

Designing an Internship Program

If you hear the word “intern” and think of a young person who can fetch the coffee and make copies, you’re not alone. But internships have evolved into more valuable roles, and well-designed internship programs can become an important part of your recruiting strategy and corporate image.

The Internship Opportunity

Internships are opportunities for students, typically undergraduate or graduate, and recent graduates to learn from on-the-job training and to experience work in their chosen field. What distinguishes an internship from a part-time job is that an internship’s purpose is to provide an educational experience for the intern, whereas a part-time job does not promise any educational value beyond necessary job training.

An intern can work full time or part time, and the duration of the internship can last several weeks, a semester, a summer or a whole year. Internships can be paid or unpaid positions, but special considerations must be made in order to comply with legal regulations if you offer an unpaid internship. This article focuses primarily on paid internships.

Benefits for the Employer

Establishing an internship program can yield several advantages for your company. Attracting young talent through a solid internship program can draw in new ideas and knowledge of the latest studies and developments in your industry, such as the most recent social

media trends. The energy and enthusiasm brought by interns can be refreshing to work with, and interns who are inquisitive and intelligent can challenge the status quo and help you view your work processes from a fresh perspective.

A competitive internship program that provides value to your interns can also contribute to a positive corporate reputation. Satisfied interns will share a positive view of your company with others. This word-of-mouth advertising can help you attract new interns and employees. You will be seen as a

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desirable company to work for, as well as an organization that cares about the community by teaching the young professionals in your industry.

Possibly one of the strongest advantages of a good internship program is the ability to attract, screen and test potential full-time employees. Working with interns serves as an efficient way to consider them for future employment. If you decide to hire an intern as a regular employee, not only will you have someone who has proven him- or herself to you, but you will be able to reduce training time and expenses because the intern will already

be familiar with the company and at least partially trained for the full-time position.

Benefits for the Intern

Internships provide value to the interns in several ways. Primarily, the experience serves as a way to learn practical, on-the-job skills and observe how an organization works. The intern can apply classroom knowledge to action in the professional world.

Internships can also benefit students because it gives them an open door into their desired career field. The interns have an opportunity to prove themselves

to you and earn either a full-time position with your company or a recommendation from you for when they are looking for jobs elsewhere.

Planning an Internship Position

A good internship program does not just happen. Carefully consider what your company wants to gain from the process, what the intern should learn from the internship and how you will make the program a successful one. Before beginning an internship program, you will need to assess your resources and make various decisions. Following are a few of the things you should consider when

designing and implementing an internship program.

Goals and Objectives

As the foundation of the internship program, you will need to establish goals for both you and the intern. You must decide whether you want to use the internship program as a channel for choosing new full-time employees, or whether you're interested in simply providing a learning environment for young professionals. Knowing what your company's goals are will guide the internship planning process.

Goals for the intern should include concise, measurable learning objectives as well as a list of projects and tasks that you want him or her to accomplish. Interns should not merely be given "gofer" assignments, but rather tasks that have value to both you and the intern. Set reasonable deadlines for each item and be prepared with extra work in case the intern completes tasks more quickly than anticipated.

Feedback

A key component in meeting goals and striving for quality learning and productivity is evaluating the intern's work and offering constructive feedback. Weekly meetings, open communication throughout the workday and an exit interview at the end of the internship will help the student learn from the experience. In the exit interview, you can also solicit feedback from the intern for how you can improve the internship program for the next time you hire an intern.

Supervision

Decide who will be responsible for supervising the intern. This supervisor will coordinate schedules and training, be available for questions and provide constructive comments on the intern's work. The first meeting between the supervisor and intern should cover information such as expectations, goals and workplace policies. After that, weekly meetings are usually advisable to address questions and concerns and provide timely feedback.

Training

Assess the resources you have for training your intern. Depending on the size of your internship program and your company, you may find a combination of group sessions, individual mentoring, training manuals and videos to be helpful training tools. Plan training that will contribute to the actual work the intern will be performing as well as information that provides insight into your field of work.

Credits and Compensation

Internships can be for college credit or not. If the internship is for credit, you may be responsible for filling out paperwork to meet the student's course requirements. You will need to work with the student and his or her school to determine exact guidelines. Other students may not need or want to earn credit for their internships. They may be looking for real-world job experience without having to pay tuition for the internship credit.

The majority of internships are now paid positions. Unpaid internships come with more legal concerns, including the need to meet specific criteria set by the Department of Labor. If you choose to offer an unpaid internship, consult with legal counsel to make sure you are in compliance with these regulations.

Hiring an Intern

You should start the hiring process for an intern approximately two to three months prior to the anticipated start date of the internship. This gives you ample time to collect applications and conduct interviews before making hiring decisions.

Before students can apply, you will need to create an internship summary in order to attract candidates. This posting should include information such as the following:

- A description of your organization
- The type of tasks that will be assigned
- The preferred and required candidate skills
- What training will be provided
- The start and end dates and number of required hours per day or week
- Whether the internship will be paid

- How to apply
- General information about transportation and housing facilities, if applicable.

Make sure you follow typical hiring practices, such as adhering to equal employment opportunity laws. Once hired, all interns should receive your regular employee manual with safety procedures and any other policies.

Welcoming the Intern

The process for welcoming an intern to your organization should be similar to your onboarding process for any other employee. Depending on your worksite and the intern's job duties, consider needs such as designating a workspace, tools and materials for the intern, preparing an access or identification badge and creating any passwords or login information as applicable.

On the first day, give the intern a tour of the office and introduce him or her to other staff members. Throughout the internship, depending on the size of your internship program, you can either include the interns in regular team meetings or consider hosting a social or educational event specifically for your interns.

Other Internship Considerations

The number of interns you hire will depend on the size of your organization, your needs and the resources you have available in order to provide a good experience for your interns.

If an intern is not working out well, most programs follow at-will employment guidelines (check with legal counsel for specific advice). However, internships last a limited time, so firing an intern is a rare event, usually reserved for when an intern commits a truly egregious act, such as lying, stealing or showing up drunk.

Implementing an internship program can be a rewarding experience for your company as well as for those who work for you. If you do choose to start an internship program, careful planning will prepare you for success.