recruiting and make sure you are reachable.*** Use forums, facebook groups etc...to find out if other people have been contacted, and be ready to be. I had two phone interviews and I got both calls without any prior notice, so make sure that the contact number you put on your application form will still be valid 6-8 months after...
- 5) ***Contact HR of your preferred DG to find out about the status of your application.*** I would advise to call because they tend to answer emails with standard responses. They are the ones who will be able to tell you when the selection will be made in their DG, and, if you are lucky, check your status in the VBB and tell you if someone is interested in you or has 'reserved' you.

Useful websites:

Official traineeship website: http://ec.europa.eu/stages/index_en.htm

Forums of former/current applicants:

<http://traineeship-ec.blogspot.com/2008/01/what-to-do-meanwhile.html>

<http://ec-traineeship.findtalk.net/ec-traineeship-2009-2010-f1/>

ECStage Committee: <http://www.stagecommittee.org/index.html>

Plus search all the Facebook groups with the following key words: European Commission, winter stage, summer stage, etc...

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