



My Internship with africon GmbH

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1. Who am I?

Let me first introduce myself: My name is Erik Deitersen, I am a Visiting Associate/intern with africon GmbH and I am doing this internship as part of my bachelor programme in business administration. My internship is still ongoing, but I already gained some experiences and finished up one major project. In case you are interested in an internship with africon as well, this report should give you insights into the work with africon.

2. How I found my way to africon



How it all started – Ghana (Accra Jamestown)

I first came in touch with Africa as a (bachelor) student when I was working at a cooperation project of my university, Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University of Applied Sciences, with the University of Cape Coast (UCC), Ghana. By chance I had gotten a job as a student assistant at the professorship of International Management, where my professor had introduced me to the “Teaching for Development” Project. This project (among other purposes) aimed at recognizing Africa or in this case particularly Ghana as a place of vast business opportunities instead of a place of starvation, catastrophes and diseases.

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At the beginning, this idea was rather something far away from me, but I got an idea about the African growth story, with e.g. Ghana showing a GDP growth of 15% around that time (2011). It was also in the context

of this project that I first heard of africon, since the company has been a partner to the project almost from the day it had started.

To make a long story short: As part of my participation in this cooperation project a friend and me helped to host some members of two delegations from UCC in Germany, which was when we got fascinated by the friendliness, helpfulness and general culture of Ghanaians. As a result, this friend and I ended up doing our semester abroad in Cape Coast, Ghana - a decision of which I can say none of us has ever regretted.

During our stay in Ghana we also worked on a market research project. It was our task to identify a potentially promising field of business for German companies to invest in Ghana. After we got back to Germany we used these results to approach companies and tried to convince them to enter the Ghanaian market. Even if we did not manage to actually find interested companies, I was/am still of the opinion that I had learned a lot and that the general idea behind the project was a very good one.

After 8 months in Ghana, some traveling through other West African countries and finishing up my project I was now "Africa infected" (not the malaria type of infected) and had to look for an internship opportunity for my final "practical" semester. I still had africon in the back of my head and I have also been convinced that the business model of africon is incredibly interesting for me. So I applied, got an invitation for a job interview and finally got accepted for an internship.

3. Working as a Visiting Associate

One thing I had been worried about was the fact that I have to work in home office most of the time (all in all around $\frac{3}{4}$ of the whole time). However, my internship started with a "general meeting" of all German africon employees (at this time 4, the others being based in Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana). I had little of an idea what was awaiting me, but it was nice to start the internship like that. After a couple of days in Willich, where our head office is located, and a first client meeting I have to admit I was a bit overwhelmed by lots of input and new learnings. I helped to work on a project for a client from the packaging industry right away and was also given my "own" project about market opportunities in the Nigerian automotive sector for another client of ours. All in all I received heaps of tasks, including this project and some general things, for which I needed some days to organize myself and get

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an understanding of what I was actually supposed to do. Even if the beginning was challenging it never got boring and in fact the more I understood of my task, the more it got interesting.

Working on my project - which had the highest priority compared to my other To Dos - started with a briefing by my boss Marc Zander, some own reading and my first contact to our colleagues in Nigeria. My task was to do online research, develop the structure of the project, prepare slides and cooperate with our Nigeria office to obtain “local input” and information “on the ground”. Of course I also got some advice and guidance from Marc. During the “normal” home office time we (Marc and me) normally Skyped almost every day to discuss ideas, problems and keep each other up to date. During these Skype calls I also often received smaller but mostly also interesting tasks, from preparing project proposals for clients to giving feedback about different things. Additionally I was in regular exchange with our Nigerian colleagues, via Skype, phone and email.

So as we were working on the project the “problem” occurred to us that due to Marc’s schedule it was about to become difficult to meet in Willich together (as mentioned above those meetings make up around $\frac{1}{4}$ of my working time), since it was initially planned for Marc to be outside the country for a couple of weeks. The solution: Instead of Marc coming to Germany, why not get me to Lagos? As you can probably imagine I somehow preferred this location over Willich, plus once I would be there I would also be able to gain information for my project myself to get a further understanding.

4. My trip to Lagos



Lagos: A bridge to Victoria Island

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Since I had been to Nigeria and Lagos before I did not have to claim anybody else's time too much to organize my trip. I was given a sufficient budget, applied for a Visa, booked a flight, looked for accommodation and arranged my schedule in a way that I was able to meet with Marc. Around 3 weeks later I sat in a plane to Lagos.

I arrived at a Saturday so after recovering from an exhausting journey I made my way from the north of this huge city, where the airport is located, to "the islands" in the south of the city. Having dropped my luggage at a hotel I went to meet Marc at his hotel, where we spent most of the day working and talking in the lobby. In the evening I also got to know the guy I had talked to on Skype many times already: Emmanuel, the head of our Nigeria office, who also made a very good first impression. One day later our other Nigerian colleagues followed.

During the following week we met with some Nigerian companies, worked on our project(s) and got to know each other a bit. Until Marc left on Wednesday we spent most of the time together (Nigerians & Germans), afterwards I continued to work with our Nigerian colleagues and also arranged some exchanges with more Nigerian companies on my own.

During the whole time I got to know a side of Lagos which had been new for me until then: apart from the chaotic, vibrant and exciting life I had seen as a "tourist" I now also got a small insight into the business life of Lagos. Even if it was just for a couple of days I was fascinated by what I saw: From the drive to do any kind of business and discussing business ideas at any occasion, to talking to some Nigerian (and Indian) managers and the general aspirational mind-set.

I had gotten some insights into Ghanaian business life e.g. in Accra before, but the atmosphere in Lagos was even more of how I imagine it to be in an "emerging market". Everywhere a chaotic crowd is making its way through life trying to succeed and get through, from traffic to the small street traders to (larger) entrepreneurs.

5. Our regular meetings in Willich

Since we unfortunately cannot always meet in places like Lagos, our normal regular meetings take place at our Head Office in Willich. During these meetings, we normally all gather together, including colleagues like Sonja and Julius who mostly form the second part of the africon team, working on parallel projects for other clients (which does not mean that we never interact outside these meetings e.g. on Skype or on different occasions).

At these meetings we all update each other, work together or do workshops. It has always been a good working environment with nice colleagues, interesting conversations and a friendly atmosphere. In the context of some of those meetings we also visited trade fairs, (such as e.g. Medica) conferences and clients. In fact these visits also got and get us far outside Willich, since our clients are spread all over Germany. Even if some of those journeys are quite exhausting spending lots of time on the road, I already learned a lot and got interesting insights, this time into the German business world. I am learning a lot about how to interact with a client, how to analyse a situation and attitudes etc.

Especially to those who are also concerned about “boring home office” I can say that I am quite sure that I think you hardly travel as much during an internship as when you are with africon.

6. Key learnings so far

To start with the cliché: Even if africon is a “different” consulting company, I am definitely getting a lot of experience in preparing PowerPoint presentations. I am quite sure that such a soft skill will be useful in any job you aim at as a business student like me. This of course goes further than the pure use of PowerPoint features: It includes creating a good structure of a presentation, thinking of how to bring a lot of content in a form which will make you understand it quickly without reading 10 pages of documents, and many other things.

Another soft skill I have been learning is how to professionally interact with potential clients or business people in general, especially on a higher level. It is normal to be in contact with your colleagues and your boss, who might even be a higher level manager, at any internship at a bigger company; however it is something very different to attend (I mostly join Marc) meetings with high level managers of other companies on a more or less regular basis. In the context of developing projects with those managers it is very interesting to see how they see the global business world today. When talking about an Africa strategy for a company we mostly talk to those who are also in charge for other emerging markets, which often provided me with interesting insights.

Talking about Africa strategies I am also learning how to develop and structure such a market entry strategy, how to create or estimate market sizes, find partners or deal with many other topics you need to be aware of when a company enters a new emerging market.

One of the main learnings from the internship is of course a lot of knowledge about many African markets. As I help to advise companies on their market entries to Africa I learn and

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read a lot about the countries and sectors. Even if I cannot save all the new information in my brain immediately I still got and get more of an idea about the economically most interesting countries. I knew West Africa a bit before but I e.g. had no idea about the East African power houses, not even to mention that there might an interesting market for PVC pipes in Nigeria, or having an idea of market sizes of different sectors. I actually began to see that there is a huge B2B market (I do not know whether this is naïve, but I never thought of the PVC pipe market in emerging countries before, even if it makes sense that there is a huge need for those as e.g. the construction sector booms), which I never really did before.

Another point that has to be mentioned here are the general learnings about “work in general”:

During the internship I am learning a lot about how to work independently and find solutions to problems that seem too complex at the first sight. While working in home office on “my own” project (which I meanwhile mostly completed) I often did not want to, could not or simply felt challenged not to ask e.g. Marc for advice about everything. This does not mean there is nobody I can ask or not even that I do not ask at all, that is definitely not the case. But when I cannot just ask “across the table” I often tend to think a second and third time before asking. Working independently, therefore, also includes learning to better organize myself and delegating tasks or questions to e.g. our Nigerian office or also other interns here in Germany.

7. Conclusion

To make it short: If you are interested in Africa I can totally recommend an internship with africon. We are a rather small company, which implies some challenges or differences towards larger companies, e.g. some of our resources are more scarce, you sometimes need to find your own solutions or generally need to do things on your own. Working hours might also fluctuate quite a bit. However it also implies a lot of advantages: You can take more influence on all kinds of decisions, communication is faster, you are more flexible, get to know your colleagues better etc.

Additionally you can get a broad insight into the African economy, learn about habits, what to watch out for and many other things. The scope of your tasks will vary a lot; it is not just about one tiny process in a huge chain as it can be in a larger company. You also have more freedom to influence your own work, as you can discuss all kinds of potential To Dos with your boss: for me it was Lagos, or decisions on where to go or how to do what.

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A further point is that you can gain contact and insights into various different sectors, which on the one hand provides you with a good general understanding, but also opportunities for your further life: The “skill gap” does not just exist in Africa, but also in Germany for people who have an idea about business in Africa. So whether you later want to grow with this company or with another company: an internship with africon can help you for both.