



Job Focus: Working Student

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How many weeks a year do you work?

As a working student, you are pretty much at the bottom of the food chain when it comes to things like days off and breaks. Basically the whole idea is to exchange very cheap or free labour for knowledge, experience and opportunities. So to make the most of it, a barn's working student is probably going to work as much as humanly possible. Luckily, a person is generally only a working student for a limited period of time because working all day, everyday, and for free isn't exactly a popular or sound career plan. So you might be a working student for only a summer or a year, but during that time it's unlikely you would be looking at very much or any vacation time.

What is the pay range?

Being a working student is an unpaid position, but the specifics of each individual arrangement can vary greatly. For example, when I was a working student, I wasn't paid at all but my horse got to come on the road with us, and all his shipping and living expenses were covered. I received unlimited training, a place to live, and a farm vehicle to use. When you work out how much all those services cost, in theory, I was making far more than the average groom would; however, with no income coming in, I still had to braid as much as I could at night in order to pay entry fees each week and if it was a really good week I could, you know, eat. At other farms, a working student might get a weekly allowance or something like that so that so they don't starve to death, or even be fed a couple of meals a day. Basically, when working out your arrangement, you would have to decide what you are seeking to exchange your time and effort for – how many horses you get to ride, lessons, a great recommendation, or to be given an opportunity to learn certain skills such as barn management.

What background is needed to be a working student?

Depending on who you hope to be a working student for, the level of experience you require can vary. I was a working student immediately following a junior career in the hunters and equitation divisions and had just bought my first jumper. I wanted an opportunity to train and show with minimized expenses. When applying, I had to send a video of my riding and a list of recent results to prove I had a background in riding and preparing show horses, which I did because I never had a groom, but I technically had zero experience as an actual show groom. Employers are going to assume you have a certain level of inexperience in the area you are going to be working because you wouldn't be offering to work for free if you already knew everything. However, working students also have to be bringing something to the table to exchange, so proficiency around the barn doing chores or flatting horses, or even a familiarity with the show circuit would all be assets making you a valuable person to take on and invest in with time.

What is the process to get a working student position?

Research. Research who is offering working student programs, who you really want to learn from and even find out what programs other successful people in the horse industry started out as working students for. Someone said to me once that it would always be more rewarding to scrub buckets for someone I respected and could learn from, than riding horses for a lesser professional, and I've tried to remember and apply that in as many situations as I can. It's not often that inexperience will matter if you have enthusiasm and a



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willingness to learn and work hard, so I think that when applying for working student positions you aim for the absolute best programs and riders that you can. You might have to just approach trainers and explain that you are willing to work really hard in any capacity or role that would be useful to them, in exchange for whatever you are hoping to get out of the experience. I would suggest being extremely specific in this stage of the process because obviously, when dealing with unpaid labour it's easy to be taken advantage of if you don't gauge how sincere the potential employer seems or if you don't list your requirements.

What are the positives and negatives?

Even though I look back on my experience as a working student as one of my favourite summers, I also have probably never worked so hard in my entire life. Having done lots of showing and traveling with horses but never actually grooming for a busy show and sales barn with a Grand Prix rider, it was definitely a culture shock. I distinctly remember very early on being dropped off alone at the Bromont horse show with an equipment trailer packed full of tack trunks stacked three-high and set up equipment, and nothing but a dolly and one bottle of water; I was thinking that this might be how I die. As a working student you will often find that you work longer and harder than the other employees because so much of the experience is proving you want to be there and are a worthy recipient of someone's time and knowledge. You might feel slightly taken advantage of from time to time, and you will definitely feel like it's unfair on the days you end up mucking 15 of the 20 stalls or end up spending an entire day scrubbing floors, but on the days you have a really great lesson or get to groom the good horse, or learn how to do something new it will seem completely worthwhile. The only real negative is not making any money, but if you can financially handle having no income for a period of time I don't think you will particularly regret that part either. The entire experience will probably occur in varying levels of crippling exhaustion, but in a fulfilling way that makes you feel like you're accomplishing something important. Being a working student may not be for the faint of heart, but neither is the horse industry in general, so for many, their time spent as a working student served as an introduction to long and successful careers in horses.