

Designing an Effective Internship Program

If you already have or are considering implementing an internship program with your organization, you are not alone. In a recent employer survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), 82.5% said they offer internship and/or co-op programs. [Of their total 2011-12 expected new college hires, more than 40 percent will come from employers' own internship and co-op programs.] In today's tight labor market, offering such programs can be a significant way to lure new talent. In addition, student interns can meet short-term needs for extra assistance and bring enthusiasm and current industry knowledge.

Simply **deciding** to utilize interns in your organization, however, is only the first step. It is important that organizations take the time to carefully research and plan an effective internship program. We have highlighted several key elements that are crucial to a successful internship program.

Long-Range Planning

Thinking about your internship needs in advance is necessary for a successful internship program. Things to consider include workload and the availability of intern projects, staff support, office space and financial resources. In most cases, you should post internships at least seven to ten weeks prior to your expected start date. This will allow sufficient time to screen and select appropriate candidates. Many companies with established internship programs utilize interns throughout the academic year. You will want to do some research to determine how often your organization can support interns and set appropriate deadlines.

Effective Supervision

Due to the training nature of an internship, it is imperative that interns are provided with sufficient supervision. Considerable time investment will be needed, especially on the front-end, to plan for and implement necessary training. It is also recommended that the supervisor plan ongoing weekly meetings to stay up-to-date with the intern's progress. Use care in identifying a seasoned staff member who "buys in" to the importance of utilizing interns. The person should realize that the purpose of an internship is two-fold. Interns will provide some useful assistance for the organization while also gaining on-the-job training that will assist them with their future career search.

Meaningful Assignments

Gone are the days of using interns as simple "go-fers". Students are seeking opportunities that will stimulate them and provide real experience. A good internship program will ensure the assignment of challenging projects and tasks. Effective assignments are coupled with adequate supervision so as to provide an information resource and to ensure interns are keeping pace. Be sure to have some additional projects available in case an intern successfully completes a project ahead of schedule. Whenever possible, try to include the intern in organization events such as

staff meetings and allow opportunities for networking and informational interviewing with key personnel.

Compensation/Legal Compliance*

A common question from employers is how to compensate interns. If an intern meets the criteria for a learner/trainee, then the employer is not required to pay minimum wage. The criteria for a "learner/trainee" state that the training must be comparable to that given at a vocational school; the training must benefit the student; the student would not replace regular employees; the employer does not immediately benefit from the student's activities; there is not a promise of a job following the training; and that both employer and student understand that no wages will be given for the training period. Contact your legal counsel or your Human Resources department for more detailed information.

In addition, employers may not be required to pay minimum wage if the student is receiving course credit for their work. In an article by Patterson (1997), she highlights information provided by the NACE general counsel on academic credit. In summary, credit must be obtained; the employer must receive formal documentation from the intern's college or university stating the educational relevance of the internship; learning objectives must be clearly stated; no more than 50% of the intern's work should be the same as other employees; and the intern must be supervised by a staff member. Each college or university will also have their own guidelines for internships taken for course credit. Keep in mind that not all students want to receive academic credit for an internship. Many colleges and universities do not require credit for internship experience. You may obtain more detailed information from your legal counsel or your Human Resources department.

If you opt for a paid internship, you will find that intern wages vary. It is a good idea to research common wage ranges within your industry and geographic location. You may consider calling a career services office in your area, as many collect this information.

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Effective Hiring*

Equal Employment Opportunity laws apply to the hiring of student interns. You will want to check with your state to see if workers' compensation laws cover interns. Just as you would a regular employee, it is important to provide interns with information on your safety and harassment policies, as employers may be held liable for intern safety and harassment issues. In general, student interns fall into an "at will" employment status and may be terminated for poor conduct.

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Appropriate Documentation

Documentation is very important for effective learning to take place. It is strongly advisable that an employer and intern create mutually agreed upon learning objectives. Well documented learning objectives provide clear direction and targeted goals for the intern. This ensures both parties envision the same experience and reduces the possibility of misunderstanding and disappointment. Effective learning objectives are concise and measurable.

An example of a measurable learning objective:

The intern will produce a marketing plan for XYZ product line.

An example of an immeasurable learning objective:

The intern will receive an understanding of our marketing concepts.

It is a good idea to also document other aspects of your internship program. This may include your internship program mission, internship job descriptions, eligibility and application requirements, compensation structures, supervisory roles, and supervisor/intern evaluations.

In most instances, the intern's school will require the above information if the intern is receiving college credit for the experience. Additional forms beyond those stated above and/or agreements may be necessary for college credit depending on the school's requirements.

Ensure Interns Feel Welcome

Just as you would a new full-time employee, it is very important that interns be provided with a warm introduction to your organization. Not only are interns new to your organization, in many cases, they are new to the professional world of work. Before interns arrive, be sure to provide them with any necessary housing, transportation, parking and/or dress code information. Once interns start, they should review necessary policies (i.e., work hours, missing work, harassment, safety, etc.). Acquaint them to their work space and environment by introducing them to co-workers. Interns should become familiar with your organization's communication process and chain of accountability. The intern should also know the extent of their job authority and decision-making capabilities. You may even want to plan lunch activities with various staff members for the first week. Many organizations plan intern group outings and special events to recognize interns' accomplishments.

Evaluation

An internship can only be a true learning experience if constructive feedback is provided. An effective evaluation will focus on the interns' learning objectives that were identified at the start of the internship. Supervisors should take time to evaluate both a student's positive

accomplishments and weaknesses. If an intern was unable to meet their learning objectives, suggestions for improvement should be given.

In conclusion, utilizing interns in your organization can result in many benefits. It is important to do some careful planning before creating your internship program. You can be sure to continue recruiting from your pool of internship candidates and foster positive public relations by implementing an effective, thorough internship program.

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