

USDA Intern Strategies for Success Guide

Welcome to the United States Department of Agriculture

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) serves all Americans daily. The Department's mission is to provide leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, rural development, nutrition, and related issues based on sound public policy, the best available science, and efficient management.

Moreover, USDA develops and expands markets for projects abroad. USDA also works to enhance the environment and to maintain production capacity by helping landowners protect the soil, water, forests, and other natural resources. You are an important part of USDA's mission. Your role at USDA will enhance the goals and objectives that we strive to accomplish every day. This guide will assist you with getting acquainted with USDA's procedures and practices.

Work Expectations

Work expectation will vary depending on your position, agency, and organization. Your supervisor will communicate expectations, assign projects, review completed work, collaboratively establish performance metrics, provide performance feedback, and assist in professional development opportunities. You are expected to complete your work in a timely and efficient fashion, ask questions if directions are unclear, and notify your supervisor when the assignments are complete. This enables you to make the best use of your time and capitalize on development opportunities. In most cases, the supervisor will establish a performance plan annually that shows how your work connects with your organization's mission and goals.

Professional conduct

As public servants, our actions and words are highly scrutinized. Therefore, we must act in the most professional and ethical manner possible. In accordance with USDA Departmental Regulation 4070-735-001, it is USDA's policy that its employees;

- a. Maintain high standards of honesty, integrity, and impartiality;
- b. Adhere to the rules set forth in the directive as well as all directives referenced in section 2 of this directive; [USDA DR4070-735-001 Professional Conduct Policy](#)
- c. Comply with lawful supervisory direction; and
- d. Comply with work related laws, regulations, and policies; and
- e. Understand and comply with the Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch, 5 CFR 2635 and the Supplemental Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the USDA, 5 CFR 8301.

Agencies may terminate participants for misconduct, suitability, or poor performance during or at the end of the program period.

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GSA Federal Building Rules

As an employee of a Federal organization, there are specific rules which accompany working in a Federal building as described in the [GSA Federal Building Rules](#). Specifically, actions that are prohibited on Federal property are as follows;

- a. Loitering, exhibiting disorderly conduct, and/ or exhibiting other conduct that is a disturbance;
- b. Gambling, operating gambling devices, or selling or purchasing tickets;
- c. Being under the influence, using or possessing any narcotic drugs, hallucinogens, marijuana, barbiturates, or amphetamines;
- d. Being under the influence or using alcoholic beverages on federal property, unless a written exemption has been granted and approved through appropriate organization representatives;
- e. Soliciting alms or commercial or political donations, vending merchandise of all kinds, displaying or distrusting commercial advertising or collecting private debts;
- f. Posting or affixing materials such as pamphlets, handouts, or flyers on bulletin boards or elsewhere on GSA controlled property;
- g. Carrying or possessing explosives or items intended to be used to fabricate an explosive; and
- h. Possession of firearms or other dangerous weapons in Federal facilities and Federal court facilities by all persons not specifically authorized

Dress code

Neither the Department nor USDA Agencies have a formal dress code policy. Some employees wear uniforms such as inspectors and have a uniform policy, but for most of us, the office dress code is business casual. Your work setting and environment will influence your clothing style. Your goal is to dress appropriately for each occasion. It is suggested that you project a positive, professional image, at all times, because your choice of attire is a reflection on you *and* the department. Shorts, flip flops, short skirts, crop tops, t-shirts with advertising, and clothing that is not neat and clean and free of tears or holes, may be examples of inappropriate clothing in the workplace. If you have any questions about what might be appropriate or not appropriate to wear at your worksite, please talk with your supervisor.

Tours of Duty

The standard tour of duty for a full-time employee is a 40-hour basic work week consisting of 5 days for 8 hours each day, Monday through Friday. Your supervisor will determine your work schedule based upon your organization's program needs. However, there are several flexibilities available. Typically, internship positions include 8-hour work days,

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Monday-Friday. The USDA participates in various types of work schedules including compressed and flexible schedules. These types of schedules must be discussed and approved by your supervisor.

Time and Attendance

Interns work according to an approved schedule. Paid Interns will receive access to the [Time and Attendance System](#) (Web TA), in which case they will electronically fill out, submit their time, attendance, and leave requests to their supervisor for approval. Access to the Web TA system is based upon tenure of the position. Details about time and attendance will be discussed during orientation.

Overtime

Overtime is defined as work in excess of 80 hours during a pay period. Overtime is only used for work that is officially ordered and approved by your supervisor and overtime pay usually comes from the normal operating budget. Overtime must be requested and authorized by your supervisor in advance of working time over 80 hours per pay period. Generally, the work performed by Students and Recent Graduates does not provide for overtime. However, overtime should be discussed with the supervisor, at all times, before any work in addition of 80 hours per pay period is performed.

Leave Requests

Please submit all leave requests, such as sick and annual, to the [WebTA](#) system. If you do not have access to [WebTA](#), please email all sick and annual leave requests to the supervisor or talk with them personally, as instructed by your supervisor.

Holidays

There are 10 observances of Federal holidays annually. Federal employees do not report to work on Federal holidays.

- New Year's Day
- Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr
- Presidents Day
- Memorial Day
- Independence Day
- Labor Day
- Columbus Day
- Veterans Day
- Thanksgiving Day
- Christmas Day

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Benefits

Interns may or may not receive benefits, depending on the type of appointment. Typically, Interns, who are on board for 90 days or less, do not qualify for benefits. This also applies to volunteer Interns. Paid Interns who are on board for 90 full-time days may accrue annual and sick leave. In addition to leave, other benefits include; flexible spending accounts; health, life, dental, vision, and long-term care insurance. Some of the cost for covering benefits is deducted from your pay. For more information on benefits contact your designated HR Benefits unit. Your supervisor can refer you to the appropriate contact.

Telework

While participation in telework is not an employee entitlement, USDA begins with the presumption that all permanent full time positions are appropriate for telework. Under new USDA guidance, employees participating in telework are required to report to their duty stations at least two days a pay period. Telework agreements are mandatory for teleworkers and are approved on a case-by-case basis or with an approved reasonable accommodation by your supervisor.

To participate in telework, employees must have:

- An approved telework agreement in place prior to teleworking;
- Completed mandatory telework training in Aglearn;
- Demonstrated dependability and the ability to handle responsibility;
- A proven or expected minimum performance rating of at least “fully successful; and
- No disciplinary action, adverse action, or placement on leave restriction in the preceding 12 months

While telework may not be readily available to Interns; in the case of emergency or hazardous weather, Interns may be granted unscheduled or emergency telework by the supervisor on an ad hoc basis. The opportunity to telework is always determined by the supervisor.

Email

USDA uses Microsoft Outlook as its email and calendar tool. Remember, as a government employee, there is no expectation of privacy in email or any other applications on a government computer.

- You should not use your government email addresses for personal business.
- If you receive email containing sensitive information, please contact your supervisor if you are unsure about your agency’s protocol.

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- You should not use the email system to transmit messages that contain confidential business information, inappropriate information, information covered by the Privacy Act, or other sensitive information.
- All email is subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and its release is subject to the same FOIA exemptions that apply to other Agency records.

All emails you send or receive must be properly managed on a daily basis. As a USDA employee, it is your responsibility to manage your email. You should follow email etiquette in preparing, sending, and responding to messages to ensure that your message is professional and appropriate.

Government Property

Employees have a duty to protect and preserve government property and should not use government property for other than authorized purposes. Government property includes items such as office supplies, telephones, other telecommunications equipment and services, government mail; automated data processes capabilities, printing and reproduction facilities, government records, and government vehicles.

While the occasional use of telecommunications resources in moderation is acceptable, uses not meeting the USDA policy are strictly prohibited. Employees are expected to conduct themselves professionally in the workplace and to refrain from using telecommunications equipment for activities that are inappropriate or offensive to co-workers or the public, such as sexually explicit materials or remarks that ridicule others on the basis of race, creed, religion, color, sex, disability, national origin, or sexual orientation. Questions concerning appropriate use of Government telecommunications equipment should be addressed to your supervisor.

Systems and Applications

Your supervisor will help you obtain access to all the program-specific applications you will need to perform your duties. Some applications are used USDA-wide and are accessible by a single sign-on mechanism called your “E-Authentication” or “E-Auth” ID and password.

Onboarding Portal

The [onboarding portal is a website](#) specific for all new employees including USDA Interns coming onboard to ease the transition to the USDA workplace. The portal is a tool that provides valuable information on forms, pay and benefits, training, resources, information on your agency, and supervisory information. While some of the information may not directly apply to Interns, please feel free to utilize the material as supplemental and valuable information.

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LincPass

Some USDA Interns will be provided a [LincPass](#). Seasonal Interns will not be provided a LincPass due to their short tenure with the USDA. The LincPass is your personal identity verification card. The LincPass is used to start your computer as well as access to the facility. Your supervisor will provide additional guidance on whether you will receive a LincPass. Your supervisor will also provide you with information about how to log on to your computer or access the facility without one, if applicable.

E-Authentication

E-Authentication (E-Auth) is a mechanism to grant access to multiple online programs (WebTA, AgLearn, GovTrip, eOPF, EPP) with a single ID and password. Depending on your appointment type, you may receive E-Auth access. Your supervisor will assist you with acquiring an E-Auth account if applicable.

All USDA employees, whether full-time or part-time, permanent or temporary, must complete an annual “Information Systems Security Awareness” training. Access to any USDA computer system cannot be granted by the IT staff until the new employee has successfully passed (70%) this training.

Note: Your E-Authentication account may take up to 3 weeks after your start date to be created. Creation of the account typically coincides with the issuance of your first paycheck. **(for paid Interns only)**

Instructions:

1. You will receive an email from the E-Authentication server, 3 weeks after receiving your first paycheck. The email will invite you to register your E-Authentication account. Embedded in the email is a link that you will click on to take you to the registration page.
2. If you have not received the email and at least 3 weeks have passed since receipt of your first paycheck, you can inform your supervisor. Request that your E-Auth registration email be sent, and provide your Government email address.
3. When you click on the embedded link in the email, you will be taken to the registration page and can follow the instructions to complete the registration.
4. After you have registered your E-Authentication account, with your E-Authentication credentials, you should be able to log into AgLearn as well as the many other applications that are password protected.

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USDA Events

The Department establishes several events each year for Interns to participate in, such as; Career/Intern Day, webinars, workshops, panel events, ethics training, communication workshops, flash mentoring, career exploration events, etc. Specific schedules of these events will be sent to Interns via email as well as posted on the USDA website. For information regarding events for Interns, please contact 202-260-8364.

Pathway Program Training and Development Plan

The purpose of USDA training and development plan is to facilitate the design and implementation of career and professional development for USDA Interns. The USDA Students and Recent Graduates Training Plans cover a period of at least two years for students and at least one year for recent graduates. The plan is intended to be used in conjunction with your individual development plan. Both plans can be found in Aglearn by searching for Student Trainee Training Plan and Recent Graduates Training Plan.

The USDA Student Intern and Recent Graduate Training Plans consist of a combination of orientation, self-assessment, mentoring, shadowing, on-the-job training, and web-based training. USDA Student Interns and Recent Graduates will be required to create an [Individual Development Plan](#) (IDP) that will serve as a career and developmental training guide. The purpose of the [IDP](#) is to have the Intern and Recent Graduate work with their supervisor to develop an individual training plan specific to the position and Agency. Both the [IDP](#) and the USDA Training Plan will be aligned with the mission and goals of the Department.

Summer Intern Training

Given the summer Intern's short tenure with USDA, it is highly suggested that summer Interns set achievable goals when completing their [IDP](#). The objective of creating an [IDP](#) is to focus on 1-3 [core competencies](#) that the Intern would like to develop during their internship and then identify actionable items to achieve and demonstrate development of it. A sample IDP Worksheet is located at the end of this guide. Moreover, an optional Summer Intern Training Curriculum for Summer Interns has been developed in an effort to maximize the internship experience. The optional Summer Intern Training Curriculum can also be found at the end of this guide. Summer Interns are **encouraged** to complete at least five courses, found in AgLearn, and work on no more than one course per week.

Creation of Pathways Internship [IDP](#)

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USDA Interns will be offered several learning opportunities through their experience at USDA. It is the responsibility of each USDA Intern to take advantage of the dynamic training opportunities. The Intern should:

- Complete and implement an [Individual Development Plan](#) within the first few days of his/her entrance on duty date
- Participate in a mentoring event or experience
- Participate in at least a one ½ day rotational assignment (optional and contingent on supervisory approval)
- A 4-6 month rotational assignment is mandatory for PMF's
- Participate in at least a ½ day shadowing experience.

Creation of an [IDP](#)

The objective of the [IDP](#) is to assist employees in setting goals for professional development and establishing a plan to achieve those goals. While the [IDP](#) is a collaborative process between the employee and supervisor, the employee should create their [IDP](#), in AgLearn, using the sample [IDP](#) in this document. It is highly suggested that all USDA Interns develop an [IDP](#). All Pathways participants on board for 90 days or more are required to:

- Complete and implement an [Individual Development Plan](#) within 45 days of his/her entrance on duty date;
- Complete at least 40 hours of AgLearn training as outlined in the USDA Student Trainee Training Plan and Recent Graduates Training Plan;
- PMF's have the autonomy to choose 80 hours of career specific training, in AgLearn, per year over a 2-year period for a total of 160 hours of training. (Please be sure to print out a certificate of completion for your records)
- Participate in a mentoring event or experience
- Complete at least one rotational assignment (required for PMF's)
- Participate in agency-wide and department-wide training opportunities
- Participate in at least a ½ day shadowing experience (USDA Interns only)
- Participate in [onboarding](#) and orientation activities

Monitoring, [Self-Assessment](#) and Performance Feedback

All Interns will receive some form of performance feedback from their supervisors. The feedback is intended to provide the Intern with highlights of strengths and areas that may need improvement. The level of performance feedback will depend on your appointment type and length. Please feel free to discuss your [IDP](#) progress with your supervisor and/or at your mid and end of term evaluations. There are ways to assess your own performance as well. In fact, a [self-assessment](#) is highly encouraged.

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Mentoring Opportunities

Mentoring has a long history as an integral part of USDA and its culture. The focus of mentoring is on fostering career relationships and exchanging career information between mentor and protégé. Mentoring provides employees with opportunities to form new connections, broaden employee experiences, assist in developing goals, and cultivate new opportunities. USDA strongly encourages all USDA Interns to participate in the USDA Mentoring Program. Participation in the USDA Mentoring Program is required for Pathways participants who are on board for 90 days or more. Mentoring Coordinators are the manager of mentoring for designating areas. They are responsible for planning and coordinating marketing activities; participating in matching of mentors and protégés; training mentors and protégés; monitoring mentoring relationships, assessing mentoring effectiveness, and developing improvements. Mentors and protégés are encouraged to use the USDA Mentoring Portal, an online database to apply for the opportunity to participate in mentoring at <http://www.eservices.usda.gov/usdamentoring/>

Pathways Performance Evaluation Policy

A performance work plan is a written document that identifies critical elements of an employee's position and the standards by which that employee will be rated. A critical element is a work assignment or responsibility of such importance that unacceptable performance on the element would result in a determination that the employee's overall performance is at the unacceptable or "Results Not Achieved" level. USDA Interns and supervisors will collaboratively determine the Intern's evaluation elements. These elements should be tied to the Intern's IPD and the Agency's mission. Performance evaluations are conducted in accordance with [USDA Directive 4040-430](#).

Each year, USDA internships are evaluated to ensure that USDA Interns receive a meaningful experience. Before August of each year, please participate in the USDA Internship Survey that is most applicable to your appointment type to provide feedback on the program. All USDA Interns should complete the USDA Intern Survey and all USDA Recent Graduates and PMF's should complete the survey for recent graduates and PMF's. Your feedback will be used to help improve for the program for future participants. The survey will be emailed each year from the Virtual University, Office of Human Resource Management.

Recommendations

The Virtual University recommends some common best practices in an effort to ensure that Interns have a meaningful work experience. The following recommendations are little tidbits of advice that were received from past Intern survey participants.

Recommendations are as follows:

- Participate in USDA events;
- Utilize the USDA Onboarding Portal to become acquainted with the procedures and procedures at USDA;

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- Take advantage of the professional development training opportunities in AgLearn;
- Create an [IDP](#) in order to develop valuable competencies (mandatory for Pathways participants);
- Take advantage of the USDA Mentoring Program;
- Ask questions. USDA employees are subject matter experts in their fields;
- Participate in an approved shadowing and rotational experience (you must gain supervisory approval) and;
- Participate in the various events designed for USDA Interns

Sample Intern Individual Development Plan Worksheet	
Name:	Date:
Developmental Goal:	
Competencies I Plan to Develop: Circle 2-4 most interested in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government Financial Standards • Program Evaluation • Government Administration • Government Procurement • Management Controls/Internal Control • Auditing • Federal Property Management 	
Action Steps:	
Target Dates:	
Required Resources: <i>No additional resources are necessary to complete these action steps.</i>	
Status/Progress/Comments: <i>Use this space to prepare for you mentoring discussions and for remind yourself about your goals, action steps, etc. Enter comments on the status of each action item, progress made, etc.</i> <i>Use this space to note concerns you wish to discuss with your mentoring partner.</i>	

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Add action steps and additional target dates when appropriate.

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Optional Summer Intern Training Plan (For Summer Interns Only)	AgLearn Course ID
The Agriculture Industry Overview	(Web Based indo_01_a31_bs_enus_SKILLSOFT)
A Guide to Completing Your Individual Development Plan	(Web Based RMA-KC-Individual Development)
Getting Time under Control	(Web Based _pc_ch_pach021_SKILLSOFT)
Public Speaking Strategies: Confident Public Speaking	(Web Based pd_23_a02_bs_enus_SKILLSOFT)
Business Grammar: The Mechanics of Writing	(Web Based comm_20_a03_bs_enus_SKILLSOFT)
Business Writing: Editing and Proofreading	(Web Based comm_19_a03_bs_enus_SKILLSOFT)
Being an Effective Team Member	(Web Based team_02_a01_bs_enus_SKILLSOFT)
Government Ethics	(Web Based fgov_01_a22_lc_enus_SKILLSOFT)
Diversity on the Job: Diversity and You	(Web Based pd_07_a02_bs_enus_SKILLSOFT)
Generating Creative and Innovative Ideas: Enhancing Your Creativity	(Web Based pd_09_a01_bs_enus_SKILLSOFT)
Customer Service Fundamentals: Building Rapport in Customer Relationships	(Web Based cust_09_a01_bs_enus_SKILLSOFT)

Intern Assignments

Once an Intern Individual Development Plan is established, Interns should identify assignments in support of the competencies identified in the IDP. Supervisors are encouraged to also work with Interns to identify learning opportunities in the organization. In the first few weeks of the internship, the intern and supervisor will discuss the assignments, expectations for the assignment, and set a due date. Once a date has been set, please be sure to ask the supervisor for an extension if the more time and/or clarification are needed.

The sample IDP Worksheet is intended to keep track of the assignments and link them to the core competencies identified in the individual development plan.

1. In the assignments column describe the assignment and the expectation for it. In the competency column, identify the core competency the assignment develops.
2. In the due date column establish the expected date the project/assignment is due.
3. In the actual completion column, record the date the assignment was completed. This shows whether the assignment was on time, late or delayed which will be considered during evaluation of the assignment.
4. In the evaluation meeting date column, record the date the sponsor met with the intern to discuss their assignment and provide constructive feedback. Typically, these discussions will occur at the weekly one on one meeting.

The assignments are based on available work, at the time of the internship. Therefore, some of the assignments may not directly align with the Intern's desired competencies. However, organizations

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will strive to provide a few assignments related to the Interns desired competencies identified on the interns individual development plan.

Pathways Internship Capstone Project

Though not required, it is highly recommended that all USDA Interns complete a capstone project and sponsor a presentation, at the end of the internship, within the assigned Agency. The project should describe lessons learned throughout the internship. It is highly suggested that the capstone project be aligned with supporting competencies that are identified in the intern's Intern Individual Development Plan. This project should be taken into consideration during the Intern's performance evaluation in addition to other things such as their assignments. Be sure to solicit constructive criticism from the supervisor throughout the development of the capstone project.

Sample Job Shadowing Request Notice:

Dear _____, (insert your supervisor's name here)

I am considering _____ as a future career path. I am interested in observing an employee in the following occupation_____. I believe that this opportunity will allow me to learn more about the above mentioned occupation.

Furthermore, I will be extremely grateful if you allowed me to quietly observe a staff member within our agency, organization, or division for a half- or full-day. As you may know, job shadowing is a career development activity that will allow me to explore a potential career at USDA. Moreover, if possible, it would be helpful if I am afforded a short exit interview toward the end of the shadowing experience. An exit interview will allow me to ask any questions that I might have after observing the employee's activities and actions.

Thank you so much for considering my request. Feel free to contact me at _____.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

_____(Sign your name here)

For questions related to the USDA Intern Program, please feel free to contact Carol Scott at carol.scott@dm.usda.gov or 202-260-8364.