

Top Ten Tips for the Proper Care and Feeding of Interns

Today, the issue of unpaid internships is on center stage, but employers need to really focus on the overall program to benefit their organizations and the students. Structuring an effective program takes time, effort and commitment from all levels of the organization. “Internship programs are so valuable because they are a win-win for the company and the student, if they are done the correct way,” says Raedawn Johnson, corporate recruiter at Solutionary in Omaha. “A successful internship program is a team effort among HR, upper management, supervisors, and really all members of the team to provide mentorship.”

If you are bringing in interns as a means to get things done cheaply, then you need to rethink your strategy. Your internship program should tie in with your talent acquisition and organizational development strategies. Internships are the new entry-level jobs, points out Dr. Phil Gardiner, director of the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University. He refers to internships as “high-stakes events.” According to Gardiner, “the internship now replaces the starting job as the place college students actually begin their journey into the workplace.”

Having the internship structured around productive, purposeful work is the key element to an effective, world-class internship program. You could have all the bells and whistles in your program, but if your interns are filing papers or answering the phone, it’s all for naught. Mike True, director of the internship center at Messiah College and an internationally recognized and respected internship advocate, points out that employers want college graduates who already know how to function well in the workplace. “It behooves them to train students before they graduate by providing solid opportunities for them to apply their disciplinary learning in a real world setting,” says True. “The greater the amount of time a student spends on projects, interacting with co-workers, and gaining a more ‘open-eyed’ understanding of what employers require, the better they will perform when they graduate and begin full-time employment.”

If you are an employer, and you want to offer “best practices” internships, here are ten areas of focus to enhance your program.

Welcome them. When the intern first walks through the door, everyone needs to be on board. The security desk can’t call up to the office saying, “there’s some guy down here claiming to be an intern.” Get all the necessary IT clearances and have an email address all set up. And when the intern meets you in your office, one of the worst things you could say is, sorry, I forgot you were starting today and I’m tied up all morning.

Train them. Run them through an orientation just like you would with a new employee. Show them your systems. Offer training modules throughout the first several weeks so it’s not all piled on at once. You

need to also train them on what it means to be a good corporate citizen. In one of her previous roles, Johnson created a community service committee, and interns selected volunteer projects to work on.

Arm them. Give them the tools they need in order to do their jobs effectively. Give them a regular place they can call their home while interning with you. Ideally, give them a cubicle with a name plate just like other entry-level employees. Make sure they can gain access to any corporate systems that are appropriate.

Challenge them. Not only give them real, productive work to do, but continue to increase the degree of difficulty of assignments. Give them projects in which they need to figure some things out on their own. Give them projects that have a tangible outcome so they can add accomplishments to their resume.

Mentor them. With most employees, after some initial training, you can let them loose. With interns, it's a learning experience for them. Check in at regular intervals and each time, teach them something new. Tell them about the technical aspects of the job and the company, but coach them in the subtleties of the workplace, such as navigating office politics, proper email communication, leadership, and, as Johnson puts it, "what you need to know about working in a professional environment."

Include them. Don't chain them to their desks for the summer. Bring them to meet with a client. Give them part of the presentation you're giving to the executives. Invite them to join you at a meeting or an event with your professional association. Make sure they get the same corporate communications that every other entry-level employee gets.

Feed them. Take them out to lunch a few times. Have some special social / networking gatherings for the interns. Show them a good time.

Pay them. For-profit businesses need to follow the U.S. Department of Labor guidelines. Even if a student is receiving academic credit, that doesn't impact your obligation to compensate the intern if he or she is doing meaningful, productive work. Even if you are managing a non-profit, give the interns a bonus or stipend if possible.

Evaluate them. Interns want to hear feedback, and they want to learn what they can do better. Interns should come into the role with previously established learning objectives. As an internship supervisor / mentor, help the interns realize those objectives.

Hire them. Internships should be an integral component of your talent pipeline. According to the National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE), over 60% of paid interns received at least one job offer upon graduation. Do you know what your conversion rate is? If not, start tracking it and improve it over time.

As a result of all of this effort, your interns will appreciate and respect you... and will be loyal to your brand. And, what does it typically cost to acquire a new customer? For the amount you invest in a summer internship, the payback in future brand equity is well worth the price.

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