

Intern Assistant to the CEO

Luxama Travel, LLC

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Introduction

I chose to do my internship with Luxama Travel, a bespoke boutique travel planning agency run by Sarah Thompson. In 2014, Sarah studied abroad in Rome, similar to me, and fell in love with Italy. Upon graduation, she entirely moved to Italy in 2015 to live and work there. Throughout her time living in Italy, she became a travel influencer and her account and videos took off leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It was then that she realized her passion for traveling and helping others plan trips. Because many people would reach out to her asking for suggestions or recommendations, she decided she should be getting paid for her work. This is where Luxama was born. Starting small, she helped clients plan their dream Italian vacations by curating unique, luxury itineraries that catered specifically to the clients' needs, wants and dreams. But her work didn't just stop there. With her services also came booking reservations, hotel accommodations, tours, transportation and anything else to create a true sense of luxury for the vacationers. She would also provide around-the-clock care to her clients, being available to change or add anything they might need while on the trip. This is part of why I wanted to work for her specifically. She really cared about her relationships with her clients, working tirelessly to provide not just the best experiences but the best experience for each client specifically. Sarah prides herself on having a connection with the clients, genuinely getting to know them, allowing her to get to know the clients and what would make the best vacation for them. She employs a philosophy that if she knows the client and their tastes and desires, she can make suggestions and curations perfectly geared towards the clients' tastes rather than relying on "cookie-cutter" itineraries. While she is based in the Amalfi Coast region, she has traveled extensively throughout Italy and is able to make fantastic suggestions and recommendations for nearly any

town or city in Italy. Her care, uniqueness and attention to detail set her apart from other travel planners.

1. Internship Research

1.1 Internship Requirements

I originally started at Clemson University, studying mechanical engineering. When that path no longer suited me, I switched to Language and International Business. I chose Italian as my language of focus because I love Italy, and having studied Spanish most of my life, I wanted a little change. Also, knowing I would be required to study in my country of choice, I had no issue with being required to spend a semester in Italy. I was also told that most students participated in an internship during their semester abroad due to the unique requirements for internships in my major. The internship I chose had to either be with an Italian company or with a company that worked extensively with Italian business, as I needed to have the opportunity to practice my language skills in a professional setting.

1.2 Career Aspirations

Part of the reason I changed my major from mechanical engineering was that none of the internships I looked into interested me. Therefore, something fundamental to me during the internship search was career relevance. Upon switching my major to something so open-ended as “business,” I could take classes that fulfilled requirements while allowing me to explore my interests. This came in the form of event coordination classes. I discovered my passion for planning and working out the details of events. Unfortunately, as this is a somewhat niche

aspiration, finding an internship that fulfilled Clemson's requirements while also helping me learn more about my industry of choice only became more challenging.

1.3 Possible Opportunities

Hope came when a friend of my mother's mentioned a company in my hometown that was the exclusive event planner for Ferrari of North America. This was my dream internship, let alone my dream job. Over the course of six months, I reached out countless times, speaking to Chief of Staff after Chief of Staff, leaving voicemails, personally delivering resumes, and finally scoring an interview. While I thought the interview went incredibly well and the woman seemed eager to have me work alongside her, as they are a small company and do not get very many internship queries, they informed me, via email, two months after the interview that while they are eager to start an internship program, they had nothing to offer me at that time. At this point, time was running out, and I still needed to find an internship.

1.4 Personal Experiences

This was when my mother discovered Sarah Thompson and Luxama Travel. We were taking a family vacation to Italy that summer, and my mother followed Sarah's travel profile on TikTok. While planning our trip, my mother became a client of Sarah's, having her plan the two weeks of our trip in the Amalfi Coast region. Our trip was terrific, and most of it was thanks to Sarah and her planning. This was when my mother suggested I reach out to Sarah to see if she would be interested in having me as an assistant while I was studying in Italy. I wrote to Sarah, explaining my situation, my struggle to find an internship, and inquiring about working for her during the fall semester. She was overjoyed at my request; having just had a baby, she was swamped with work and needed additional help. We had an online meeting to discuss some

more fine details about everything, and we both were incredibly excited to get started when I got to Italy in the fall.

2. Initial Expectations

2.1 Work – School Balance

To start discussing my initial expectations, I'd like to begin with how I was worried about balancing my class workload and my internship work as studying at a different university in a different country, which I was sure would come with unique challenges and adjustments. I also wanted to travel as much as possible, and the university accommodated this by only having classes Monday through Thursday, setting a standard of three-day weekends. So, adding an internship to this was a point of concern for me. However, Sarah, having studied abroad herself, understood this, and we discussed keeping my workload lighter and that I would be free to travel on the weekends. I was extremely grateful for her understanding and willingness to work around my schedule. Aside from this initial concern, I was incredibly excited to get working once I arrived in Italy.

2.2 Overall Excitement

My Italian language skills were an essential part of my work, as I would need to be able to communicate with restaurant staff to make reservations, hotel staff to inquire about availability and a variety of other businesspeople regarding travel details for our clients. This would allow me to strengthen my language ability, understanding and perfect my conversation skills. In addition to needing to communicate with business professionals, I was also excited to see other parts of Italy as Sarah discussed with me how she might need me to travel to different

locations to assist with more significant events or accompany her on site visits. Conducting site visits was another aspect of my internship that I was particularly excited about. I would be able to work more on my language skills and see the incredible, historic, and beautiful luxury accommodations we would recommend to our clients. Site visits are crucial in the industry as they allow us to get a feel for the accommodations, allowing us to recommend hotels specific to our clients' tastes. Some clients prefer modern accommodations, while others want to feel like they have been transported to historic Italy. It is essential to understand these needs and suggest accommodations accordingly. The final part of my initial expectations and the aspect I was most excited about was to engage with clients. I am an incredibly personable person and enjoy meeting new people. I am also a people pleaser and was looking forward to working with clients to curate and provide the perfect Italian experience for them. The event planning industry is nearly entirely comprised of working with the client and creating a relationship to provide the best possible experience, and as I did not have much experience in this aspect, I was very excited to learn from Sarah and work on my client relation ability.

3. Assigned Duties

During my first week of classes, I met with Sarah and her team to discuss my duties and the best way to complete them and work around my academic schedule. We established my duties to encompass six categories of Luxama's day-to-day needs.

3.1 Assistant to the CEO

The first of these categories was being an assistant to the CEO, Sarah. As her executive assistant, I would support her by managing administrative tasks, like organizing client meetings

and subsequent client onboarding discussions, as well as coordinating her daily schedule. This mainly consisted of helping her stay updated on Luxama's business by sending daily briefs about what needed to be done or started during that day. In addition to this, I also would play a key role in streamlining communication and workflows within Luxama.

3.2 Client Relations

The second of these categories was my work within the client relations aspect. This included regularly interfacing with clients, maintaining my accessibility so they could ask travel-related questions, and providing tailored assistance as needed. I also guided new clients through the Luxama onboarding process, ensuring a smooth and welcoming experience, setting up initial inquiry meetings, relaying pricing details and providing introductory explanations of the service we provide.

3.3 Professional Interfacing

The third category of my work was professional interfacing. My primary duty in this category was collaborating with various business professionals, such as local vendors, hotel staff, and tour operators, to enhance our clients' experiences. One of the most critical aspects of this duty was accompanying Sarah to conduct site visits and inspections to evaluate accommodations and services to ensure they met Luxama's luxury standards. My favorite of these site visits was when I accompanied Sarah on a visit to the Four Seasons in Florence. This was towards the end of my semester, so the hotel was beautifully decorated for Christmas. We met with the hotel guest relations manager, who gave us a tour of the most prestigious suites on the property, explaining the unique details of each room, the newly finished renovations and the decadent

history of the hotel, which was once an Italian palace. She explained in detail all the services the hotel provides and described a few of their recent events.

3.4 Client Trip Support

The next category of my duties was providing support during client trips. This meant that I would provide essential assistance during client trips, allowing me to demonstrate my adaptability on-site and my client-first mindset to address any needs promptly and efficiently. Another of my favorite experiences with Luxama was when Sarah called me down to Sorrento for a weekend to assist her with an event for a client. The client had rented an entire estate to host several couples for her 70th birthday, and due to the size of the event and all the accompanying components, Sarah needed an extra pair of hands. I could engage directly with the event staff and clients to provide a fantastic experience, including fireworks, a gelato cart, and a disco party.

3.5 Language Proficiency

One of the other categories regarding my duties was my language proficiency. I was required to leverage my language skills to communicate effectively with international businesses and partners to facilitate seamless and professional interactions. As I was working and operating in another country, it was imperative for me to be able to communicate effectively to provide the best possible experience for our clients.

3.6 Additional Contributions

Finally, the last category of my duties was more open-ended, allowing me to grow and learn in the professional world. This was described as my additional contributions to the team and Luxama. I was able to take initiative in problem-solving and how I provided my assistance

to Sarah. I tried my best to go above and beyond what was expected of me to support the Luxama Travel team best.

4. Takeaways

4.1 Client Interactions

The first main takeaway from this experience was how to interact with clients. My only other client interaction experience was when I worked in a boutique over the summer of the year prior. While that still involved interacting with clients, this experience allowed me to learn a lot about interacting with clients in a professional business relationship sense. I witnessed how Sarah built a relationship with her clients that allowed her to provide them with the best possible experiences, and I want to incorporate that desire to connect with clients into my own professional career.

4.2 Professional Relationships

Similarly, Sarah prided herself on not only building these relationships with her clients but also creating and maintaining relationships with her business partners and other business professionals that she worked with on a regular basis. As I worked with her, I saw firsthand how her relationship with the business professionals she worked with allowed her to get the best possible service for her clients. I also experienced this firsthand in a more personal way as when my family was on our trip, anytime Sarah had booked anything for us, those at the establishment only had good things to say about her and were excited that she had chosen them to include in our trip. It definitely added a personal element to our experience as clients.

4.3 Industry Experience

I also learned a lot about the luxury travel business and the luxury travel planning industry, as Luxama upholds its high standards in order to provide exceptional services and experiences for its clients. It is easy to show the clients on paper and with numbers what luxury might look like, but I was able to learn about what traveling in luxury truly means to Luxama, creating a high-end, bespoke, personal, and unforgettable experience. The last main thing I learned during my time with Luxama was how Italian business differs from what I was used to in the U.S. This likely being part of why Italy is so popular as a vacation destination, aside from its unmatched beauty, but its laid back, easy-going mindset. Italians are never in a rush, which is undoubtedly different from the U.S. business mindset. Adapting to this was a challenge, but I learned to take a breath and relax the feeling of needing to complete every task the instant it is assigned.

5. Learning Desires

5.1 Event Coordination

While I am incredibly grateful for the experience and insight into the travel planning industry and the overarching planning industry from this internship, I still hope to learn some things to prepare myself for working in my desired industry. I would like to work more in the event planning and coordination industry than in private vacation planning. However, from the things that I learned from this experience, I am able to determine that event planning is genuinely what I want to do. I was able to experience a type of planning that helped me understand the direction in which I would like to focus my career aspirations. I will also be able to apply

everything I learned from my internship experiences in a similar industry to help me in my industry of choice. While I do believe everything I learned from these experiences will be incredibly helpful in my career moving forward, I still hope to gain more experience in planning events specifically.

5.2 Event Professionals

In addition, I hope to gain more experience working with business professionals in the events industry. I gained experience working with business professionals as they pertain to luxury vacations, but when it came to event planning, I did not gain the experience in coordinating such event-related aspects as I had hoped. This is, again, not to disregard my experiences with Luxama Travel in any way, and I am incredibly grateful for the essential industry experience I gained during my internship. It is unfortunate that the short time I was given to find an internship, the strict requirements, and the general lack of resources prevented me from finding an internship in my specific desired career path. Due to this, I found an internship in what I was able to determine as the next best industry, with travel planning being similar to event planning, allowing me to gain adjacent experience while fulfilling my requirements.

6. Final Reflection

To conclude this report, I would like to say that I am incredibly grateful for the experiences that I have gained from this internship. I am thankful to Sarah and the Luxama Travel team for allowing me to learn under them and for their flexibility and understanding regarding my study abroad experiences and academics. They allowed me to gain invaluable

insights into an industry very similar to the one I want to pursue in my career while giving me the space to fully experience studying abroad, traveling and the unique academics that the semester held for me. While this internship was ultimately in a different industry than the one I am hoping to pursue upon graduation, I feel that it prepared me for my desired industry of Event Coordination in a unique way, emphasizing creating lasting client relationships and unique, memorable experiences over anything else. This insight, I believe, will set me apart from other candidates in the field in the job search as well as set me apart from others in the industry. I was able to witness firsthand the significance of creating and maintaining these relationships and how they allow us, as planners, to create the best possible experience for the client.