

The  
**Hill**  
**Navigator**   
Series

Career Advice and Office  
Etiquette for Congressional Staff

By **Rebecca Gale**



# **BEST** **INTERN** **EVER**

**Roll Call's Guide to Acing Your Internship**

# Best Intern Ever: Roll Call's Guide to Acing Your Internship

## Table of Contents

<b>Foreword: Welcome to Your Internship</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Part 1: Best Intern Ever: Six Rules for Success</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Part 2: Get a Job</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Part 3: It Happens to the Best of Us: When the Job Does Not Work Out</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Getting Around: Map of D.C.</b>	



Hill Navigator is a workplace advice column geared toward Capitol Hill staffers that's published in Wednesday editions of Roll Call and online at [rollcall.com/hillnavigator](http://rollcall.com/hillnavigator). Have a question or comment about working on Capitol Hill? Email [hillnavigator@rollcall.com](mailto:hillnavigator@rollcall.com). All submissions will be treated anonymously.



CQ Roll Call provides essential intelligence and grassroots advocacy resources to take action. As the premier source of timely news, objective facts and analysis, and coverage of elections and the politics of legislation, we keep our fingers on the pulse of the legislative process and give our clients the tools they need to maximize their influence. We are the ultimate insider, and our unmatched network of relationships and expertise has powered the productivity of those who rely on us since 1945.

"Best Intern Ever: Roll Call's Guide to Acing Your Internship"  
is sponsored by



### Congressional Federal Member Rewards!

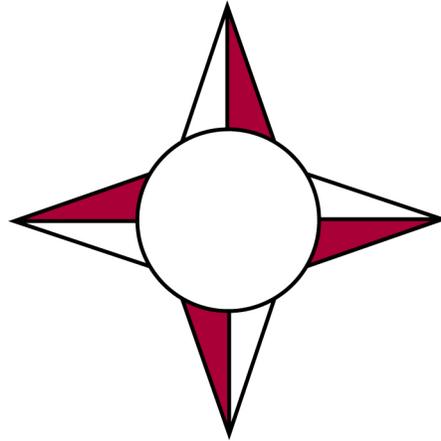
Earn points when you refer qualified friends and family to open a checking account at Congressional Federal!

## Masthead:

**Editor-in-Chief:** Christina Bellantoni  
**Managing Editor:** Cameron Easley  
**Assistant Managing Editor:** Cyra Master  
**Capitol Hill Editor:** Jason Dick  
**Hill Navigator:** Rebecca Gale  
**Design Editor:** Chris Hale  
**Copy Editors:** Kaitlin Kovach, Justice Gilpin-Green  
  
**EVP & Managing Director:** Keith White  
**Chief Content Officer:** David Rapp  
**Chief Product Officer:** John Dineen  
**Vice President, CQNews:** David Ellis  
**SVP & Publisher, Advertising:** Beth Bronder  
**Vice President & Associate Publisher:** Mary Cadwallader

**Associate Publisher & National Sales Director:** Dave Decker  
**National Sales Director:** Michele Galvin  
**National Account Executives:** Paige Helling, Julie C. Harrison  
**Director, Business Operations & New Media:** Lauren Mikoy  
**Director, Advertising & Events Marketing:** Michelle Rideout  
**Retail Account Manager:** Shishir Sharma  
**PR & Events Manager:** Shana Westlake  
**Account Manager, Advertising Operations:** Marguerite Stephan  
**Production Manager:** Brigid Hogan

# FOREWORD



## Welcome to Your Internship

*“Piloting one’s career through the world of Washington and Congress can be intimidating, confusing and downright scary for the uninitiated. I’ve been impressed with Roll Call’s Hill Navigator column. In a short time, Rebecca Gale has established herself as an expert in offering shorthand counseling in an easy-to-read format.”*

— Bradford Fitch, president and CEO of the Congressional Management Foundation

In nearly every office, at anytime of day or year, there are new interns on Capitol Hill. Some are here for college credit, some are aspiring to land full time jobs, some have a piqued interest in the way Congress works or the chance to rub shoulders with the government’s legislators.

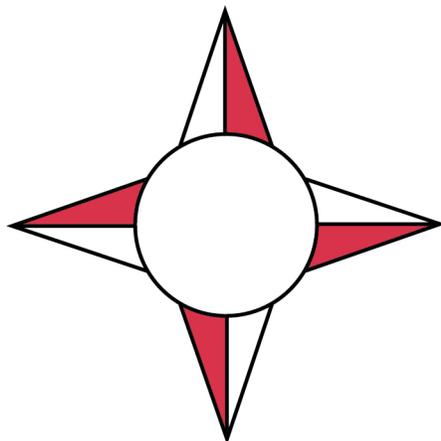
But not all interns are created equal. And Hill Navigator acknowledges that not all interns come prepared. This is many interns’ first professional exposure, so aspects such as dress code, social media policy and even punctuality may be out of their realm of understanding. Some internships are part of a larger program that might include trainings, mentorships, realistic expectations and extracurriculars — visits to the White House and Capitol Dome tours — that can set interns up for success, and a positive internship experience can be instrumental in landing a paying job.

Internships are finite. There are always more bright-eyed, wannabe staffers ready to take your place, so it’s up to you to make the most of it while you can.

Hill Navigator was an intern once (really, who in DC was not once an intern?) and wants to see as many interns succeed as possible. That’s why we’ve compiled an updated collection of the best of Hill Navigator with input from our friends at the Congressional Management Foundation.

Good luck!

# PART ONE



## Best Intern Ever: Six Rules for Success

Hill Navigator knows that interns are busy. Six rules, surely that can be easy enough to remember.

**1. Stay professional:** Every year, Roll Call's [Heard on the Hill](#) writes up anecdotes of intern tomfoolery. While there may be [egregious exceptions](#), more often these gaffes are due to inexperience and a lack of basic understanding of what it means to work in a professional setting.

### Things to remember:

- ◆ Treat every office visitor as a VIP, even if they are just your average Joe from Cincinnati.
- ◆ Treat everything connected to the office — email, phone, personal space, midday breaks — as sacrosanct.
- ◆ Don't put anything in email you don't want to see printed in Roll Call.
- ◆ Learn the office dress code (see No. 3) and err on the conservative side of following it.
- ◆ Brush up on your manners. Yes, it's arcane, but it works wonders. Hold the door for the person behind you, say thank you, kindly ask if you can put a person on hold before slamming the phone down. Such things can go a long way toward showing you're a capable team member, hopefully one the office wants to keep around.

**2. Check your opinions at the door.** You may be majoring in political science, or have read everything Thomas Friedman ever wrote, but your personal opinions are usually best left unsaid. Sure, you can echo your enthusiasm for a cause your boss is championing, or include your admiration in your thank-you notes to the hard-working legislative staff, but you're there to help advance your boss' current agenda, not help him or her craft a new one. If you're curious about a particular topic— say Affordable Care Act regulations are a particular passion of yours— get to know the legislative assistant covering the issue, and ask for reading recommendations or even a few minutes of their time for coffee. View your internship as a time to take in information, not spew out opinions.

And when you do air your opinions— even if they are just about how fantastic that office Keurig is — be smart about your surroundings. Those metro cars are tiny, voices travel. If you insist on talking about work in a public place, refrain from mentioning the boss' name or any other identifying details, lest you want to read about them in Roll Call.

**Q. I am about to start an internship in an office with which my own political beliefs do not exactly align. That isn't to say I disagree with every policy stance, but there are definitely disparities. Is it common to see staffers and interns whose views aren't in lock step with the platform of their respective party, and how do I prevent my dissenting views from ever becoming problematic?**

**A.** I have good news for you: No matter where you work — unless it's your name on the door — you're going to disagree with at least some of your boss' political beliefs.

The political spectrum doesn't run just left to right. There are a host of complicated, intricate issues that require up-or-down votes. Sometimes bosses vote for or support things that we wish they didn't, but such is life on Capitol Hill. The goal is to find someone to work for whom you respect as a person and can stand behind, even on issues you wish they would vote on another way.

And even better news for you: There is an easy fix for making sure this does not become problematic. It's called staying quiet. I know it's tempting to voice your opinion in a congressional office, just as it's tempting to yell at the TV when C-SPAN is on. But unless you are directly asked about a particular issue (and you may have to wait until you're a legislative assistant to get your opinion heard), your job is to support your boss, represent him or her well and learn all you can.

But take heart: Congress is not static. Opinions evolve, votes switch and, believe it or not, staffers change their minds, too. By using your internship experience to better understand the issues and your boss' positions, you might surprise yourself.

Even if you walk away unchanged on your positions, you will have learned more about the opposing viewpoint. And best of all, you will have practiced being the consummate staffer who does not let his or her personal beliefs cloud professional judgment.

**3. Learn, memorize, internalize and follow the office dress code.** Ignore the smirks on staffers' faces, Hill Navigator knows that this isn't the no-brainer that experienced hands assume it is. Dress codes are not always as obvious or natural as it would seem, especially because many interns are in college and do not have extensive work-appropriate wardrobes. The yoga pants and sweatshirt combo might be fine for Econ 301, but Capitol Hill has a sun's out-suit's out mentality. The dress code matters. It may mean spending some money on button-down shirts, slacks, office-appropriate skirts and shoes that do not have "flop" in the name. Don't want to walk around in those four-inch heels all day? A pair of closed-toed flats can work wonders. And even if the rest of the office is wearing jeans in August, that doesn't mean you should. Don't assume: ask.

**Q. I will be starting a Hill internship soon and I wanted to know what I should expect to wear on a regular day. Will it be a suit 5 days a week?**

**A.** Nothing says Capitol Hill like young people in suits. Speaker John A. Boehner’s announced policy for the 113th Congress states that staffers must be in “appropriate business attire” on the House floor, so this ups the ante on how staffers dress on a daily basis. Most offices have dress codes and will happily answer your questions about what to wear. Some stellar offices even have intern handbooks that address this directly. But just in case you aren’t sure or are reluctant to ask, here are some general guidelines that can help get you off to a good start.

- ◆ Wear a suit the first day of work. Even if it’s recess. Or Friday. Or hot outside. Your first day sets the tone of your internship, and a suit shows you’re taking it seriously.
- ◆ Wear a suit (or jacket and tie, or blazer/slacks/skirt for ladies) every day Congress is in session.
- ◆ Dress up every day the boss is in town. Most offices have a relaxed dress code when Congress is out of session, but if the boss is there, take the extra time to dress in business clothing.
- ◆ Follow the office’s lead. Don’t be the first one to wear jeans or break out into casual Friday polo shirts unless you see your co-workers doing the same thing. And by co-workers, I don’t mean other interns. Take the cues from the higher-ups in the office.
- ◆ Cover up. Keep the short skirts and deep v-neck shirts at home. If you aren’t sure whether it’s office appropriate, it probably isn’t.
- ◆ Stay away from jeans, sneakers, T-shirts and yoga pants. No matter how casual Fridays get, you’re better off in khakis or dress pants than something more comfortable. Wait for the weekends to wear whatever you want. Or wait until your internship is over.

**4. Ask this question: What is the office’s social media policy?** Social media: so fun, so ubiquitous and yet, it can be so detrimental to careers everywhere. Right after asking the dress code, request a copy of the office social media policy. And then — like the dress code — err on the conservative side of following it.

“One of the great fears of senior managers in Congress is waking up one day and finding a junior staffer or intern has thrust the office into a crisis because of some silly posting on social media,” said Bradford Fitch, president of the Congressional Management Foundation, a nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to helping Congress.

Even privacy settings can’t always protect you if you’re posting items while you are at work, or including details — however inane — about your job. Remember that many members of Congress face re-election every two years, races that often cost millions of dollars, and opposition researchers are always looking for material, especially in an election year.

If your office does not have a social media policy, here are a handful of rules Hill Navigator recommends:

- ◆ Avoid social media during work hours — even on your phone.
- ◆ Do not mention your official duties in any capacity without receiving explicit permission.
- ◆ Ask first, post later. If your office allows you to post a photo of you and the senator mugging it up, then by all means make it your profile pic. Some offices do encourage such things, but make sure such encouragement is spelled out. Don’t infer anything, even if you think, “Well, no one checks Instagram,” or your settings are private. Someone checks everything. Screenshotting can be taken, and the Internet is forever.

- ◆ Reason cannot trump the stubborn nature of luddites. If you're working in one of the offices wary of social media in general, accept the decision and then follow your co-workers' lead. Don't use this as an opportunity to show social media's proliferation into the 21st century, unless, of course, they specifically ask. Then you can put your Facebook skills to good use.

**5. Have meaningful— and realistic— expectations.** Setting achievable goals is one of the best ways to have a positive internship experience, but expecting that you will write legislation, staff the senator or field press calls is setting yourself up for disappointment.

“Interns should understand they’re being tested early on,” Fitch said. “[They] won’t get any valuable work or experience if they don’t do the little stuff right. The smart ones excel at the grunt work and graduate up from ‘boring’ to ‘mildly interesting.’”

Hill Navigator would argue that even the mundane task of making coffee in a congressional office can be interesting; many offices have chatty back rooms. If you find yourself in one of those, you can pick up everything from legislative procedure to after-hours gossip while you’re acing your tasks at the copy machine.

And if your expectations include a paying job at the end of the term, you have all the more reason to excel at the small stuff, as many staff assistants pick up the grunt work once the interns have departed.

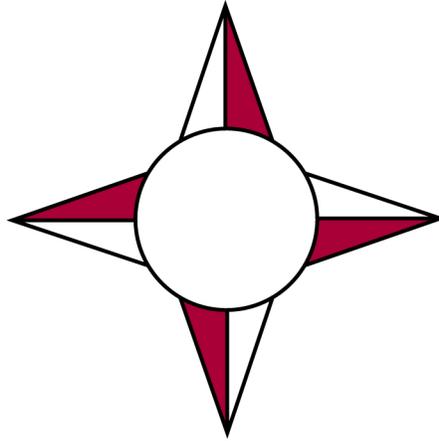
**6. Have humility, in large doses.** This particular piece of advice is courtesy of many current and former Hill staffers: Do good work, but don’t tell us all about it. You don’t need to hang that marked-up constituent letter at your cube, or brag about how you’re the only one who can navigate Cannon’s fifth floor. Every Hill office knows which interns are competent. In the frenetic, fast-paced world of Capitol Hill, people who get things done are easy to spot. You may not see it, but it might as well be tattooed on your forehead. Just make sure you’ve got some appropriate business clothes to match your go-get-’em attitude.



Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call File Photo

Six things for interns to remember: Stay professional, leave your opinions at the door, learn and follow the dress code, learn and follow the office’s social media policy, have meaningful and realistic expectations, and be humble.

## PART TWO



### Get a Job

Ask a staffer how she or he got that first job on Capitol Hill, and most have a colorful story to tell.

Some started as interns, which led to full-time work. Some pounded the pavement handing out résumés until they landed an interview. And some went about it the old-fashioned job-bank route.

For those still looking, the wait for a job can seem endless. Here are some tips on how to make the job-searching process work the best for you.

**Q. I have been eyeing a job on the Hill because I want the opportunity to see our government function and the legislative process.**

**I've been having coffee/beer dates with the coms director and counsel to this senator frequently and they've been passing around my résumé. The last time I met with them, the counsel [said], "Something may open up."**

**Do you think that being crystal clear with my intentions and the fact that he mentioned that "something may open up" means anything?**

**In addition, [an organization] sends out their "job bank list," which shows vacancies on the Hill, and [I] frequently apply for the ones that make sense to me and then let my insiders know that I've applied for a position and to keep their ears open.**

**Do you think that I am overdoing it with my insiders? Do elected officials actually pull from these advertisements or do most of the jobs get filled by people already on the Hill?**

**A:** I think your approach is the right way to go about it. Network on the Hill, be clear about what you're looking for and don't give up.

But searching for a job can have its discouraging moments, especially as it seems that despite all of your hard work, "something" has still not come up.

Some things to keep in mind in your job search:

**1. Very few people get a Hill job easily.** Sure, there are people plucked from college for an entry-level job in D.C., but most had to pound the pavement to get where they are. The same aides who are meeting you

for coffee once had their résumés passed around, tossed in the trash, resurrected and were given unpaid intern positions before they landed the coveted full-time job. If Capitol Hill is where you want to work, you should keep doing what you are doing. Be gracious and patient, all the while staying focused on your goal.

2. I, too, was skeptical of job banks, or the anonymous “WESTERN SENATOR SEEKS STAFF ASSISTANT” job postings that float around Capitol Hill. **The chance of getting a job through the job banks is likely less than landing a job through regular informational interviews or an internship.** But that does not mean you should give up. On the contrary, the job banks and job postings exist because offices are still interested in outside talent. And while I wouldn’t rely solely on the job boards, I wouldn’t ignore them, either. Even landing an interview is good practice and movement toward networking further. And keep in mind the golden rule of Washington, D.C.: Even if you don’t get the exact job you’re interviewing for, it doesn’t mean there won’t be another job for you in that same office that is a better fit.

3. **“Something may open up,” is maddeningly vague, yes, yet it is entirely true.** A job opening could sprout up. Someone could be just days away from giving two weeks’ notice, and you might be the ideal candidate. So while that is not giving you any promises — and it is certainly not enough for you to hang your hat on and slow your own job search down — it’s accurate. What you can do is stay in touch with those contacts, reiterate your own interest and keep them up to date on your job search. Your motivation and drive can leave a strong impression — so when something does open up, they’re more likely to remember you.

## Hill Job 411

**Q. I moved to the District a year ago (about two years out of school) with the hopes of landing an internship or entry-level position in a Hill office. I ended up taking a job at a large organization to pay the bills. I was only able to develop a couple of minor contacts in a senator’s office from my home state, and they didn’t yield much. I don’t have any other contacts on the Hill. What can I do to meet staffers, or get my résumé in Hill offices (more effectively than mailing it or using the online job banks)? And should I mainly target my home state’s representatives and senators?**

**A.** Smart first move. Home-state senators and representatives are the best place to begin your job search. Even if they don’t have a job opening, a staffer from their offices should be able to provide an informational interview for you. You should have contacts in each of your home-state offices — particularly from the party you’d prefer to work for.

And these minor contacts you refer to — why are they minor? Follow up with them. Ask them for additional people you can talk to about the Hill. Even if they meet you for a surly coffee and give you a name of one person who doesn’t email you back, still be gracious and send a [friendly thank-you note](#).

But let’s assume you’ve visited your home-state offices, met people for countless coffees and your handwritten thank-you notes have already been delivered — yet you’re still running dry on contacts. Try talking to former staffers. People who work off the Hill often still have connections and can help arrange more informational interviews. Former staffers sometimes have an even greater motivation to help you — once you land a position on the Hill, it’s one more contact in their coffer.

And don’t despair when contacts don’t initially “yield much.” Landing a job on Capitol Hill can be a long, cumbersome process — but keep at it. Just think, the government shut down and staffers nearly lost their paychecks and health insurance, yet people still are clamoring to work there.

## For the New Graduate

Plenty of people will arrive in Washington, D.C. with a diploma in hand and starry gaze toward the Capitol Dome. But wanting a job in public service isn't enough. How do you find one? And then, how do you find a place to live? Here's how to spin your credentials into a job on Capitol Hill and move here permanently. It starts — like many things in life — with lots of coffee.

**Q. I am a college senior about to graduate and make my way into the real world. I have no idea where to begin finding an apartment in D.C., especially one on a beginning Hill staffer's salary. Any tips or tricks that you can offer a newcomer into the D.C. professional world?**

**A.** Get ready for the group house. Before you wince, let me give you a few selling points on why living in a house with a few other people — otherwise known as your new friends — is a great idea and will save you money, too.

Group houses are cheaper. You're sharing everything from the cable bill to the dishwasher and probably a bathroom, so your rent is going to be lower than in a studio apartment.

You're also in a house, so you're less likely to pay for a doorman and concierge service. And if you live in a neighborhood like Capitol Hill — where you can walk to work! — you can likely find street parking and avoid paying for a space.

If living in Dupont Circle or the U Street area strikes your fancy, you can ask your office to give you a parking space in lieu of a Metro subsidy and leave your car permanently parked in Lot 7. Or leave the car at home and take the Metro like the rest of your cohorts.

Group houses come in all varieties; you can find one that is all guys, all girls or mixed. Rooms are usually pro-rated on size and desirability, so you can opt for the master bed with adjoining bath or take the super cheap spot in the basement.

So where can you find this group house? Craigslist. The Rayburn bulletin board. Friends. Word of mouth. Post a message on Facebook. People are always looking for roommates and — similar to hunting for a job — they prefer people they know or who have been recommended.

Roommates make your dollars go further, and if you are new to Washington, they'll be an asset to your social life as well. By the time you're sick of them, hopefully you'll have a promotion and raise to pay for a place of your own.

**Q. I am originally from the D.C. area and moved to the Midwest a few years ago with my wife. I have a year and a half of my bachelor's degree to complete and may stay in the Midwest just long enough to finish a master's program. Immediately following my education, we are moving back to D.C. to be back near my family. When should I start trying to network and communicate with people who may help me land a position on the Hill? I know these people are exceptionally busy. Am I bothering them wasting their time by trying to make contact from across the country and a year and a half (or more) out?**

**A.** Start now. Start the minute you think you want to move to Washington and get a job on Capitol Hill.

The job process is long and cumbersome, and face-to-face informational interviews remain among the best ways to get your résumé noticed. People want to hire people they have met before or who have been referred to their office. These are small offices, so personalities matter a great deal in finding someone who will be a good fit for an already crowded space.

In a stack of 100 résumés for a job opening (I don't exaggerate; I've heard of piles several times that large), most of the applicants are qualified. More are over-qualified than under-qualified. Master's degrees, law degrees, fellowships abound. How will you stand out? By putting a face with your name. And it's hard to do when you're far away. This means you need to start as soon as you can.

People in Washington are busy. People on Capitol Hill are even busier and will love to tell you that. But they can usually find time for a quick cup of coffee when you're in town to meet and chat. Be willing to come to them. Set up multiple coffee meetings in one day if you can schedule it. Follow up with thank-you notes, both handwritten and email. (Handwritten because everyone loves to get mail and it shows you're classy; email because they need to know where to forward job openings.)

Use your existing network to branch out. Since you're from the D.C. area, use those connections to set up meetings. If you have a degree, you'll also have an alumni network, so give alumni a call and see if they know people who work on Capitol Hill. With each meeting, or at least the ones that seem to go well, ask if the person can give you additional names. Slowly you'll build a network and mound of business cards, so when you move back to the D.C. area full time you'll be in great shape to keep going with your job search.

## Watch Out for Poison Pills

Internships can lead to great things. But what if you're interning with an organization that you'd rather not attach your name to? Here's how to evaluate just how damaging might a Google search be for your future prospects.

**Q: As a recent college graduate, I'm recently on the hunt for a full-time job, but in the meanwhile I plan on continuing to intern. I have an offer on the table to work for an unnamed advocacy group that works with privacy/censorship issues. Without getting too specific, they're very much of the anti-NSA surveillance, pro-Edward Snowden persuasion. This position would entail writing public pieces that my name would be attached to.**

**While I don't disagree with most of their positions, I wonder if this job would be a poison pill, given that my primary interest is national security. If I try to get a position later on, say with the House Committee on Homeland Security or a governmental agency, would I get blackballed based on my association with this group?**

**A.** Blackballed, no. But any prospective employer is likely to ask about your previous work, and if you're attaching your name to something that any Google search can turn up, you want to make sure it's representing you well.

Likely a future employer in the same field would have some understanding of this group's policies and positions. Civil policy disagreements are part of the nature of working in Washington. But if it's a fringe or extreme organization, you're correct that a governmental agency might raise eyebrows at your association. If you want to take the temperature of such a group, ask people currently in the field how the group is regarded. They can give you an answer as to how your future employers might view this line on your résumé.

Given the language of your question ("poison pill" and "blackballed"), I'm inclined to think this group might not be the best fit for you. But ultimately that is for you to decide. Part of the internship experience is finding out what suits you best. If it's not the right fit for you, learn what you can and move on. One internship need not define the rest of your career.

## The Intern Rerun

Even the best of internships have their limits. Here's how you know when you've reached the end of the intern trail.

**Q. I'm a college senior who will be graduating in May. I have interned in two congressional offices and my ultimate goal is to be back on the Hill. I have a couple of questions. Firstly, when is it appropriate to start applying to staff assistant positions such as those listed on job banks? Secondly, I know that both of the offices I have interned for would consider me if they had a staff assistant opening, but that doesn't seem likely at the moment. I know there are many ways to get to a job on the Hill, but do you think I should cut to the chase and intern again in an office in hopes of it turning into a paid position? If so, is it best to wait until the fall?**

**A.** Interning on Capitol Hill is one of the best ways to find a paid position. But you know this, which explains why you've interned twice already, putting yourself in a strong position to be hired. You have Hill experience and you have some foresight to start applying soon.

But Capitol Hill will not fit neatly into many timelines, and even the strongest powers of prognostication cannot tell you how long until you find a paid position. What Hill Navigator can tell you is how to maximize your opportunities to do so.

**Stay in Touch:** Those offices that you interned for are your best resource for additional informational interviews, recommendations for offices to contact and potential future employment. They should know that you are looking and it's your job to keep them informed of your progress. If you are applying somewhere, let them know. If you are looking for an introduction to a particular office (perhaps your home-state senator or member from a nearby district), see if they can help arrange one. Be gracious, be patient and follow up with a thank-you note each time they help you. Staff members are less likely to turn away an applicant who has been recommended to them by another office. You might not get the job, but you're more likely to land an interview.

**Evaluate Your Prospects:** What does another internship get you? Are you angling to work on a particular committee or in a particular chamber, but lack the requisite experience? If so, a third internship homing in on your interests could help. But if you're just adding another office experience that is largely indistinguishable from the previous two, you may be better off finding temporary paid work while focusing on your Hill search.

**Seek Selective Guidance:** Hill Navigator thinks you're great, though we haven't actually met so I can't give you the personal assessment you need on how long your job search might take. Seek out [one or two trusted individuals](#) for their input; they may have insight on how long you'll be waiting for a job. Perhaps you're from a region that is likely to hire someone local, or people are getting ready to depart for midterm election campaign trails. Or, perhaps you're angling for a position that could take months (or a blue moon) to become available. Not all résumés and job opportunities are created equal, and someone who is closer to you and the process can give you a more realistic assessment of how long your wait might be.

## The Staff Assistant

The best way to end your internship? With a staff assistant job.

Hill Navigator was once a staff assistant — answering phones, ordering sandwiches from the Rayburn Special Orders deli (old timers may remember that one) and greeting every visitor with a big smile and an offer to make fresh coffee. Such skills may be deemed entry-level, but they have served me well in every job I've had since. By the time I'd become weary with the job, a promotion — to the coveted back office — was in the wings.

And so it goes, a tale common for many Hill staffers. The lesson? Don't overlook what the staff assistant does. It's important. It's necessary. It keeps the offices functioning and smiling. And — I'll put this in bold — **it's a great job to have**. Just not for too long a stretch of time.

**Q. I will [soon be a] graduate of a small liberal arts college, and I will be working as the campaign manager for a congressman during the 2014 cycle. I do not have any direct Hill experience, but I will have three election cycles under my belt (including the 2014 cycle). I do not want to be stuck as the campaign junkie and my short term goal is to work on the Hill. When is a good time to start looking for jobs on the Hill? What level of positions should I be looking to apply for? Am I stuck at the staff assistant level because of the lack of experience?**

A. “Stuck at the staff assistant level?” *Stuck?*

It sounds like you are a promising, eager, graduate-to-be who wants to work on Capitol Hill. And you've got campaign experience, so you're likely someone who knows how to work hard for little pay. The one hitch in your question? The idea that you'd be “stuck at the staff assistant level.”

The staff assistant job is not quicksand. It is a launching pad. A caterpillar. Insert any metaphor for things that start small before getting big.

Staff assistant is the common point of entry for Capitol Hill jobs for recent graduates. According to the 2010 House Compensation Study, the D.C. staff assistant position has an average tenure of less than two years. *Less than two years*. And where do these staff assistants go? They get promoted. Or they get a better job. And wherever they go, they take that Hill experience with them.

So I'll take the liberty of reframing your question: When is a good time to start looking for a job and what level should you seek out?

If you know you want to work on the Hill, start now. You don't have to be a college grad to go on informational interviews. Start with your local and state delegations and any offices that are closely connected to the campaign you are working on. Meet with them in earnest. Say that you're hoping you can join a congressional office once the campaign ends. Be willing to take any position, though given your lack of Hill experience and your recent college degree, you'd be wise to look for entry-level spots and then work your way up. Let your campaign know your future goals; many campaign aides end up on the Hill, so you might already work for your future boss. And your campaign experience isn't all for naught. The same work ethic and political smarts that serve you well on the campaign trail will translate to a congressional office. Even at the staff assistant level.

## Making the Intern-to-Staffer Leap

**Q. I have been interning for a representative for a few months and was recently hired as a full-time staffer. I am beyond excited for my new job, but a little worried about the transition (both for myself and for other staffers) from intern to full time. What can I do to differentiate myself from my past role?**

**A.** Congratulations on the new job. Presumably you've been promoted because you did outstanding work as an intern. So keep in mind that the skills and work ethic you exhibited initially are the same ones your office is likely hoping will continue. If you weren't "too big" to make coffee as an intern, don't be too big for it as a staffer. And if you excelled at a particular area — be it sorting mail or answering phones — keep doing that now. The new title and responsibilities are a strong testament to your previous success, so be careful not to change your ways too much.

One thing you'll learn about Capitol Hill is that staffers respond to success. Show that you're a willing and capable member of the team and they will start to treat you as such. And you're already starting ahead of the gate — they saw your work and thought you'd be a great fit. Sounds like there is not too much changing you'll need to do.

## Looking for a Mentor?

A good mentor can change your world. At their fingertips are advice and connections, all for your benefit. But for most of us, finding a great mentor isn't like buying a sofa on Craigslist.

There are a lot of superstars to-be on Capitol Hill, many of whom have advice to offer. Here's how to turn their goodwill into a mentorship.

**Q. How do you turn a key relationship into a mentorship? Thanks!**

**A.** Good news for you: You already have.

If you have a "key relationship" with someone who gives you feedback and insight, therein lies your mentorship. You do not need to bestow the "mentor" title upon them; all you need to do is reiterate how much you appreciate their time and advice, and soak up as much of their wisdom as possible.

And here are a few ways to continue to do that:

**Take their advice.** Are you bemoaning your lack of promotion options, but then refusing to go on the handful of informational interviews that your mentor suggests? If you can't take your mentor's advice, don't take up too much of his or her time. Hill Navigator acknowledges there are times to agree to disagree, but if you want this to be a relationship that lasts through your next job, make sure it's with someone who is simpatico with your worldview. From the mentor's end, it is much more gratifying to spend time with someone who values the advice doled out.

**Give the good news and the bad.** Don't just seek the mentor out when you need help. Be sure to keep him or her apprised of the good in your world, especially if you can do so as a credit to that person's help. Even if all he or she did was refer to you read Hill Navigator, say thanks for the advice and tell him or her how much it helped.

**Give thanks.** Most key relationships don't need a Starbucks gift card, but your mentor will appreciate a hand-written note. Particularly if he or she goes above and beyond in giving you time and consideration, put pen to paper and say "thanks." Then put a stamp on it. Don't take the easy way out with email.

**Help the mentor, too.** Your mentor might not need your words of wisdom, but could want a Capitol Tour for a family friend, or an informational interview for an aspiring intern. The more receptive you are to requests, the more incentive there is to keep advising you to reach your goals.

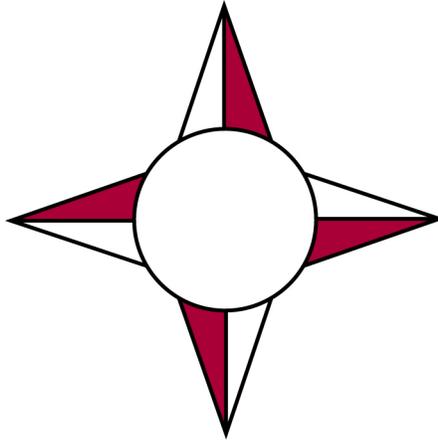
**Don't be a cheater.** Once you pick your mentor, don't start shopping around for another one. Yes, you can have more than one confidante and adviser, but your inner circle should be small, without many overlaps. One of the greatest gifts you can give another colleague is respect for his or her time; if you can do so for your mentor, then you are likely to have a productive relationship for years to come.



Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call File Photo

No job is too big (or too small) for an intern. If you're hoping to transition into a permanent position, show that you're a willing and capable member of the team and you will be treated accordingly.

## PART THREE



### **It Happens to the Best of Us: When the Job Doesn't Work Out**

---

#### **The Loser's Guide to the Job Hunt**

Hill Navigator has yet to meet a person in Washington, D.C., who has never been turned down for a job. On both sides of the aisle, in each branch of government, there are staffers that — like you — were not picked for a job they wanted.\*

But talk is cheap; you don't want company in your zero-batting-average job hunt, you want success. All of us — Hill Navigator included — have been on the wrong side of that awkward email. Here are some tips on how to take the rejection in stride.

**1. Write back.** You know that terrible email you're about to get, with some vague line about how they're going in a different direction or have found someone else, or really liked meeting you. It may pain you to read it, but chances are that it pained the author to write it. It's never fun having to reject people, especially in the Capitol Hill world, where everyone is qualified and more than one person would make a stellar co-worker. Even just a few lines — “Thanks, I appreciate it, would love to stay in touch, etc.” — can go a long way toward leaving a good last impression. And it shows that you're a pretty upstanding person who won't hold a grudge.

**2. Stay in touch.** This was not the last job you'll ever apply for, and it's possible that another one could exist that is an even better fit. Capitol Hill offices usually want to fill jobs quickly; make sure they know you're still interested in working in their office should another position become available, because it may happen sooner than you think.

**3. Don't take it personally.** Easier said than done, of course, but don't take a job rejection as a referendum on your personality or capabilities. This bears repeating: This happens to all of us, for myriad reasons.

**4. Don't obsess over the myriad reasons.** Maybe you misspelled Tucson on your cover letter, or thought the state capital of New Mexico was Albuquerque.\*\* Perhaps the boss wanted to hire someone from a certain part of the state, or with a rural health background or a grass-roots organizer. Maybe the office had one too many extroverts and preferred someone laid back. Whatever it is, you're unlikely to find out the real reason. Save your energy for bigger and better things.

**5. Keep your confidential circle small.** Yes, when you're feeling glum it can be tempting to hang out by the Nespresso machine and spill your troubles to passersby. But be smart about sharing your job woes. If someone you trust is close to the application process, you can ask them for their feedback. Perhaps they can offer useful insight, either on what the job required or areas of improvement for your résumé. If nothing else, they can be a sympathetic ear for you. Because like everyone else in this town, they are familiar with what you're going through.

## And the Winner of the Staff Assistant Job Is ...

We've all been there — qualified, hopeful, ready to hit the ground running but ultimately not the one picked for the job. But what happens when you aren't even given a chance to apply?

**Q. I'm an intern in a Senate office, and I truly love my job. Lately my office has been experiencing a lot of turnover: [Legislative assistants] and [legislative correspondents are] moving on, and one of our old staff assistants moved back to the state to work in the state office. Instead of hiring a new staff assistant, the chief of staff and HR person decided to pick an interim from within the intern pool. They just decided to go with the oldest, (not me), and I was a little frustrated with the situation. If it would have been an interview process and I lost I would be fine with that, but the fact it was just a pick seems unfair.**

**I also got stuck with all of the other intern's tasks, which I am going to nail because I want to prove they made a mistake in not hiring me. I don't really want to mention it to anyone in the office, because I don't want to be 'that guy' who complains about not getting the job. The other intern is a good friend, but I would have killed for that job as a way to further prove myself and I just don't know what to do now.**

A. Keep doing what you're doing.

Hill Navigator has heard of a lot of unusual hiring practices — picking someone who is the “oldest” might be a new one. It is not unusual to give a promotion based on length of tenure or seniority, if that is what you're referring to. But let's assume this was an arbitrary hiring decision, and had you been born in January and not July, the job could have been yours.

You're correct — don't be “that guy” who complains. But do take the time to connect with your direct supervisor about more ways you can position yourself for a full-time, paid job. It is no secret, nor is it unusual, that someone who interns on Capitol Hill will want to work permanently on Capitol Hill. That pipeline exists for a reason.

Pick a time to talk with your supervisor and frame the conversation about your goals and the best way for you to get there. As you said, you don't need to lambast the office for its unusual hiring practices. It's also possible there are forces at work behind the scenes that helped your friend get the job. He might have earned it through sheer hard work, or the senator could have taken a particular liking to him, or his father could be a major campaign donor back home. (Don't look so shocked. It happens.)

\*Hill Navigator acknowledges there may be an exception whose résumé has always shined a bit brighter, or whose luck has never strayed. Congrats to you, a true prime number among staffers. But for the sake of argument, let's assume your long and storied career has a few more bumps, hurdles and peaks.

\*\*It's Santa Fe, though you probably knew that.

And take the time to work closely with your friend in his new post. At the rate the office turnover is happening, he could move up much faster than either of you anticipate. And then there will be another staff assistant opening, one you are well suited to be selected for.

---



### For more Hill Navigator:

- ◆ [6 Ways Your Campaign Job Is Different From Your Hill Job](#)
- ◆ [5 Ways Your Capitol Hill Office Is Not a Campaign](#)
- ◆ [Best Flack Ever: Six Ways to Improve Your Game](#)
- ◆ [Beginner's Guide to Political Reporting Jobs](#)
- ◆ [Best Job Ever? Maybe Not. Four Ways to Tell](#)

For more Hill Navigator advice, go to [rollcall.com/HillNavigator](http://rollcall.com/HillNavigator) and follow [@beckgale](https://twitter.com/beckgale) on Twitter. Got questions about working on Capitol Hill, or feedback on the intern guide? Email [hillnavigator@rollcall.com](mailto:hillnavigator@rollcall.com). All submissions will be treated anonymously.

For breaking news and everything you need to know about Capitol Hill, sign up for newsletters at [rollcall.com](http://rollcall.com) or download the Roll Call iPhone app.



# GETTING AROUND: Map of Washington, D. C.

