

Name: Dominic Chomko

Home institution: University of Waterloo

International CO-OP destination (city, country): Warsaw, Poland

Travel dates: September 2010

Work term (1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.): 3rd and 4th

1. Why were you interested in an international work term?

I was on an international academic exchange (in Warsaw, Poland) and I figured an international work term in the country would be a great way to broaden my cultural experience and gain a different perspective than what I had got from studying.

2. How did you fund the travel costs and other expenses for the term?

I covered the travel costs and other expenses, such as travel/health insurance and visa fees, from my personal savings. After I started work, the wages were enough to cover living expenses.

3. Can you tell me what steps you took to secure your CO-OP position? Was it a difficult process? What advice do you have for other students?

I had handed out my resumé to a few companies during the job fair at the school I was studying at on exchange. Many of the companies at the time, however, were looking for graduates rather than interns. One of my professors suggested I apply to a specific company and so I looked them up. They didn't have any specific positions open at the time, but they had hired many students for "practicals" before. The "practicals" in Poland are much different from a typical work term, lasting only a few weeks.

I sent them my resumé and then called to follow up a few weeks later. A short while later, they called to set up an interview.

I did not find it particularly hard to secure my job. I would recommend that other students make the effort. It's possible to secure a job even if you are not in the same country as the firm. A month after I started, another intern was hired who had applied from Portugal, and had had his interview over the phone.

4. When conducting your job search did you find that many of the jobs available were in specific sectors (such as corporate, non-profit, government, etc.)? Where, or how, would you suggest other students focus their search?

Most of the jobs were in the corporate sector. Most of the international work opportunities are with larger or multi-national corporations. These are also the companies most likely to offer work in English. The greatest resource I found was

the companies' websites—they often contain information about opportunities for students.

- 5. Tell me about the cost of living in (city or country). How did your expenses compare with the salary you were earning? Were you able to save any money? Where did you find savings or discounts to reduce your expenses?**

The cost of living in Warsaw, Poland is much higher than in the rest of the country, but much lower than in Canada. However, compared to student wages, it is much more difficult. My expenses were the equivalent of my wages, for the most part. I edited English reports on the side several times to earn a little extra money.

There are many discounts available to students in Poland, and many (but not all) are available to foreign students too. Even if you are foreign, there may still be discounts available, such as on trains, if you are under 26 years of age. This really helps save money while travelling and seeing the country.

I bicycled to work to save even more money, rather than take public transit, which was impeccable compared to the typical North American public transit system. It's very easy to get around Warsaw by bicycle as there are many bike paths. I was nonetheless shocked by the high level of bicycle infrastructure in other European countries, especially Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands.

- 6. How did you find accommodations and how much rent should students expect to pay in (city or country)?**

I found the room I rented through online classified ads. I had also tried a real estate service, but with little luck. They did not have much selection in the area I was looking, as the company I was working for was located on the outskirts of the city.

The company you work for may also be able to help you find accommodation. There was an announcement board at my work, with at least a few ads posted all the time.

One problem I had was that around one-third of the landlords did not want to rent to a foreigner, despite the fact that I spoke Polish reasonably well after my exchange year.

In the central areas of the city, you can expect to pay 600-800 PLN (CAD \$220-300) for a room and at least 1500 PLN (~CAD \$600) for an apartment. I paid 500 PLN (~CAD \$180) a month for the room I was staying in, all expenses included. However, I was living on the very outskirts of Warsaw. It took 30-45 minutes to get downtown by public transit.

- 7. What, if any, cultural barriers did you have to overcome?**

After having already been in Poland on exchange for almost an entire year, I was fairly well prepared. The one thing I was unsure about before starting work was the formalities of conversation. The Polish language is very formal when speaking with people you don't know well—you need to use the equivalent of Sir and Ma'am. My workplace environment turned out to be very informal though.

8. Did you find it difficult to meet new people? What steps did you take to integrate yourself into your new surroundings and make yourself more comfortable in your new setting?

People are generally quite friendly and I had no difficulty fitting in with my co-workers and roommates. My work also had meetings and organized events for the international employees.

9. Overall, what advice would you give CO-OP students who are seeking international opportunities?

You have to be ready for new and very different experiences, but it is certainly worth it.

10. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience?

N/A