

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE MIS CO-OP PROGRAM

This handout discusses questions that employers frequently ask me about the MIS co-op program. If you have additional questions about the program and whether it can be useful in addressing your organizational needs, please contact me at (617) 373-3432.

When are students available for co-op jobs? And for how long?

Most undergraduate business students work for six months of the year and go to school the other six months of the year. Many students work during the Spring semester and Summer I mini-semester (roughly, January through much of June); many others work during the Summer II mini-semester and Fall semester (late June through the end of the calendar year).

Generally, though, we steer students toward the six-month job periods because this is what employers often prefer.

We usually discourage students from working six months starting at other times of the year. This is because it could delay academic progress as well as limit the number of job opportunities available to them.

Let's say I want to offer a co-op position for an upcoming work period: What do I have to do? When do I have to do it?

First, you need to write a job description; I have enclosed a sample with this packet of information. The job description may be only one or two pages, but it should tell the student the following:

- Who is your company? What do you do? Where are you located? Are you accessible by public transportation?
- What is the co-op job title?
- What are the typical job tasks involved in this position?
- What kind of PC skills are *required*, if any, in terms of whom you want to interview?
- What kind of PC skills are *preferred* for potential job candidates?
- What kind of personality characteristics are you seeking in a job candidate?
- What is the pay range for the position? For how many hours per week?

A sample job description is located at the end of this document; please feel free to use it as a template. If you are interested in hiring a co-op student now, get a job description to me as soon as possible.

We anticipate that about 40-50 MIS students will be available to start working full-time at the beginning of January. The next work cycle will start on **Monday, January 5, 2009** and continue until **Friday, June 26, 2009**. We start the resume-referral process for that cycle in mid-October. The subsequent work period starts

on **Monday, June 29, 2009** and continues until **roughly Christmas**. We begin sending resumes for this cycle in early March (shortly after students return from Spring Break) for that cycle.

Bear in mind that these timeframes are not absolute. If you have a need for help at other times of the year, by all means give me a call—the worst that I'll say is that I can't help you right now. Sometimes I can even line you up with a part-time person who can be full-time when the next six-month cycle begins.

We never have enough good positions that are entry-level and in the Boston/Cambridge area. In contrast, we currently have more than enough jobs available when it comes to more advanced jobs if they are beyond public transportation. Therefore, I recommend that you e-mail your job description to me as early as possible; my e-mail address is s.weighart@neu.edu. This will give you the best chance of hiring a student that meets your needs. I will accept job descriptions throughout the year, but if you have not hired someone by the first few weeks of the work quarter, you will have a much smaller pool of students from which to choose. When that happens, we sometimes run into the “round pegs and square holes” problem—we still have jobs, and we still have candidates, but matching the two gets a little harder as the pool dwindles.

What is the job market like for MIS students these days?

The market is excellent for students who already have strong skills and job experience. As a result, you should be aware that a top student may have several attractive options for great learning experiences and excellent pay. Although the job market for full-time IT professionals is not exceptional right now, the co-op job market is really quite good for students right now. Even a first-time co-op student with relatively little job experience sometimes get multiple offers from good organizations. Given the uncertainty of the economy, many employers are finding that co-ops are a great hedge against that uncertainty. No one wants to hire a full-time person, only to let him or her go after six months or a year for economic reasons. Co-ops are cost-effective, benefit-free, and highly motivated, and they are also a way to keep a recruiting pipeline on tap in anticipation of better times. The more you are willing to hire someone who is bright but less experienced, the more likely you are to be successful in having a good pool of candidates who are willing to work for lower wages.

What factors determine how successful an organization is in attracting students to MIS jobs?

As you will see, some of these factors are more controllable than others:

--**quality of the job experience**: Does the student believe that he or she will have an opportunity to learn new technologies, build his or her skills, and contribute meaningfully to the organization?

--**location**: jobs outside of Boston's public transportation system can be challenging for me to fill. Not all students have cars, and those who do can often pick and choose among many great opportunities around the suburbs. Distant employers often have to offer better pay, perks, and job opportunities to ensure getting a decent number of

resumes from job candidates. The exception, of course, is when we happen to have students whose permanent address is near the employer.

--**willingness to train:** there are many employers who will be glad to hire a highly-skilled student with extensive job experience; however, an employer who is not willing to train someone in at least some job areas may be disappointed to learn that most of our job candidates don't have dozens of applications on their resumes. And those who do have that kind of experience will be sought by as many as a dozen top-notch companies offering outstanding pay and work experiences. Some of our most successful employers realize that a student who they train may be more likely to return for future co-ops and to encourage other students to apply for the position in the future.

--**pay:** As I often tell my students, pay should not be their number-one priority at this point in their careers. However, there are two realities to consider here: 1) Students often rely on co-op as a means to offset their dependence on loans and other financial support while financing their education, and 2) If a student is trying to choose between two great jobs, and one pays two or three dollars more an hour, which one do you think he or she will choose?

--**potential for future employment:** If an employer has a record for hiring former co-op students as future co-op employees or full-time employees after graduation, this may be a factor that the student weighs before accepting an offer.

How much do Northeastern students get paid for doing MIS co-op jobs?

Although there are a few exceptions on the both ends of the spectrum (especially on the high end), the typical range is from \$14/hour to \$21/hour. The average pay is currently about \$16.50/hour. Someone who has some computer skills (i.e., Microsoft Office applications but no more), a good attitude, solid communication skills, and a strong willingness to learn can make \$14-15/hour, even if they don't have a car. A student with a car on top of these attributes can make as much as \$19/hour in a suburban organization.

I don't require that any employer pay more than \$11/hour, but I suggest that they adhere to the \$14-21/hour range if they wish to be competitive with other firms in the marketplace. This is especially true for employers who are in the suburbs or out of state: Because there are many excellent jobs in convenient locations, students need the additional incentive of competitive pay if they are to accept a position elsewhere.

Higher pay is usually (but not always) correlated with class year, but I generally recommend against having a scaled pay rate according to class year. I do this because it is not unusual to find a sophomore without any formal co-op experience who can command as much as \$17-18/hour. Likewise, I may have a senior who did several finance co-op jobs before switching to MIS toward the end of his or her academic career: That student may only make \$14-15/hour. Paying students based on class year may reward some students unfairly and punish others only because of their age. In the computer world, age is not usually the foremost consideration.

Do co-op students get benefits? How do we set them up for payment?

Co-op students almost never receive benefits. I have one employer who gives students five paid vacation days once they have been employed for three months, but this is unusual. Not infrequently, employers will provide pay for holidays, though is not an absolute requirement. Co-ops rarely if ever receive medical benefits: They have health insurance through their own families or through the school.

All of that said, co-ops do need to be on your payroll, and they must have taxes withheld from their pay. The IRS does not view students to be sophisticated enough to be considered “consultants,” and this is just as well as paying estimated taxes is an unnecessary complication for our students. International students must have taxes withheld, but they should not have FICA withheld.

Do we need to sign a contract with Northeastern University? What is the extent of our responsibilities as an employer?

We make hiring a co-op quite easy for employers. Beyond setting them up on your payroll, you don't need to do anything else to get the student on board. You sign no contract with us. However, we do expect you to honor the six-month commitment to the student, just as we expect students to commit to a full six months. In rare instances, students do get fired, but we do not expect firing to be the first resort if a problem occurs (unless it's a serious offense, obviously). Likewise, we don't permit students to quit jobs unless an employer truly fails to live up to their responsibilities. I am here for either student or employer if there is any difficulty, and I certainly want to be involved if any difficulty occurs.

The employer's primary responsibility to Northeastern is to discuss performance objectives with each student in the first week or two of the work term and to complete a performance evaluation at the end of the six months. We provide the evaluation to the students, who will pass it along to you at the right times.

What are some typical jobs or tasks done by students in MIS co-op jobs?

There is a great deal of variety, but there are also several common themes:

--**PC Support:** This usually entails working on a help desk or in some other way providing assistance to end users working with a variety of software applications, such as Word, Excel, Access, PowerPoint, etc. These jobs also may afford the co-op student an opportunity to gain initial training and exposure to LAN administration.

--**LAN/WAN Administration:** Many students work in network administration, most often involving Windows NT, TCP/IP, Novell NetWare, UNIX, and,. Typical task in these jobs may involve adding or deleting users, setting up new work stations, installing or upgrading software, optimizing memory management on personal computers, and other forms of network troubleshooting. Lately, more students want to get into heavy-duty server work and computer room operations.

--**Database design/development/maintenance:** Some students may develop databases, using programs such as Access or Crystal Reports—sometimes more sophisticated databases such as SAP or Oracle—or they may work on ensuring that the database is useful to end users and up-to-date. Some students are engaged in business

process re-engineering—using databases to manage information more efficiently and with less redundancy.

--**Business Analyst/Systems Analyst:** There are many students working in positions that I sometimes call “classic MIS,” meaning that these students are engaged in the process of turning data into meaningful information. Alternatively, some students sometimes translate business needs into a format that can be readily understood by application developers.

--**Internetworking:** Increasingly, our students are getting involved in jobs pertaining to the Internet and the World Wide Web. Some students know how to create a web page or web site and have used technologies such as Java, DreamWeaver, and XML; others don’t know how to do this yet, but they usually know some HTML and are experienced users of the internet who are eager to learn the more technical aspects of it.

--**Programming:** Very few of our jobs involve programming, and when they do, they most often involve applications like Lotus Notes, Visual Basic, and Access. We have some students who are interested in programming and who have taught themselves C or C++ to varying degrees, but these students are more likely to do other support work in C or C++ environments rather than straightforward programming.

--**Quality Assurance/Testing/Debugging:** Some of our jobs involving testing new programs, perhaps intentionally trying to “break” a program to find bugs, which are then documented and given to the software developer to fix.

--**Application Specialist:** Some entry-level students may get jobs where they simply are performing tasks using applications such as Excel, Access, PowerPoint, etc. Especially nice are administrative positions in an MIS department that entail using applications like these and doing some clerical work while having a chance to rub shoulders with MIS professionals.

--**Hybrid positions:** Some of our jobs are not purely MIS positions. These jobs may combine more than one business discipline; they would be better described as hybrid jobs. For example, one employer wants students with strong computer skills who is interested in becoming an insurance industry expert; I would call this an MIS/Finance job. We have a position with a major computer manufacturer on the West Coast which is primarily a marketing job. But because marketing computer hardware requires a strong understanding of computers, I would call this an MIS/Marketing position.

There are many other unique MIS jobs out there. Some may combine many of the above areas. If you’re unsure about whether your job is in the realm of what our students do, give me a call.

I would like to hire a computer science major as a co-op student. Would that be possible? What are my options?

Occasionally, potential employers call me up and tell me about a great job that they have in PC support or network administration, and that they would like to hire a computer science major to fill this position.

I work closely with Dr. Mel Simms, Nora Jemison, and Mark Erickson, the co-op coordinators in charge of the computer science jobs, so I have a good sense of what computer science are seeking: Basically, computer science majors generally prefers jobs in software design and development. If an employer wants students to do C++ programming

and is willing to train students who lack job experience in this area, Dr. Simms, Ms. Jemison, and Mr. Erickson are *very* interested. If this applies to you, please call Dr. Simms at (617) 373-4244, Nora Jemison at (617) 373-4038 or Mark Erickson at (617)373-3458. If the job does not entail programming at all, many comp sci students may not be interested—or they may only accept the job if they are unable to find a programming position. If an employer were to call him in search of someone to do PC support, network administration, or even database programming involving, say, Lotus Notes, the comp sci coordinators probably would refer the caller to me.

What are your options if your position is more technical than what my MIS students can do, yet is not really a programming position? I still would encourage you to e-mail me a job description. I make my job descriptions available to any student from any college in the university. The Engineering Technology program often has students who are interested in MIS jobs, and the Industrial Engineering program also has students with good computer skills. If I get a job description that I believe I cannot fill readily, I will photocopy it and distribute it to coordinators who may have students who better match the job description. For example, I would put a technical writer position in my book, but I also would pass it along to my counterparts in English, Journalism, and Communication. Or I might pass a job requiring AutoCAD onto my colleagues in Industrial and Mechanical Engineering. Regardless, I will try to make your job available to students who would be appropriate for your position.

I would like to hire a business student concentrating in something other than MIS. How would that work?

Give me a call or drop me an e-mail describing what kind of position you're looking to fill. Other business students are generally available at the same time as MIS students. Other business concentrations include marketing, finance, accounting, human resources, international business, entrepreneurship/small business management, general management, and supply chain management.

In most cases, it probably would make sense for you to speak to an individual who works with co-op students from the most relevant concentration(s). If there is overlap—for example, a job which might appeal to both MIS and marketing students—we will list the job with more than one coordinator's listings to ensure that all plausible will see the job.

What are some typical MIS employers for NU co-op students who seek a job?

To name just a few: The Gillette Company, Microsoft, MIT Lincoln Laboratory, John Hancock, Harvard University, Boston Beer Company, Raytheon, Tyco Health Care, the New England Patriots, SunLife Financial, GE Aircraft, and State Street Global Advisors.

Why do so many prominent employers choose to hire students from the MIS co-op program?

The MIS co-op program offers employers:
-cost-effective labor

- an invaluable trial period prior to making a full-time position available to an individual after graduation
- workers who are eager to learn and to build their skills for a professional future
- employees who need not be paid benefits for health insurance, vacation time, sick days, etc.
- an opportunity to deal with the demands of an MIS environment without making more than a three- or six-month commitment
- an option for getting work done in a cost-effective manner during times of economic uncertainty. In other words, if you're not sure about what the economy will be doing in the months to come, co-op students are a way to get things done without a long-term commitment or possible layoff during times of budget cuts.

If you would like to talk more to determine if there is match between your needs and the capabilities of our students, please be sure to contact me. I also can come to your workplace to make a presentation to you and your personnel if that is preferable.

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E-mail: s.weighart@neu.edu

SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTION

Acme Consulting Group
150 Royal Place
Boston, MA 02119

EMPLOYER CONTACT NAME

John Schlobotnik

EMPLOYER TELEPHONE NUMBER

(617) 936-9999

EMPLOYER FAX NUMBER

(617) 555-1212

EMPLOYER E-MAIL ADDRESS

j.schlobotnik@acme.com

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

The Acme Consulting Group is an international leader in management consulting. The organization's primary objective is to help CEOs and line managers improve performance by focusing on the fundamentals of their businesses. ACG offers a fast-paced, highly professional environment working with individuals who rank among the best in the country.

This position would entail working in the Corporate IS Department of ACG. ACG is located in downtown Boston, just a few minutes walk from the Government Center stop on the Green Line or the State stop on the Orange Line or Blue Line.

COOP JOB TITLE

Information Systems Assistant

COOP JOB REQUIREMENTS

This position will require a student who is technically inclined and comfortable with a job that has great variety and a relative lack of structure. On a day to day basis, the coop worker may be involved in software testing, data entry, working with spreadsheets, voice mail (maintaining directories), videoconferencing, and other as yet to be defined responsibilities.

In terms of specific computer skills, any of the following will be useful:

Microsoft Word
Microsoft Excel
PowerPoint
Lotus Notes
Filemaker (database)

All of these skills are preferred but not required. At the minimum, though, the coop candidate should have good experience with spreadsheets and basic word processing. Good administrative skills and organizational skills are very important. Additionally, the candidate should be able to learn quickly and work enthusiastically in a fast-paced environment.

WORK HOURS AND PAY

37.5 hours per week

The pay range for this position is from \$18.00 to \$22.00 per hour depending on the student's experience with software applications and operating systems. Overtime will be compensated with 1 1/2 times the pay rate.

Interested applicants should see Mr. Scott Weighart in Hayden 219B. His phone number is 373-3432.