

Developing an Effective Internship Program

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Introduction

What is an internship?

An internship is a supervised work experience in which a student has set goals of what they hope to learn and accomplish during their internship experience. It usually involves the student interacting with a supervisor or mentor as well as their academic advisor to track the progress of the internship. Internships typically:

- Last between a few months to a year, but the normal duration is from 3 to 6 months (often coinciding with the academic semester)
- May be part time or full time
- May be paid or non-paid
- May be done for academic credit, and thus are monitored to ensure the student will receive credit, or they may be done to gain experience only
- A structured set of goals or potential projects to work on are developed prior to the start of the internship
- An effort is made to be flexible with the students work hours and class schedule
- Promote academic, personal, and career development

Adapted from materials published by the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE)

How do employers benefit from internships?

- A readily available year round source of qualified students
- Increases public awareness of your company
- Competitive advantage in recruiting the best workers
- Lower training time, reduce recruiting costs and lower turnover rates
- Build a reputation that will pay off with students, colleges and the community
- Benefiting from the input of talented, enthusiastic and innovative people

Implementing a Formalized Internship Program

Design an internship program to tailor to the needs of your company.

1. Set Goals

- Identify what your organization hopes to gain from developing an internship program
- Are you a non-profit company that cannot afford to pay, but has lots of experience to offer students?
- Are you a small, local organization that needs additional help on specific projects?
- Are you interested in creating a new pool of potential employees?

Make sure that management participates in this process. Create goals that can be agreed upon by everyone involved in the internship program. Management must support the internship program in order for it to be highly successful.

2. Plan Out the Specifics

- Create a job description for each separate internship position you want to fill.
- Do you have specific projects you want an intern to work on?
- Do you need an intern for general office support functions?
- Will you pay the intern? If so, how much?
- Where will you have the intern located? Do you have an appropriate workspace for them? Will they need help with parking or living arrangements?
- What specific major/academic background do specific internship positions require?
- Is previous experience required? If so, how much and in what areas?
- Who will be the contact person for your organization?
- Who will be the intern's primary supervisor? Will it be a mentor, manager, or experienced employee in that department?
- Do you want to provide additional service to interns such as training, meetings with executives, social events, etc.?

Things to think about include:

Will you pay the intern? Wages vary widely from field to field; be sure yours are competitive.

Where will you put the intern? Do you have adequate workspace for them? Will you help make parking arrangements, living arrangements, etc.?

What sort of academic background and experience do you want in an intern? Decide on standards for quality beforehand — it'll help you narrow down the choices and find the best candidates.

Who will have the primary responsibility for the intern? Will that person be a mentor or merely a supervisor?

What will the intern be doing? Be as specific as possible. Interns, like others in the process of learning, need structure so they don't become lost, confused or bored.

Do you want to plan a program beyond the work you give your interns?

Will there be special training programs, performance reviews, lunches with executives, social events? Keep in mind that your interns are walking advertisements for your company. If they have a good experience working for you, they're likely to tell their friends — word gets around. A bad internship, by contrast, can only hurt your chances of attracting good students. These are just some of the questions to consider. Your organization's approach will depend on your specific resources and needs.

A very important part of your plan should be the assignment of a mentor or supervisor — that is, someone from the intern's department who will be in charge of the intern. This person doesn't have to be a teacher per se, but should be selected because he or she likes to teach or train and has the resources to do it. If the person you select has never mentored an intern before, give him or her some basic training in mentoring.

3. Recruit an Intern

Start looking early, this is the best advice we can give you. The sooner you give us your internship opportunities, the sooner we can try to help you fill them. In addition, the sooner you start recruiting, the more likely you are to get the most qualified and motivated students. A good amount of time to start searching before you need a position filled in 3-4 months. Also, the longer you accept applications, the better your chances for getting the best interns.

Promote your organization to local recruitment sources. Attend internship and job fairs, send all your information to our office. Once we have the required information, we can help market your company and your internships to our students.

Choose your interns carefully. Treat them in the same way you would hire a new employee. After all, they could possibly end up being permanent employees someday. Conduct interviews with potential interns to find out what they are looking for and what they hope to gain from an internship.

Managing Interns

Orient interns to their new work environment.

Now that you have an intern, what do you do with them? When they first arrive, you need to have some type of orientation. This could be a formal orientation program, similar to the one you send new employees to, or it could be informal, such as showing them around. Make sure you take them on a tour of the facility, introduce them to people they will be working with or need to know. Make sure they know your company's rules and regulations. Go over what is appropriate attire, what to do if they need to call in sick, how the telephone and mail system work, etc. Do whatever you can to make them feel welcome at your company to help ease them into the role of an intern.

Now that you have set up an internship program, it is important that you know how you are going to supervise interns. Make sure you have plenty of work for the intern to do. The last thing you want is for them to feel bored. However, make sure you offer some real work and projects for interns to work on. The whole point of an internship is for them to gain valuable experience that will help them develop the skills they need for their career. Try to give them work that is challenging and interesting, but be sure you are available to help them if they need it.

Make sure interns have the resources they need to do their job. Give the intern a desk with proper office supplies, tell them where the supply closet is, where to go if they need technical support, etc. You want to send the message that interns are important and that you want their help and input.

Check up on your interns.

Don't follow them around all day, but meet with them daily or every other day to make sure you know what tasks they are working on, they can ask any questions they may have, or receive help if they run into problems.

Give interns lots of feedback.

Monitor their progress and make sure to tell them how they are doing. Recognize good work they have done as well as giving them suggestions on what they could do better. Also, give feedback on how well the intern is meeting their pre-established goals. Make sure you allow them to give you their feedback as well. Find out how they feel things are going, and if they are happy with the work and projects they have been assigned.

Monitor your program's effectiveness

Consider having an exit interview with each intern before he/she leaves. Find out what they thought about their experience at your company. What did they like about it, what did they think could be improved?

Consider keeping track of some numbers associated with your internship program. For example, how many interns convert into full time employees? How many repeat requests do you get from managers/departments for interns? Are the numbers of intern applicants increasing?

Orientation Checklist

It is extremely important for employers to take the time to help orient interns to their new environment. Doing so will result in increased intern productivity and effectiveness. To help interns adjust the organization should:

Explain the mission of the organization

- How did the organization start? Why?
- What is unique about your product or service?
- Who benefits from your product or service?
- What are the organization's current objectives?
- How may the intern contribute to those objectives?

Explain the organization structure

- Who reports to whom?
- Who, specifically, is the intern's supervisor?
- What is the intern's department responsible for?
- How are decisions made?
- Which personnel can answer different kinds of questions?

Outline organizational rules, policies, decorum, and expectations

- Is there special industry jargon?
- What are specific work standards and procedures?
- What access to the supervisor (days, times, and duration) does the intern have?
- How should they process requests?
- How do the mail and telephone systems work?
- What are the approved forms for correspondence?
- By what safety regulations must they abide?
- Is there a procedure for signing off completed work?
- What periodic forms or reports need to be completed?
- Are there security or confidentiality issues the intern should be aware of?
- What is acceptable with regard to dress and appearance?
- How should they maintain the premises and their work area?

Define the intern's responsibilities

- What is the intern's role?
- What projects will be assigned to him or her?
- What resources are available to the intern?
- What training is necessary?
- How does the organization want the intern to deal with clients and vendors?
- What tasks can be completed without supervisory approval?
- Do other employees understand the intern's role?

Monitor the intern's adjustment and understanding of what is expected

- Make yourself visibly available to the intern
- Assign someone who can periodically "check in" with the intern
- Provide feedback and constructive criticism
- Encourage the interns to ask questions

Legal Issues

Do you have to pay interns?

The U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which applies to all companies that have at least two employees directly engaged in interstate commerce and annual sales of at least \$500,000.00, severely restricts an employer's ability to use unpaid interns or trainees. It does not limit an employer's ability to hire paid interns. (See Fact Sheet #71 from the U.S. Dept. of Labor – <http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.htm>)

You don't have to pay interns who qualify as learners/trainees. The U.S. Department of Labor has outlined six criteria for determining trainee status:

- 1) Interns cannot displace regular employees
- 2) Interns are not guaranteed a job at the end of the internship (though you may decide at the conclusion of the experience to hire them)
- 3) Interns are not entitled to wages during the internship
- 4) Interns must receive training from your organization, even if it somewhat impedes the work
- 5) Interns must get hands-on experience with equipment and processes used in your industry
- 6) Interns' training must primarily benefit them, not the organization.

Workers' and Unemployment Compensation

Workers' compensation boards have found that interns contribute enough to a company to make them employees. It's wise to cover interns under your workers' compensation policy even though you aren't required to do so. Student interns are generally not eligible for unemployment compensation at the end of the internship.

Keep In Mind

Even if a student is earning college credit for an internship with an organization, the student is still permitted, under the FLSA, to be compensated.

Paid interns make ideal workers - hungry to learn, eager to make a good impression, and willing to perform a multitude of tasks. The relatively small amount of money employers spend on intern wages and benefits is a good investment.

The employer should identify the specific terms and conditions of employment (e.g., the start and end dates of the internship; compensation; organizational and/or reporting relationships; principal duties, tasks or responsibilities; working conditions; confidentiality; and any other expectations of the employer). These should be discussed when recruiting an intern, and also at their orientation, so there is no misunderstanding regarding these matters. Also, it may make good sense to document such a discussion with a written agreement. This should be made in consultation with the educational institution. If an intern is harassed at your organization, and you don't do anything about it, your organization opens itself to the risk of lawsuits. Take time to advise your interns of appropriate workplace behavior, the organization's harassment policy, and complaint procedures.

International Students

The most common visa types employers will see on college campuses, when recruiting international undergraduate or graduate students for either full-time or internship positions are the F-1 and J-1 visas.

“An F-1 visa is granted to a person coming to the United States to attend a college, university, seminary, conservatory, academic high school, elementary school, or other academic institution or language training program approved by the U.S. Attorney General for study by foreign students. The visa holder plans to return home after completing studies. This is the most common non-immigrant visa for an international student attending undergraduate and graduate school. Students are granted F-1 status until the completion of the academic program and 12 months of post-program practical training. The purpose of the F-1 visa is to provide an opportunity for study in the United States. Anything outside of study, including employment, is an exception to the visa. Authorization for employment is strictly limited to certain situations.

- The student holding F-1 status for a full academic year and in good academic standing may work off campus. Such work authorization is granted when the student has sustained unforeseen economic hardship. Also, the student may not work for more than 20 hours per week when school is in session, but may work full time during holidays and vacations, including breaks between terms, provided the student intends to register for the next school term.
- Curricular Practical Training: An F-1 student may perform curricular practical training prior to the completion of the educational program as part of his or her educational experience. The INS defines this type of training as ‘alternate work/study, internship, cooperative education, or any other type of required internship or practicum that is offered by sponsoring employers through agreements with the school.’
- Post-Completion Practical Training: This is temporary employment directly related to the student’s major area of study that takes place after the student completes a full course of study. Authorization for this training may be granted a maximum of 12 months of full-time or part-time work. Those on a student visa can only gain authorization once for this type of training.”

The above information is adapted from a web article by Rochelle Kaplan, General Counsel for the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). Reprinted with permission of the National Association of Colleges and Employers, copyright holder. For more information on these and other legal issues related to hiring, see NACEWeb and www.naceweb.org.

Employers can take advantage of a nationwide service provider who handles all the necessary paperwork and processing for international students to work in an organization. The largest provider is:

Immigration Support Services
1200 Bent Creek Blvd.
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055
1-800-437-7313
www.immigrationsupport.com

ORIENTING AND TRAINING INTERNS

Many students are unfamiliar with the activities, environment and objectives of business and industry. A thorough orientation and training can greatly help in these areas. The sooner your student interns understand what your organization does and how it operates, the sooner they can assume assigned responsibilities and become productive. You can help this process by providing the following kinds of information about your site:

Prior to the First Day

- Set up an organized work area for the intern
- Set up phone, voicemail, PC, email, and internet access and/or other resources necessary for them to accomplish the tasks you have stipulated in the internship position description
- Outline work expectations for the duration of the internship
- Prepare forms to be signed, including a confidentiality agreement, if necessary

Personnel Structure

- company organization
- special industry jargon
- specific work standards and procedures
- reporting relationships
- access to the supervisor (days, times, and duration)
- tasks that can be completed without supervisory approval
- work processing requests and timeliness
- email, mail and telephone systems
- approved form(s) for correspondence
- safety regulations
- procedure for signing off completed work
- periodic forms or reports to be completed
- security and confidentiality issues, if relevant
- acceptable dress and appearance
- maintaining the premises and work station
- productive interactions with others at the work site
- personnel who can answer different kinds of questions
- how the organization wants the intern to deal with clients, customers, and vendors

You can communicate this information in several ways:

- take your interns on a tour of the facilities and introduce them to the other employees
- give your interns company materials to read such as newsletters, annual reports, an organization chart, or memos from the CEO
- encourage your interns to spend break and lunchtimes in places where employees gather
- schedule regular one-on-one meetings with them
- give the interns opportunities to observe (or participate in) professional meetings
- allow the interns to interview company personnel
- encourage the interns to walk around and observe others at work

The success of an internship depends on the partnership between representatives of the organization, the college, and the student. These three parties need to agree on the conditions of the internship, the responsibilities of each party, and the reporting requirements. The site supervisor is the critical link. You guide your interns by providing direction and feedback. If a problem occurs, you counsel the students and contact the campus supervisor, when necessary.

KEY POINTS

- Develop a thorough orientation and training plan to be implemented when the interns begin work, so they will learn quickly and become productive members of your team.
- Invest supervisory time to establish an important bond with interns and set a crucial tone for the internship experience.

DEVELOPING WORK ACTIVITIES AND MEASURABLE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

A large part of producing effective position descriptions involves the development of challenging work assignments that complement students' academic programs. One way to do this is to design a preliminary list of work activities that will fit the needs of your department. A detailed description of typical tasks will help the college to promote your internship, and help you to screen the right candidates for the position.

Later, when the interns you select join your team, you will have a chance to review the work activities and modify them according to the interns' knowledge and personal work/learning goals. As part of the educational process, internship work activities should focus on projects specifically related to the academic major and the degree the interns expect to receive. Students who perform menial tasks will become quickly demoralized and will learn nothing about applying their expertise to a business environment. While many students work (or have worked) at part-time jobs to finance their education, an internship does not fall into the category of a job. It is actually part of their academic program and should offer every opportunity to link classroom learning to workplace experience.

Undergraduate students expect and appreciate clear direction regarding what is expected of them and frequent feedback concerning what and how they have done. Remember, in their academic environment, clear direction and periodic feedback is the way of life. It is also most important the interns perceive their work is making a useful contribution to the sponsoring organization.

A particular concern at the undergraduate level is that work assignments provide interns with a variety of tasks, while accommodating the needs of the organization. Of course, some of the interns' responsibilities will involve repetition, because all work involves some repeated activity. The program should be designed to maximize the scope of the students' organizational experience.

Sample tasks that undergraduate students have provided for their sponsoring organization include the following:

- performing laboratory tests
- writing handbooks or manuals
- designing posters, charts, graphs
- generating financial forecast and cost recovery reports
- performing software/hardware modifications
- conducting studies and surveys
- developing presentations
- compiling technical reports
- creating social media sites
- conducting research
- generating marketing plans
- conducting training packages
- preparing budgets and financial reports

Developing challenging work assignments relative to the students' abilities should be a major thrust. The internship position description should incorporate the needs of your organization as well as the abilities and academic goals of the students you employ.

KEY POINTS

- Describe challenging, but realistic tasks students can accomplish within a three-month period.
- Work with faculty to establish specific learning objectives for students.
- Identify outcomes or expected products.
- Be willing to incorporate the students' particular strengths.
- Show how this work relates to the overall efforts of the department or organization.

SUPERVISING THE INTERN

As an intern supervisor, you use all the skills necessary in any effective supervisory relationship:

- Providing leadership
- Communicating
- Motivating Developing and training
- Delegating Evaluating

Additionally, the students will look to you as a mentor who will assist their transition from the classroom to the work environment. Since the internship is an extension of the learning process, you will need to provide opportunities to bridge the two experiences. We suggest that you meet with your interns regularly to provide feedback concerning their performance. During these meetings, the students can:

- report on the status of a project
- ask questions
- learn how their work is contributing to the organization
- participate in an evaluation of their strengths
- discuss areas needing growth and development
- get a sense of what kind of work lies ahead

At the same time you will have an opportunity to coach, counsel and reinforce positive attitudes and performance. You should anticipate that you will have some interaction with your students' campus internship coordinator through phone calls, email, on-site visits, and written evaluations. Such persons will help you find a solution if difficulties occur (intern attendance or punctuality problems, low motivation, unsatisfactory work, or personal conflicts). Also, you should get in touch with the college contact if the internship conditions must be altered - such as a change in supervisors, delays in the availability of data needed by the students to complete an assignment, a strike by unionized employees, transfer or termination of an employee involved in the interns' work, or other unanticipated changes.

Encourage your interns to keep a portfolio of work accomplished during the experience. This will help fulfill the students' academic requirements and provide them with a sense of accomplishment. In addition, it will give you a basis to discuss their professional growth.

- Specific work documents to include in a portfolio might be any of the following:
- Job Descriptions Company Newsletters Financial Reports
- Legislation Performance Appraisals Displays & Exhibits
- Proposals Charts/Graphs References
- Manuals Correspondence Survey Reports
- Citations & Awards Press Releases Cost Analyses
- Contracts Certificates Marketing Plans
- Program Outlines Research Reports

KEY POINTS

- Maintain an open channel of communication with formal and informal meetings.
- Keep the interns busy and directed towards their learning objectives. Students rarely complain of overwork, but they do complain if they are not challenged.
- Provide opportunities for increasing responsibility.
- Encourage professionalism by assisting the interns in developing human relations skills, decision-making abilities, and managing office politics.
- Remember that you are a role model.
- Develop connections.

RESOURCES

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

National, member organizations can offer assistance. The following organizations, and their regional and/or statewide affiliates, should be consulted.

Cooperative Education and Internship Association (CEIA)

P. O. Box 42506
Cincinnati, OH 45242
Phone: 513-793-CEIA (2342)
Fax: 513-793-0463
Web: www.ceiainc.org

National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)

62 Highland Ave.
Bethlehem, PA 18017
Phone: 800/544-5272
Fax: 610/868-0208
Web: www.naceweb.org

National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE)

19 Mantua Rd.
Mt. Royal, NJ 08096
Phone: 856-423-3427
Fax: 856-423-3420
Web: www.nsee.org

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