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Final Report: Marketing Internships with Connected

Hadi Kiani

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Hadi Kiani

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Prof. Bruce

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SASAH Experiential Learning Course: Final Report

Internships can be viewed as a symbiotic relationship between the intern, the employer, and the returning student. The student brings a commitment to learning, the intern a commitment to delivering, and the employer an interest in developing future employees. The student, upon their return to class, has an opportunity to share and leverage skill sets learned. I cannot say I entered my first internship at Connected with this view, but it is one I grew to understand. In this report, I will provide both a macro and micro view of my experiences at Connected, as well as insights I gained along the way.

Background and Culture

Connected is an interesting company. Even though it is a startup, it has been recognized as one of Canada's Top Small and Medium Employers, winning awards the past two years. They search out employees who are "smart, kind and reliable individuals with a desire to teach and learn." Needless to say I was intrigued. Would it live up to its reputation? I was cautiously optimistic—from my interviews as well as the employee reviews, Connected seemed to be a great company with forward thinking ideas, particularly in the areas of organization, learning, leadership through teamwork, and workplace culture. In particular, it appeared to be aligned with SASAH's learning outcomes; its recruitment focused on people who wanted to both learn and share new skills in order to expand on their realm of creative potential. One example of Connected's creative learning approach is when they partnered with Civic Tech Toronto to create a special edition of

‘Wild Combination’, a “rapid ideation card game...applying technologies to real-life scenarios to create novel solutions for people.”

For context, Connected is a software product development firm. This means that the company pairs with ambitious brands to aid in the designing and creation of their software powered products. The company was founded in 2014, is 100% employee-owned, and, in less than six years, has grown to roughly 160 employees. It certainly fits the image of a tech startup; bean bag chairs and ping pong tables amidst high tech computers and never-before-seen products. The more time I spent at the company, the more I realized how innovative it actually was. For example, there are only two offices, one for the Director of HR and one for VP Operations. Everyone else, including the CEO, works “en plein air.” You might think this would be stressful as everyone can see what you are working on, but I found it to be the exact opposite. For me, it facilitated dialogue and an openness that I have not experienced at other companies. Another benefit of this open concept is that you could work anywhere in the space and take as many breaks as you needed. Everyone has different work methods and schedules. I find it difficult focusing on something for more than three hours at a time and so, when I felt I needed a break, I would go to the third floor and either play a game of ping pong or see what the employees from the other Guilds were working on (Design is my favourite). In the long run, I believe this boosts efficiency and trust as employees are not expected to work when they are at their least productive, effectively avoiding burn out.

My First Internship at Connected

I want to begin with my expectations of the first internship and how those expectations evolved and shifted over the course of my time at Connected. In my interview before starting the internship, it was hard to say that the Marketing Team had a specific role in mind for me. They had not hired a Marketing intern before, so I hazard to guess there was a bit of “winging it” going

on. During the interview we spoke about the possibility of my working on a new website, updating the company's wiki page, and more broadly "helping around the office." When I received my contract, reality quickly set in. I was signing a document that was detailed in areas such as intellectual property and confidentiality, both sensitive issues in the tech industry. On my first day I learned exactly what that meant when our customers were never referred to by name but by codes: Banff, Madrid, Fuji, and Darwin to name a few. My onboarding focused on the history of the company, corporate values, clients, and the confidentiality surrounding the work we do along with more mundane aspects of the office. I was part of a team, finally something familiar to me.



My team was made up of five people: the VP of Marketing, Social Media and Event Coordinator, Graphic Designer and my interviewer, Eli, Communications Manager. My first job was to acquaint myself with the different platforms and tools that I would be using throughout my internship. These included Google Drive, Slack, Bamboo HR, Asana, and Hootsuite to name a few. Needless to say this industry is fast-paced and by the second day I was thrown into a research project. As Connected was in the process of a full rebrand when I joined, the team was working

on creating a new website among other projects. I researched competitor websites to see how we could incorporate a new design and feel to ours, making it stand out amongst our competitors and the industry in general. The companies I researched included: TWG, TribalScale, Fahrenheit212, ustwo, Punchcut, Shopify, and Digital McKinsey. My report, which included recommendations on design, was ready within two days in order to meet the deadline. Once completed, I worked with graphic design to incorporate our ideas in addition to aiding Connected's Search Engine Optimization (SEO). It is interesting to note that for roughly the first half of the internship, my skill set was quite lacking relative to what I was working on (website design, SEO optimization), however, what I was able to utilize were my research skills and ability to adapt on the fly. These two skills are critical to our success in the SASAH program, and, I learned, marketing in the tech industry as well.

While I was pleasantly surprised by the potency of my transferable skills, that is not to say that I did not struggle. For the first few weeks I certainly made many mistakes. Whether it be understanding company and industry jargon, using programs such as Hootsuite, or not using the correct messaging for the social media copy, it took me a while to orient myself. I found that I was nervous about asking questions because I wanted to appear competent and not a simple intern. That being said, I eventually had no choice but to ask for advice from most of my team members. I learned that everyone starts somewhere—what matters is that you show initiative and continue to improve every day. As my understanding of the role and company grew, so too did my knowledge base. Looking back, I am thankful that my role was not simply smooth sailing. Challenges force you to step up to the plate and act outside of your comfort zone. I believe they are necessary for a successful internship and indeed, the majority of careers at any level.

I realized that the company's stated goal of hiring people who have a "desire to teach and learn" was in fact the case. Every employee at Connected, no matter how senior or how skilled, were always learning and growing in their respective fields. In education, the content of what we learn is no doubt important but on a deeper and more foundational level, an understanding of how to learn is what is critical. After the completion of our website I was tasked with taking over Connected's social media presence, conducting further competitor research, aiding with the external brand launch, and helping to set up internal events (Lunch & Learns, MicroLearns, in-house contests). These projects expanded my network within the company; from my team through to working with employees from other guilds (Engineering, Design, and Sales). I was never completely sure of what I would be working on each day which I found to be exciting. Having to be nimble, agile, flexible, and focused, I knew the skill set I would bring back to Western would be invaluable.

Comparing my first experience at Connected to university, I am able to recognize many similarities: projects were assigned with tight timelines, the workplace fostered a collaborative approach, and there was a rigorous commitment to learning. I worked in a team that utilized the skill sets of each member, while encouraging everyone to participate and grow. While handing in an academic assignment late leads to consequences, at the workplace, that took on a much more serious meaning. This difference was made clear from the outset of my first project. It was a bit of a trial by fire, the fire being the one you could experience if your work did not meet expectations. As a result, while the workplace environment was no doubt lighthearted and fun, there was an undercurrent of responsibility and weight. I knew what I had to do and what the implications were if it was not done correctly. This motivated me to do my best on every project I was asked to work on, as well as encouraging me to take initiative and work on more complex assignments.

In summation, my first internship at Connected gave me the chance to take my first step into the “real world.” I met great people who I now call friends, worked on some impressive projects, gained insight into the emerging tech industry, and through all of this matured in terms of my discipline and love of learning.

My Second Internship at Connected

Returning to Connected was a fantastic opportunity—one that I wanted to take advantage of. Furthering my knowledge of the software development industry, meeting new colleagues, and exploring my own interests were all things I was able to address during my two-month stint. I left this internship with a lot on my mind in terms of future career aspirations as well as next steps.

What was work in the ‘new’ marketing team like? Since my first internship, three of the five members of the marketing team had left Connected: Eli, Luke, and Emily. While all three went on to pursue new opportunities and passions, they had left on good terms which was yet another testament to the company’s healthy culture. It did not take too long to get used to the new team members. Kevin (Director of Growth) took a hands-on approach with our work which allowed me to gain insights into what quality of work a seasoned professional needs as a successful marketer. Raquel (Event Marketing Manager) mainly had me set up for events in the downstairs section of the building. Katie (Graphic Designer) had me take (and model!) photos for the company. And finally, Lisa (Communications Specialist) had me write and edit blog posts. Everyone was kind and welcoming, albeit slightly more serious than my previous team members. While working with new people was not difficult, what did take adjusting to was the merging of the Marketing and Accounting/Business Acquisitions teams. While it makes sense on paper—both teams sit right next to each other and often work on projects together—the actual implementation was shaky logistics-wise. Both teams had very different personalities and styles. Marketing, as the

smallest guild in the company, was tight knit and while serious about their work, were more relaxed in terms of deadlines. In contrast, the Business Acquisitions team was always “Go! Go! Go!” with a sole focus on output. Our success metrics were different and as a result, there was some friction which was certainly interesting for me to see as the company, during my first internship, was relatively quiet in terms of disagreement.



In regards to the work I conducted, my main focus was Connected’s blog. I both wrote and edited two blogs per week which included: [Connector Spotlights](#) (highlighting different employees), the “[Product I Love](#)” series, and recapping the various [conferences](#) Connected employees attended. While I enjoyed writing the blog posts, I was somewhat caught off guard due to the fact that I had to write them with someone else (Lisa). During my first internship, Eli generally did not let me write anything that would be posted on the company’s website. Because of this, I did all of my writing as I was used to—by myself with edits afterwards. This time around, Lisa and I would lock ourselves in a meeting room and would brainstorm, write, and edit an article all in one go. Working on a 250-750-word article with someone can result in frustration, especially

if your writing styles clash. I noticed a sharp contrast between the more academic oriented writing style I was used to and the more casual yet still precise writing Lisa was looking for. I saw it as a battle between precision and accessibility. With a lot of academic texts, the ideas being conveyed are complex and require correspondingly nuanced language. With these sorts of texts, the accessibility is low. On the other hand, if you try to maximize accessibility you have the danger of sacrificing precision. This is often what our disagreements came down to. Luckily, this did not happen too often; however, when it did, it took us a very long time to decide what changes to make. While these conversations were stressful, I recognized that they had the added benefit of boosting my negotiation skills.

I also helped run Connected's social media accounts which included: Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. This was probably my least favourite part of the internship as it was not very engaging or challenging, however it did not take longer than one hour per day, so on the whole it was certainly tolerable. My final area of work was creating a research database for Kevin which focused on the top tech writers in Toronto: who they are, their primary area of expertise, how we can get in touch with them, etc. I enjoyed these tasks as I buckled down and focused for a few hours at a time. Overall, the work that I did was engaging, yet, as I will elaborate later in this report, it is not something I would like to do long term.

In terms of whether I would suggest a SASAH student participate in an internship, I would absolutely encourage it. There is more and more research being conducted on the link between an Arts and Humanities education and success in business. Internships open up a new world and pushes you out of your comfort zone, both important for growing intellectually and expanding personal horizons. Perhaps you will find a career path you never considered, or alternatively confirm your commitment to your current plan. You learn soft skills, like working with people

from different disciplines, as well as working independently without necessarily having firm direction or oversight. You may find yourself immersed in a company that you have absolutely no background in and yet, you can deliver. I understand that I had a fantastic time at my internship and that my next placement may not be as rewarding, but I am starting to realize that even if you have a less than ideal experience, there is always something to learn. I would suggest entering with an open mind and zero ego. You will encounter things you are familiar with and other things that are completely alien to you. Take a deep breath and know that you have what it takes to succeed. Coming to a company with the ability to think critically, read, synthesize your thoughts in an articulate manner, and tackle problems with a human-centred focus are all things that businesses are hungry for.

After you complete your internship, there will be skills that you can bring back to university; for me, my time management, communication, and understanding of the marketing perspective have all been bolstered thanks to my time at Connected. As SASAH is an interdisciplinary program, you are able and encouraged to use different kinds of knowledge to reach your goal. Even though we are in Arts and Humanities, bringing marketing and design thinking perspectives could make the difference between a good and a great project. Likewise, bringing a Humanities perspective to business can usher in a new type of enterprise, one that is both profitable and human-centred.



Immersing myself at Connected reaffirmed why I chose to study at SASAH—to use interdisciplinary and human-centred perspectives and apply them to real world situations. Having said this, I come back from this experience with a more nuanced outlook on where my path leads. I certainly enjoyed the environment at the company, and the work was for the most part quite engaging, however I just do not see myself working in a marketing capacity long term. Whatever I end up doing as my ‘main’ career, I know that I want to take on a more active role in helping people—be it locally or abroad. How will I do this? To be completely honest, I am not sure. I believe that through my Humanities education, I have encountered great thinkers who have inspired me to do more than simply working on branding a company in the most flattering light possible. This is certainly not to put anyone down who does this—if you have a passion for your work then all the more power to you—but I just do not see a corporation solely focused on profit as something in my future.

This is why I believe internships are so valuable. Before Connected, I was dead set on working at a large company as an executive of some sort, but now . . . I believe my passion has

changed. Wherever your path leads you, all that matters is that you continue to be true to yourself. Be open to any opportunity that comes your way and be confident in your ability to contribute. Speak your mind and keep your eyes and ears open for new learning opportunities. This is what I learned at Connected and it is what I will take with me going into Graduate School and beyond.

Experiential Learning Presentations

In preparing for my presentation, I tried to distill my experiences as accurately as I could. While reviewing my previous reflections, I was struck with just how unique Connected is. Be it micro-learns, clubs, monthly awards, ‘disconnect’ trips to the Toronto Island, or even the general layout of the office, Connected really knew what sort of environment they wanted to foster. This culture led my work life to be more integrated into my non-work life, leading to a much better work-life balance than I expected. I decided to create a slide dedicated to the company culture. I chose to focus on Connected’s four core values which I see as the foundation to their activities and environment. I also included images of some of the awards the company has won to further illustrate this successful culture (Canada’s Top Small & Medium Employers four years in a row). Throughout the rest of the presentation, I used photos to showcase the environment: I decided to include images of the team go-karting, having lunch, going to a tech conference, and a picture of us during the internal rebrand launch party. While my work was important and, on the whole, quite meaningful, I saw the company as the most unique aspect of my two internships—I wanted to illustrate that clearly in my presentation.

While I worked as an intern, the projects I was involved in were nonetheless noteworthy. Speaking about my first internship, I decided to mention my work on social media, search engine optimization, competitor research, and my ‘Retire the Brand’ contest. While I did other tasks and worked on other projects, these four activities certainly ate up most of my time. For my second

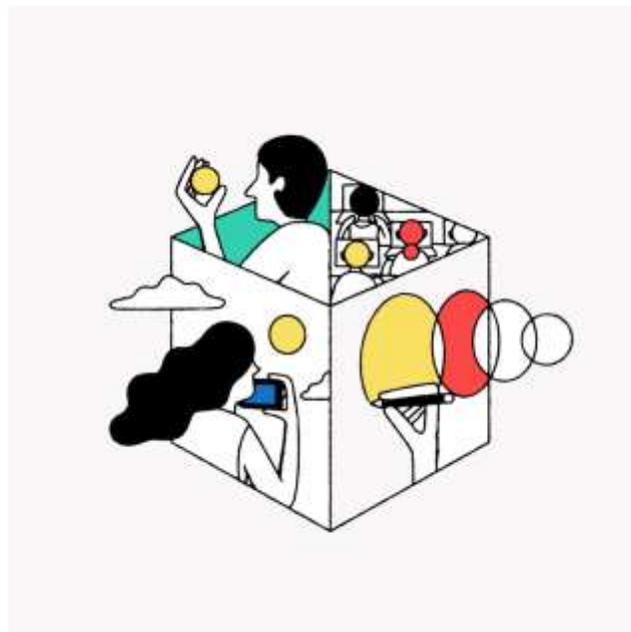
internship, I spoke about social media again as well as blog writing and creating a marketing opportunity database. In addition to the fact that these were my main tasks, I wanted to speak about research and writing to convey to the audience how an Arts and Humanities education can transfer to marketing in the tech space. At the core of marketing is the transfer of ideas, and one of—if not the—primary methods of doing so is language. Being able to articulate ideas in a persuasive manner is necessary to the success of any marketing plan. Both SASAH and MIT have without a doubt positioned me to excel in this respect.



The final slide of the presentation was my takeaway list: be comfortable being uncomfortable, active listening, and “it’s what you make of it.” Originally, I had a list of six takeaways; however, during practice runs, I found that these three stood out the most. I wanted to create a list that, while truthful to my experiences, would still be applicable in broader contexts. Internships are as much about taking your insights into new fields as they are the work you do for the company.

I noticed, while watching my classmates’ presentations, that there were many parallels between our experiences. Regardless of the industry—law, film, entertainment, education—it was

clear that there was an undercurrent of what we learn in SASAH present. Noticing these transferable skills in a variety of environments further proved to me that the insights I gleaned during my time at Connected were correct. Reading, thinking, synthesizing, and writing are what we hone in on the SASAH program, and indeed, they seem to be necessary in the emerging zeitgeist of business. I believe that ethical practices, social impact investing, and effective altruism are all forerunners to an age of socially aware business models. How socially aware these companies will actually be is certainly up in the air, but what is not is the value of communicating these ideas to the public.



During the presentations, I was also struck by everyone's mindset. Going into an internship can be daunting—perhaps you will feel behind and out of the loop or embarrass yourself by making simple mistakes. Paradoxically, the best thing you can do in that case is to gather your courage and jump into the fire. I believe that is precisely what I did at Connected and it is what I saw my peers do during their internships. Whether it be Sierra travelling to the US or Will working for the

London Film Festival, everyone presented a positive and strong mindset. They showed initiative through their projects and displayed an acute sense of self-awareness.

While my time at Connected was nothing short of a fantastic experience, I realize that you may not always work at a company that fosters a supportive and uplifting environment. All I can suggest is going into your internship with an open mind. Take everything as a learning experience and know that no matter how good or bad your placement is, you are only at the company for a finite amount of time; as a result, you should do your best to make the most of it. Working at Connected has given me skills that I was able to take back to Western such as time management and collaboration. It has also given me a new appreciation of the fact that I am, for eight months of the year, able to study the things that I love with people who share my passions. That being said, it is always important to continue to push yourself and, in my opinion, jumping into an internship is a great place to do just that. I am proud of my SASAH cohort.