

HBI INTERNS TAKE ON THE WORLD OF BUSINESS

Making the jump from a neuroscience research laboratory to the business world isn't easy. But for postdoctoral scholars and graduate students at the HBI, a new professional development initiative is helping trainees who are interested in careers outside of academia to bridge the gap between the laboratory and the corporate sector.

The REALISE Career Encounters program explores how skills developed through graduate training translate into the private sector, government and non-profit organizations.

Project-based work experience provides brain and mental health trainees with an opportunity to discover the world outside of the laboratory, demonstrating the immense value that analytical minds can offer organizations in meaningful, yet sometimes unexpected ways.

Launched in 2014, the Career Encounters program was championed by HBI community supporter William G. Sembo, who recognized the potential for specialized postgraduate education in business applications. Sembo serves on the board of directors at CEDA, an oil and gas services company.

Forward-thinking executives at CEDA initially created two six-month internship positions for HBI trainees at their Calgary head office.

"We came up with two opportunities that were research based: one in workforce management and the other in tailings technologies," says Roberta Roesler, chief information officer and executive vice president of Corporate Services at CEDA.

"We wanted someone who would come and look at these issues and opportunities in a completely different way."

Impressed by the calibre of the REALISE interns, CEDA later created a third internship to further benefit from the innovative thinking of HBI trainees.

Chris Bladen, PhD, originally hired as a tailings analyst intern, demonstrated initiative and made a quick transition into the business environment.

"What Chris didn't know, he found answers to," says Paul Massel, vice president of Corporate Development and Bladen's internship supervisor. "Chris has been challenging me in lots of ways, which has been fantastic," Massel adds of their collaborative working relationship.

Bladen's leap from ion channels to tailings ponds wasn't as great as one might think. His undergraduate degree is in ecology and, at the time of hiring, he was halfway through completing a certification in environmental management alongside his PhD. Coupled with astute problem-solving skills augmented as a researcher at the HBI, Bladen was well-suited to analyze recent tailings pond legislation.

This role quickly expanded as Bladen's supervisors saw his skills in action. He became more integrated into business development, identifying opportunities to capitalize on the changing landscape of tailings management.

When a new job posting as an environmental specialist came up with CEDA, Bladen's combined education, experience and skillset made him an ideal candidate, earning him the offer of a permanent position.



Shadna Rana, left (postdoctoral scholar from the laboratory of Quentin Pittman, PhD), Brett Simms, second from left, and Chris Bladen, right (PhD students from the laboratory of Gerald Zamponi, PhD) are pictured with Roberta Roesler, chief information officer and executive vice president, Corporate Services at CEDA.

“This internship was invaluable in opening a door. Once you are through that door, it becomes apparent that researchers have highly transferable skills.” – Chris Bladen, PhD

Fellow intern, Brett Simms, PhD, was initially hired on CEDA’s workforce management team to find the reasons behind — and possible solutions to — high employee turnover. CEDA were able to implement cost-reducing changes in this area as a result of Simm’s work.

“Graduate school and the HBI train you to think analytically,” Simms says. “The research conducted inside the HBI is similar to research in the business world. We all ask ourselves: what’s the real problem, where can I find the answer — and once you have the potential solutions — how could they be implemented?”

Originally a business improvement intern with CEDA, Shadna Rana, PhD, worked on project aimed at improving information and knowledge sharing across the company. She is confident the skills gained as a researcher helped her face the steep learning curve in this new role.

“Our training as researchers hones our communication skills,” says Rana. “We have experience writing proposals, manuscripts and theses which are valuable skills in business.”

Simms and Rana were both transitioned into business analyst roles at CEDA. Simms credits the HBI and its REALISE program for helping show both trainees and potential employers that scientists don’t just belong in the lab.

Director of the REALISE program, Sarah McFarlane, PhD, believes it’s important for students and faculty to understand the value that academic and research skills can contribute to organizations. “We’re not only showing our people how to apply the skills they learn in the lab to the outside world. We’re also letting the outside world know that there are smart, hard-working people here who could be a benefit to their organization,” says McFarlane, who is a professor in the Department of Cell Biology and Anatomy.

With a demonstrated return on investment, Roesler is encouraging other companies to take on HBI interns. “I would absolutely recommend it,” she says, adding the key to their success was to pair interns with company experts to ensure the newcomers have access to institutional knowledge. Beyond that, she says, it’s all about having an open mind.