

## **In Their Own Words: Advice from Past South Africa Externs**

### **What did past externs learn in South Africa that they feel they could not have learned here in the US?**

2011 extern - "My experience in South Africa was more substantive and prepared me more for practicing law than any of my legal internships. I was given an actual case load and asked to make determination on each case. It required me to take initiative, to learn law, to call clients, to draft legal opinions, and to figure out how to prioritize and balance all of my work."

2009 extern - "[Y]ou have the opportunity to work on matters that you would not otherwise work on and have a level of responsibility that law students and junior attorneys generally do not have. Most importantly, during the externship I discovered my passion for refugee law and hope to one day practice in this area of the law."

2007 extern - "The experience [added] significant depth to my law school training, and the work that I did in Cape Town--direct client counseling and court appearances--gave me confidence in my practice."

2002 extern - "[I]t helped develop my oral communication skills, and forced growth in resourcefulness and empathy; it afforded opportunity to interact with very influential and interesting people in a stimulating, open environment; and I found a superb mentor and friend in my supervisor."

### **I'm worried about the effect South Africa will have on my career prospects. Has the South Africa externship aided the careers of past externs?**

2011 extern - "While I had a job lined up before I left, the experience absolutely helped my professional development. I gained practical experience working abroad, and took on a great deal of responsibility in handling challenging cases within the refugee context. I believe that working in South Africa also demonstrates to potential employers that I am willing to step outside my comfort zone. It was a unique experience, and one that I think separates me from other law students in the eyes of prospective employers."

2010 extern - "I think the South Africa experience can be immeasurable in terms of career prospects in the short term. In a crowded field of applicants, it makes you stand out. The willingness to take a 'risk' and commit yourself to the important work being done by lawyers in South Africa shows a confidence and commitment that is not easily communicated through a resume or an interview. I also imagine it gives much needed depth to the resumes of those who go straight through from undergrad to law school. At the very least, it gives you no end of things to talk about in an interview."

2009 extern - "Yes, I feel that going to South Africa aided my career. Today's job market is flooded with smart students from strong law schools, and that atmosphere makes it really important to differentiate yourself from the pack. My experience in South Africa gave me something different and interesting to talk about during job interviews, and it also shows that I am a hard worker who isn't afraid to do challenging and difficult work. Additionally, the externship gave me concrete, real-world work examples

that I could describe during interviews, and I wouldn't have gotten such great anecdotes if I had spent the semester sitting in a classroom in Hutchins Hall."

2009 extern - "I cannot imagine that an employer would view it as anything but a positive addition to a resume and I have had it brought up in conversation during nearly every professional interview I have had since then."

2009 extern - "I would recommend it because I became more passionate about the work I was doing and ended up pursuing pro bono opportunities in the same field, which I think has helped my career."

2008 extern - "I believe going to South Africa has aided my career, and will continue to do so in the future. My work at the Unit led to my being named as co-author of a chapter in a book that was recently published. Also, I was recently staffed on a pro bono case with an important partner in part because of my time and familiarity with South Africa. Aside from these specific examples of how South Africa has aided my career, I can also say that my time there has been a conversation starter numerous times during firm and/or networking events."

2008 extern - "Not sure if it has aided in my career, although I certainly don't think it hurt. It did give me something interesting and unique to talk about during interviews."

2008 extern - "Not only did my experience in South Africa aid my career, it made me a better person."

2004 extern - "YES! There is no way I would have the job I do now had I not participated in externships like the South Africa program. I work for a public interest organization and we will not hire people unless they can demonstrate a commitment to public interest legal work. We are currently looking to hire an attorney with 0-4 years experience, and we've received over 300 applications for that one spot. I can't stress enough how vitally important this program is, especially to anyone who wants to pursue a public interest career."

**Did past externs have fears about the impact the South Africa externship would have on their career prospects, and how did they address them?**

2011 extern - "I went to South Africa in the spring of my 3L year--and I did not have a job when I left. I was worried that South Africa would interfere with my ability to apply and interview for a job. [However], I eventually accepted a job that I only interviewed for entirely over Skype while I was in Cape Town. It was not an issue."

2009 extern - "No, I was not concerned. I knew that, more than likely, I would work domestically right out of law school, but I was still confident that the externship would benefit me even when applying to domestic jobs; [I had spent previous time in Africa, and] because of the interest that interviewers in the US had in my previous experiences in Africa, I knew that an externship in South Africa would give me an edge when applying domestically."

2008 extern - "To be honest, I was worried. But what I found after studying in South Africa is that discussions about my resume would often gravitate to the externship."

2002 extern - "Law students can use reminding that people rarely count risk-taking and personal exploration among their regrets."

**I am going to start my career in a big law firm. Is South Africa still a good choice for me?**

2010 extern - "I was about to be a summer associate when I made the decision to go, and I did not know how a law firm would perceive the externship. I emailed the hiring partner before making my final decision, and he was nothing but supportive and encouraging."

2009 extern - "People are interested in knowing that associates have traveled and worked in an international setting. This is particularly important in a firm or other work setting with a global reach or focus. Additionally, the relationships that were formed during my 2009 externship paved the way for other opportunities during my 2010 deferral year."

2008 extern - "[E]specially as a student looking for a career at a large law firm, the South Africa externship is a very strong resume builder. This past year I was fortunate enough to recruit law students at UM with my firm. And in speaking with other recruiters, we almost unanimously agreed that when recruiting Michigan, we know that every student is bright. What we look for are the students that differentiate themselves. The South Africa externship is one way that I was able to differentiate myself."

2005 extern - "[The South Africa externship] proved to be an unmatched way to set myself apart during firm interviews. I found people more interested in my work experience there and all that I could accomplish than in other more traditional law school achievements. In this market, it is critical to have a way to set yourself apart."

2002 extern - "Law firms (or at least mine) don't focus on what classes students take (within reason). We're much more worried about the breadth of their experiences and their intellectual prowess. In other words, we want to make sure that they can do the work, but we also care about whether they will play nice with others and fit into our culture. People that are cognizant of the world around them are much more likely to succeed in a global law firm that does an ever-increasing amount of work across borders."

**Even though I'm starting out in "big law," I'm interested in transitioning to public interest or government work in the future. Will South Africa help me transition from a law firm to other careers?**

2010 extern - "I already had a position with a law firm when I went to South Africa, so the experience did not assist me with getting a job in the short-term. However, should I choose to switch careers in the future, I think it will be a strong asset on my resume. I think this is especially true should I make the transition away from corporate law to either government service or non-profit work. The work I did in South Africa incorporates a social justice component into my legal background that establishes that any interest in leaving corporate law was part of a larger narrative, not just a sudden change in plans."

2006 extern - "Working in South Africa helped me gain experience in government/public service work, which eased my transition from private practice into public service. I had always wanted to shift to public service after working a few years at a law firm, and having the South African internship experience demonstrated my commitment to public service without jeopardizing my chances with law firms (who viewed it as a cool way to travel as a student). The internship also sticks out on my resume and provided an easy talking point during all of my interviews."

**What would past externs say to future externs as they decide whether to go?**

2011 extern - "It was one of the clear highlights of my law school career and an experience that was challenging, enriching, and incredible in about three million different ways."

2010 extern - "I was very hesitant to go at first, but it turned out to be the best decision I made in law school. I learned so much about being a lawyer and was able to reconnect with some of the issues that motivated and inspired me before I came to law school."

2009 extern - "It was extraordinarily fun and a wonderful break from the ordinary stress of law school (i.e. FINALS). I would go again in a heartbeat and am so glad that I seized the opportunity!"

2009 extern - "I cannot recommend the South Africa externship enough. It is one of the most professionally and personally rewarding experiences that I have had to date."

2009 extern - "It was an unforgettable experience, and I would do it again in a heartbeat."

2008 extern - "Overall, this is likely the last time for awhile that law students will have the flexibility to live in and experience a different country for an extended period of time. I look back on this experience as one of the most memorable experiences in my life, and wouldn't trade it for anything. Current law students should take advantage of this."

2008 extern - "One of the best things I ever did, and definitely the best thing about my experience at Michigan."

2008 extern - "If I had the opportunity, I would relive my South Africa experience over and over again."

2008 extern - "It was the best semester I had in law school. It gave me a lot of good experiences and memories and it expanded my worldview."

2006 extern - [I]t was really the only opportunity I thought I would ever have to live and work abroad. It's very difficult to do so once one graduates and the student loans go into repayment. I'm glad I took advantage of the opportunity while I could."

2006 extern - "I wouldn't trade it for the world. Most law students will never again get the opportunity to spend even a few weeks in another country, experiencing another culture. Almost none will get to spend several months doing so."

2004 extern - "The South Africa externship was the highlight of law school for me. In fact, I'm not sure I would have stayed at Michigan had I not been granted a spot that semester to go. I still get asked about it all the time and have the fondest memories of my time there."

2003 extern - "It was, without a doubt, a defining moment (if a moment can be said to last four months) in my life. I think about it frequently and draw on the lessons I learned there often."