

Managers Letter

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Making the Most of Workplace Internships

by Liza N. Burby

There was a time when college students serving as workplace interns spent summers in a relative's office, assisting with menial chores such as making photocopies and brewing coffee. They were fortunate if they had a desk and even luckier to stumble on a chance for meaningful interaction with a skilled manager. Those interns traded time spent enduring a banal experience for an entry on their resume. Later, when they searched for a real job, that entry carried little weight; their potential employer knew the score: the internship had little value.

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***Mark Oldman, President and Founder
VaultReports.com***

Not so anymore, when most college students are required to complete supervised internships before graduation and even high school students are expected to sparkle up their college applications with evidence of at least one internship experience.

That news is good news all around. Many business managers have come to realize that internships can be valuable experiences for both the intern and the company. In turn, students have come to anticipate that internships will provide valuable hands-on experience and, in many cases, a salary.

Internships offer a taste of real-life business experience. Interns get to know exactly what it's like to work for a particular company, providing the managers recognize that the intern is there for an educational experience, not simply to serve the manager. Correspondingly, a bad internship program is one in which the intern is treated like a pack mule who never leaves the copy room.

Companies that take on interns enjoy savings on recruiting costs and/or salaries. Mark Oldman, who started VaultReports.com four years ago to help candidates get the inside scoop on companies, said, “Internships save Fortune 500 companies an average of \$8,000 per hire because they don’t have to place job listings and conduct interviews. An intern is pretested.”

Besides helping to cut expenses, interns also provide a valuable public relations resource for us as they promote the company name in the community, added Oldman. Chris Dobins, Vice President of Marketing for Creamer Dickson Basford in New York City, which hires 11 summer interns each year, agreed: “It’s a good idea if we want our business to progress and prosper. When we train and educate interns, they can make a difference to the workforce and hopefully [provide] good public relations for us,” said Dobins. “They are ambassadors for our company and a worthwhile investment. Further, in the summer, they are particularly helpful because so many employees take vacation. Many companies try to keep one or two interns year-round.”

Oldman explained that interns also add youthful energy to an organization. “They can shake things up and inspire a potentially burned-out workforce. If you look at things through the eyes of an intern, it can be refreshing and remind you of what is exciting about your work,” he added.

Interns also strengthen the caliber of your job application pool later on, according to Brenda Vester, Human Resource Manager for Ketchum Public Relations in Pittsburgh, PA. “The benefit is that when you work with someone for the summer, you get to know them and their work, and then you often hire them a couple of years later,” she said. “We’ve hired 10 out of 70 interns. We look at past interns before publicizing a job.”

Adding Value to the Internship Experience

When organizing an internship program for a company, the key is remembering to make it an educational, supervised and practical experience, advised Oldman. To be substantive, it must include challenging work and afford the intern the opportunity to stretch his/her skills.

Oldman said it's important to provide short- and long-term projects so the manager doesn't have to monitor

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interns constantly. Managers should, however, counter-balance busywork with interesting assignments and explain the significance of the work by putting it into perspective. For example, they should let interns know when the copies they are making will be distributed to every manager in the company for an important meeting. In this way, interns will come to see how their work fits in with the larger picture.

Mentoring is a critical aspect of a good internship plan. Companies should assign someone the intern can call for advice and ask career-related questions. Quality of life is also an issue. Simply providing a chair sends the message that interns are not highly valued. Ideally, the intern should have his/her own desk and phone. In fact, internships are so beneficial, it makes sense to establish a location just for them.

It's also a good idea to include interns in social events, providing a chance for them to get to know each other and prospective employers. In many industries, interns can expect between \$200 to \$600 a week. Some companies, to make their program more attractive to students, are now competing by providing perks such as trips to sporting events, access to company fitness centers and subsidized or free meals.

Finding the Right Intern

Begin searching for summer interns in early March. Students like to have their summer plans in place by the end of April. For year-round interns, contact colleges and universities before each semester. Also remember that high school students are an untapped resource. According to Oldman, they are the most technically savvy and are often out of school by 2 p.m. Recent graduates, too, can make great interns. Internships for career changers of any age provide a great way to spark the interest of competent people in your company.

To locate interns, find schools that specialize in your field of work. Contact their career counselors to explain your needs. They will do all the work and forward candidates. You can list your internship opportunities in the *Princeton Review Guide's America's Top Internships, 1999 Edition* and *The Internship Bible, 1999 Edition*, both from Random House. You can also post your company on www.vaultreport.com.

Once you begin interviewing, Oldman added, you should expect applicants to convey why they want to work with you and how your company relates to their future career. They should also know something about what your company does and show enthusiasm for learning.

Vester added that interviewers should seek some information on the candidate's skill level. "Interns should be confident and comfortable working on different teams and be able to work independently. This can be hard for them because they have so much to learn. So we look for a kid who is socially active in school, and we like them to have at least a 3.0 average."

Vester advised treating an intern like an entry-level staff member. "We hire four for the summer and assign them

based on the needs of different departments. We work in teams, so an intern may work on several teams within the same general area. This way, he or she learns an area, and gets experience working with different people," she said. "We keep track of the work they do. If they find they are not as busy, they can work with other interns. If one intern has too much to handle, another can help. This gives them a peer at their level and the chance to learn from each other."

One caveat: Make sure they know their interests in the job might change as time goes on. Joyce Gioia of the Herman Group in Greensboro, NC, learned this after an intern quit because she was really interested in a different segment of the business. "Now I say during the interview, 'If your interests change along the way, please let us know and we'll adjust accordingly.' We want to get work done, but we want it to be educational and exciting for young people too."

When the internship is over, give each student a review, explaining what they did well and how they can improve. If you're interested in hiring them in the future, make sure you keep in touch with them.

Although companies risk investing money and time in interns who may decide they don't like the field, it's not a wasted experience. In those cases, the company still gained affordable assistance and a chance to promote corporate good will.

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