

How to Make Internships Work For Your Company

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Students in their graduating year of University or College are currently in the driver's seat when it comes to finding a full time job. Employers are now being asked hard hitting questions like "what's in it for me" and "why should I work for your organization". These questions can be answered through an effective internship program that allows students the opportunity to work for a company while they are still completing their degree. Implementing an internship program will also help a company assess student talent before offering that same student a full time job. Internships create win-win situations for both students and employers.

Before continuing, it is important to clarify that co-op work terms and internship programs represent the same concept. Both involve students working for a company or organization while they are still in school. For the sake of simplicity, this article will use the term internship to refer to the concept of companies hiring students for a work term (usually four to eight months in duration) while they are still in the process of completing their degree.

Internship programs are popular with students for the following reasons:

- Students gain valuable work experience while still in school completing their degree.
- Students can observe first hand how a business operates on a daily basis.
- Students can see if what they thought they wanted to do for a career is more than just a "perceived notion".
- Students can apply the theory they learned in the classroom to "the real world".
- Students can learn the soft skills applicable to work that can't be taught in the classroom.
- Students can network and meet people in the business world.

Creating a strong internship program will achieve the following benefits for your company:

Recruitment Savings

Internships offer companies the opportunity to see what a student is capable of doing before offering them a full time job. Companies that take hiring interns seriously can select their top picks while students are still in their second or third year of study. Fewer companies recruit interns than graduating students so the competition is not as intense and the ability to uncover superstars before graduation is increased. This formula leads to a higher caliber of students being offered full time jobs upon graduation because the students who can't back up their interviews will be flushed out during their work term. Think of it as a test drive before buying a new car.

Satisfying Seasonal or Special Project Needs

Another benefit derived from an internship program is the ability to satisfy seasonal hiring needs. Accounting firms do this during the winter months when audit and tax season require extra bodies to deal with the workflow. Often a company will have a special project involving market research or a feasibility study on a new business concept. Full time employees may not have the time to dedicate to the project but managing an intern to do the work is a viable option.

IMPLEMENTING A SUCCESSFUL INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Crafting an internship program does not have to take a lot of time or cost a lot of money. The steps involved are simple and the results will be worth the effort. It is important for companies to take the following into account when designing an internship program:

Identify Your Needs

When designing an internship program it is important to ask yourself the following questions:

- What do you want the student to do?
- How long will it take the student to do it?

- What resources will you need to give the student to get the job done?
- Who is going to manage the student during the work term?

For example, a production company might need a student with specific computer design skills, the project might take four months, and the student would need a work station with a computer, design software, a phone, and email address.

Identify Schools That Fit Your Needs

Work to build relationships with universities and colleges that have programs in the departments you want to hire from. Look at both regional and out of province programs that meet the educational criteria needed to qualify for job openings with your company. Most importantly, identify if the school you are recruiting at attracts students from out of town or is a commuter school. The reason for this is that many students, especially those who grew up in a major city, will move home upon graduation to reduce their cost of living and pay down their student loans. As a result, sometimes the closest university or college to your company may not always be the best place to recruit at.

Provide a Mentor For Each Intern

Mentors are a must when hiring interns. Select a mentor within the company who can relate to and understand the needs of your intern. Many companies assign mentors randomly without giving much thought to how either party will interact. Look for your mentor to have some type of common ground with your intern. This will help create a bond between the two. Also, encourage the mentor to do monthly reviews with your intern and to go for lunch or a drink after work. An informal setting will allow both parties to be more at ease and talk freely about the intern's work experiences. The mentor's role should be to promote the benefits of launching a career at your company and to assess whether the intern should be offered a full time job.

Set Clear Goals

Another important aspect of an internship program is to set goals with the interns on what you want them to accomplish during their work term. Make the interns feel a part of your company by outlining how their work fits in with the needs of the organization. Performing the mundane tasks in the office might be necessary but make sure that interns also get to do some exciting work that will allow them see where their careers can lead to if they choose to return for full time employment upon graduation.

Provide an Exit Interview

Always make sure that there is an exit interview with each intern to find out what his/her plans are for the future. Interns that you would like to hire for another work term or on a full time basis upon graduation should be given job offers before they return to campus. Do not let your competition have a chance to hire away a student that you are interested in.

Critical Evaluation is Everything

It is important to monitor how many interns accept full time jobs upon graduation with your company. Results speak for themselves. Companies that hire the interns they desire are reaping the rewards of a successful internship program.

About Nathan:

Mark Laurie and Nathan Laurie are the 2006 Winners of the CACEE Outstanding Achievement Award. This award was presented in recognition of outstanding contribution to the field of career planning and recruitment.

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