

Creating an Effective Internship Program

If you already have or are considering implementing an internship program with your organization, you are not alone. In today's tight labor market, offering such programs can be a significant way to lure new talent. Interns can provide cost-effective, highly skilled labor for your organization while giving you a chance to observe potential new employees without having to hire them on a long-term basis.

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. Internships should be designed to give students an opportunity to use their knowledge and skills in an actual work situation. It also allows them to investigate career opportunities and learn about their interests and abilities.

Key elements for a successful internship program

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.

Meaningful Assignments: Designing a Position

Gone are the days of using interns as simple "go-fers". Students have many talents and traits that benefit employers: enthusiasm, dedication to learning, and an eagerness to work and do a good job. They 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.

An internship is really a partnership between the employer, the student, and their school. While there are many aspects to establishing a successful work-learning experience, the work assignment is a key element in the planning process. Here are some tips for creating a successful work assignment:

- Review current job descriptions of employees and determine what types of work can be expanded or augmented. Develop a student assignment from that information and provide a thorough job description.
- Involve the manager who will be responsible for supervising the student in the development process.
- Develop positions that will challenge students. Don't underestimate their abilities.
- Remember that students learn quickly and want to contribute meaningful work to your organization.
- Ensure that infrastructure is in place to support the intern(s). Sufficient workspace (desk, computer workstation, access to phone and fax, company email if necessary, etc.)
- Be prepared to discuss "learning objectives" with your student workers. Many students will need to develop clear objectives for the learning they want to achieve while working in an experiential learning position.

Recruiting and Hiring: The students you hire for internships should be as carefully chosen as other employees. These are individuals in whom your organization is making a significant investment. They may well be your future permanent employees. To recruit students successfully, consider the following points:

- Determine in which academic majors you will find students with the course work, interests and career goals that fit well with your organization's experiential learning assignments.
- Contact the career services department at the private colleges, community colleges or universities for assistance in developing and advertising your positions.
- Once you have received resumes from interested students, interview them in-person at your organization, if possible, so that they can meet potential co-workers and see the actual work environment.
- Try to elicit information from students about their immediate work interests and career goals to develop a good match between the student and your work assignment.

Effective Supervision: Providing quality supervision is an essential element in establishing a successful experiential learning opportunity. 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. Consider the following points:

- Place students with carefully selected and trained **supervisors**.
- Be sure that supervisors provide students with **detailed information** about the work they will be doing, including specific tasks, relevant equipment, and work flow.
- Have students and supervisors **meet at least weekly** to address students' questions and provide them with feedback on their performance.
- Provide an **orientation to your organization** (by the supervisor or student program coordinator) so that students will learn about policies, benefits, the facility, etc. Having a handbook that is geared for student workers can also be extremely helpful.
- If possible, have supervisors encourage students to **participate in your organization's training programs** as well as cross-department assignments.
- Involve supervisors and students in a **formal evaluation process**. Be sure that students know how and when their performance will be evaluated.

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.

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.

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.

Assistance developing an internship position: If you need assistance developing your internship position, contact the career center at one of the private colleges, community colleges or universities. Career centers can provide assistance with:

- Internship job description
- Guidelines for posting internship positions to the website
- Internship agreements with the educational institution
- Assistance in developing a job offer for the intern
- Assistance in evaluating the intern's work

Contact lists for the career centers at the community colleges, private colleges and regent universities can be found at

http://www.iowalifechanging.com/business/ic/internship_program.html

Internships: Tips for employers on starting an internship program. [10 paragraphs]. National Association of Colleges and Employers: Jobweb, HR/Staffing Professional's Desktop, Tools and Publications [Website]. Available: <http://www.jobweb.org/hr/interntips.htm>