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Nature of internships changing

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The difficult economy and the U.S. Department of Labor are changing the nature of internships.

Human resource, career specialists and educators say internships are still a valuable route to experience, getting to know potential employers and letting potential employers get to know interns as prospective employees.

But a tough job market also has spilled over into competition for internships, and federal rules issued this spring have paved the way for what some say eventually will be a requirement that all internships be paid.

"There's some gray areas in there regarding that," said Tammy Craig, director of the Career Development Center at the University of Illinois Springfield.

Craig said the marketplace still offers plenty of internship and volunteer opportunities, but the economy has made a difference.

"This also has been brought to the attention of the Fair Labor Standards Act. There are criteria that have to be met, and because of the economic downturn, employers are wanting to do more unpaid internships," said Craig.

Even so, she said a record number of employers have signed up this year for an Aug. 26 "Foot in the Door" fair at UIS that concentrates on local internships, volunteer opportunities and part-time work.

"It really is worth doing. It's the new way to test out potential employees," said Craig.

A shift in demand

Hanson Professional Services of Springfield received more than 50 applications for 13 summer internships this year.

Not that long ago, the reverse was true, said Tony Comella, vice president of human resources for the engineering and consulting firm.

"I go back four years, and it was totally flopped around. You had to find an intern and make them an offer by February. If you didn't have a good offer by February, you couldn't get a good intern," said Comella.

On the flip side, Comella said interns stand a much better chance of getting hired by the company where they interned, especially once the economy and hiring picks up. As with most local companies and organizations contacted locally, Hanson's internships are paid.

Director of human resources Dave Ryan at Mel-O-Cream Donuts International in Springfield said the company has not used interns for four or five years.

Mel-O-Cream paid its interns, but there are expectations in the human-resources field that the federal regulations eventually will require that interns be paid. Generally, the revised rules require that unpaid internships be predominantly "educational" and not involving duties required of regular employees.

United Way of Central Illinois president John Kelker said the group has interns some years and other years not. The group pays a small stipend. This year, an intern begins work on Monday and continues to mid-December.

Kelker said interns are assigned a variety of tasks in each of the agency's departments, including communications, community service and resource development.

"We hope to increase their knowledge of the entire social-service field," said Kelker.

Depends on the field

Almost every industry has some type of internship or on-the-job training program, and some are more likely to lead to jobs than others.

"It's probably true of any company, whether you're a law firm or not a law firm. You prefer to hire somebody you know something about," said Mark Ferguson of Sorling, Northrup, Hanna Cullen & Cochran in Springfield.

Ferguson said the firm usually hires two or three second-year law students for paid summer internships with the idea that they will be available the following summer if the firm is looking to bring in new associates.

"They return to law school for the final year, graduate in May, take the bar exam and start with us if we've made an offer and the offer has been accepted," said Ferguson.

Paid internships at Horace Mann Educators Corp. are mostly in the actuarial department, said director of recruiting and selection Cinda Earles. Demand has always exceeded the slots available, but the number of applicants does appear to have increased as a result of the economy.

Earles said clear performance standards and regular evaluations are the key to a successful internship.

"We do have a mentor on staff to oversee the interns. They are assigned a partner and are actually given projects

"They have a weekly meeting with the mentor. At that time, if something needs to be revamped or there needs to be extra instruction, they'll provide that. It's very hands on," said Earles.

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Intern market

Four interns at Hanson Professional Services in Springfield shared their experiences with the job and internship market this summer.

*Kelsey Gerber, Springfield; engineering, Vanderbilt University.

"It depends on your location. At the school in Nashville, a lot of people graduating in civil engineering this last May are struggling to find a job, so I felt like internships were even harder to get than fulltime jobs."

*Bart Rovey, Chatham; engineering at the University of Illinois.

"I interned the last two summers at CWLP (City Water, Light & Power). Last summer, I got laid off because of budget cuts. I applied at career fairs and didn't hear much back. It's tough to get a job, and internships are a good alternative."

*Emily Koester, Effingham; architecture, University of Illinois.

"The architecture jobs have taken a hit. In Atlanta, 60 percent of architects are out of work. ... I would say in the next few years, it'll pick up again. It's another reason I wanted an internship at an engineering firm as well as an architect firm. I'll also be able to do engineering designs."

*Adam Marks, Pawnee; engineering, University of Illinois.

"I first applied in April and was denied because there was no need for a mechanical engineering intern at the time. They hired a new senior mechanical engineer and needed help with a project. They called me up on a Friday afternoon and said, 'Do you still want to work?' I said, 'Yeah, for sure.'"

New rules

The U.S. Department of Labor in April issued a fact sheet intended to clarify the rules on internships, including whether standard labor and minimum-wage rules apply. The rules were issued in response to nationwide reports of interns being required to do menial tasks for no pay, or to perform duties and work hours that would have required standard pay or overtime for regular employees.

Among the highlights:

* Internships can be unpaid if the work is primarily educational, the work is primarily for the benefit of the intern, the intern does not displace a regular employee, there is no promise of a job at the end of the internship, and the intern and employer understand the position is unpaid.

* If an employer uses interns as a substitute for regular workers, minimum-wage and overtime rules apply.

* Wage rules apply if an intern receives the same level of supervision and evaluations as regular employees.

* Internships should be of a fixed duration determined at the outset by the intern and the employer.

* If the internship comes with the expectation of a permanent job at completion, wage and hour rules apply.

On the web: <http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.htm>.

'Foot in the Door' job fair

The Career Development Center at the University of Illinois Springfield is holding a "Foot in the Door" job fair that concentrates on internship and volunteer opportunities from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 26. The event in the Public Affairs Center on the UIS campus is free to UIS students.

Employers including law enforcement, insurance, health care, not-for-profits, on-campus organizations, finance and the media are scheduled to participate. Walk-in hours for students wanting to prepare for the event will be held from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, Aug. 23-25 at Student Affairs Building 50.

Information is available online at www.uis.edu/careerservices or by calling 206-6508.

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