



**Management Buy-In: The Most
Crucial Component of Successful Internship Programs**

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MANAGEMENT BUY-IN: THE MOST CRUCIAL COMPONENT OF SUCCESSFUL INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS

Introduction: What Are Internships?

Internships are short-term, on-the-job learning experiences designed to allow students to apply knowledge gained in the classroom to a real-world, professional work setting. These work experiences may be paid or unpaid, for credit or not for credit, or full-time or part-time. Typically, students will complete an internship in a field related to their major, but this is not always the case. While summer internships tend to be the most popular, fall and spring internship opportunities are plentiful and, often, easier to obtain. The role the student assumes within the organization is often one with a fair amount of responsibility, especially if the student is an upper classman. Usually, there is also an educational component to the experience, via assigned papers, projects, or readings from a faculty advisor. The student learns through observation, participation, and reflection of what occurred during both the work experience and the academic experience.

Although some schools require their students to complete internships during the course of their college education, many students complete internships voluntarily because they want to build their resumes and, quite possibly, make contacts for a future full-time job search. Ideally, the internship experience should provide a win-win situation for both students and employers. Students should be able to view the internship experience as a career opportunity (and not just a semester-long job) on their path towards graduation, while employers should be able to view the internship experience as an opportunity to utilize the skills, talents, and insight of enthusiastic, motivated young professionals with fresh outlooks and creative, “out-of-the-box” ideas.

How Internships Can Benefit Companies

In the last several years, companies have started to realize that it makes strategic business sense to align their hiring goals with the experimental learning opportunities that they, themselves, provide. College students can be very enthusiastic, highly capable, and extremely valuable contributors to an organization’s mission if the internship program is well planned and executed. Interns often possess content knowledge and technical skills that full-time employees may not. In addition, these students can bring in a fresh, structured approach to business that is not always evident in the more

seasoned employees. Tim Ritter, Vice President of Universal Protective Packaging, Inc. located in Mechanicsburg, PA, says that he believes interns are definitely worth all of the effort and cost you put into them. He states that, “The natural eagerness of truly serious students to get into the ‘real world’ and practice some part of what they learned makes them a genuine asset almost immediately. I appreciate the concise project planning and progress reporting that seems second nature to most interns because of the demands of their coursework in school.”

In fact, for many companies, student interns are vital to their long-term success as these programs are wonderful recruiting tools and a demonstrated way to test out potential full-time, permanent employees. Holly Ivel, Program Associate with The National Society of Experiential Education, believes that internships are excellent ways to identify quality employees early and to increase employee retention. She contends that, “Employers will have an experienced, tested pool of students from which to recruit for their full-time work forces by seamlessly converting interns to permanent hires. This may also significantly decrease their cost-per-hire.”¹ It is important to note that a student with internship experience, who then moves on to become a permanent employee, will most likely have a minimal learning curve and an easier time acclimating to the company culture. As Ivel points out, “A manager can start building on that new employee’s strengths immediately, rather than waiting until the person has adjusted to the work world and the organization’s environment.”² For example, Lyondell Chemical Company, headquartered in Houston, TX, hired nearly three quarters of their 2005 full-time entry level staff through their summer co-op and internship programs. IBM consistently hires 1,500-2,000 college students annually and converts more than half of them to full-time employment. Stacy Ernst, College Recruiter for the accounting and consulting firm Beers and Cutler in Vienna, VA, says that, “Our internship program and the ability to convert interns into full-time employees has been a critical element in meeting our recruiting goals.”³

1. Patterson, Valerie. “The Employer’s Guide: Successful Intern/Co-op Programs,” *NACE Journal, Winter 1997*
2. Patterson, Valerie. “The Employer’s Guide: Successful Intern/Co-op Programs,” *NACE Journal, Winter 1997*
3. “Best Practices Round-Up: Branding, Diversity, Internship and Cooperative Education Programs,” *NACE Journal, Spring 2006*

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Having the opportunity to “try before you buy” is a huge advantage to both big and small companies. Hiring an intern can be much more cost-effective than recruiting a full-time employee, training them, and establishing and paying benefits for them. As Katie Miller, Manager of Internal Research and Analysis at the Vienna, VA branch of Navy Federal Credit Union, states, “If all of my employees could start as interns, that would be ideal – we know it’s a good fit if we offer them a job and then they can hit the ground running when they become full-time!” Larger companies, with substantial college recruiting programs like Enterprise and IBM, understand the value of well trained interns. Throughout the years, they have converted many of these folks to full-time status, not only because of the cost savings, but also, presumably, because these students need much less training after a full internship and do not need to be “retrained” in the business methodologies specific to each company.

According to the results of the 2008 Experiential Education Survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, employers are looking more and more to their internship programs to find new employees. Employers reported that nearly 36 percent of the new college graduates they hired from the Class of 2007 came from their own internship programs, up from 30 percent from the Class of 2005. In addition, “More interns are getting offers of full-time employment. Currently, employers say they extended job offers to nearly 70 percent of their interns; in 2001, they offered jobs to 57 percent,”⁴ says Marilyn Mackes, NACE Executive Director. She asserts that, “Nearly 90 percent of employers who use their programs to hire say they are very or extremely satisfied with their interns, and employers consistently name the internship program as one of the most effective tools they have for hiring new college graduates. Employers see results with these programs.”⁵ Not surprisingly, employers expect to add to their intern numbers this year, projecting a 3.7 percent increase in the number of interns brought on board. Survey findings also indicate that interns who become full-time hires are more likely to stick with the organization than their co-workers who did not go through the program. More than one third of employers reported higher retention

rates among those converted from intern to employee within the first year of hire, and nearly half said former interns had higher retention rates after five years post-hire.

How Internships Can Benefit Students

Students who are savvy enough to take advantage of internship opportunities often find themselves at a distinct advantage over their fellow “non-internship” peers at graduation time. They have, at least, solid resumes with significant work experience, contacts within the business world, and heightened levels of maturity and business acumen. At most, they have full-time jobs. It makes sense, then, that internship programs which provide the highest level of learning and professional experience would be the primary recommendations of career services offices. Robbin Beauchamp, Director of The Career Center at Roger Williams University, stresses that the most astute students understand the value of interning. “While many students hope to earn money while gaining internship experience, they are savvy about positioning themselves as excellent candidates in this job market. Money is not their primary motivation. Learning and networking is. They know they need a hands-on learning experience that will compliment the classroom knowledge they are receiving.”⁶ As an added bonus, students who participate in internship programs come away with a renewed sense of confidence, competence, and self-awareness. They hone their communication, conflict resolution, and interpersonal skills and are often able to draw on and reflect upon their experiences in the years to come. Northeastern University, in particular, has been committed to the idea of experimental education for over one hundred years. College of Arts and Sciences Dean James Stellar states, “By combining classroom excellence with a stronger experimental component, we offer our students the opportunity to grow stronger and more confident about their academic and career goals.”⁷

The possibility of conversion from an intern to a full-time permanent employee is, obviously, of benefit to the student as well as to the company. It is essentially analogous to getting accepted to college through the early admissions

6. Bottner, Richard. “Show Me the Learning,” *EACE Bridges, Early Spring Edition, 2006-2007*

7. <http://www.northeastern.edu/cas/about/message.html>

4. NACE 2008 Experiential Education Executive Summary
5. NACE 2008 Experiential Education Executive Summary

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process. While other students are scrambling to find jobs upon graduation, the former intern may have his or her employment cemented. In certain industries, this early exposure is crucial. For example, in particular financial services firms, the “reality” of the type of work, company culture, and performance measurements are often very different from what students may imagine. Ben Maxwell, Financial Advisor at the Fredericksburg, VA office of Edward Jones Investments, states that “It would be very difficult to jump into this business without understanding how the day-to-day job is done. An internship is an incredible recruiting tool that can give a significant advantage to those applying for jobs here.” In Washington, DC, where numerous, though competitive, opportunities abound for work in the political arena, students are highly encouraged to make contacts early and often. As Whitney Stockett, Intern Coordinator in Congressman Rob Wittman’s office declares, “Applicants with solid Capital Hill references and Hill internships are always highly valuable and preferred over other applicants.”

Obstacles to a Successful Partnership

Although it seems clearly advantageous for both companies and students alike to participate in internship programs, there can frequently be some degree of hesitancy. More often than not, this unwillingness is illustrated by the failure of those individuals in upper management to commit to a structured plan of action with regard to the students, specifically, and to the program, in general. And, as numerous human resources professionals have learned the hard way, when there is a lack of buy-in at the senior management level, any attempt at a structured, innovative program is commonly futile. Marie Artim, Corporate Recruiting Manager for Enterprise Rent-A-Car, describes support for internships as a hallmark of the Enterprise program. “It is an economic necessity that support begin at the top. We have found that it is absolutely imperative for a buy-in from upper management.”⁸ Since managers, supervisors, and mentors can be the determining factor in an internship program’s success, it is necessary to explore why these folks may not see the value in creating internship opportunities and, subsequently, to determine how to gain their commitment, respect, and trust.

8. Gold, Melanie. “The Elements of Effective Experiential Education Programs,” *NACE Journal*, Winter 2002

One of the fairly common, and certainly long-standing, misunderstandings about college students is that they are not skilled or knowledgeable enough to be of any value in the professional workplace. The attitude exists that students are time-consuming and not productive. As a result, many managers do not believe that they have the time, energy, or training to work with, much less supervise, interns. To do so, they think, would be too much work for too little value. However, as evidenced in those organizations who hire interns on a consistent basis, it is clear that this line of thinking is faulty. Interns can be extremely valuable members of an office staff. They can write articles and press releases, conduct research and benchmarking studies, create computer programs and websites, implement marketing plans, coordinate volunteer efforts and community events, and deliver presentations. Granted, there is sometimes a learning curve because some interns come into the organization fairly “green.” And, sometimes, it just might be more time and cost effective to have an experienced staff member complete a task instead of teaching an intern to do it. Neva Adamson, Managing Director of First Peoples Worldwide, based in Fredericksburg, VA, says that, “Although we value what interns bring to our organization, time commitment and skill are something we consider. For instance, during the summer, 20 plus hours per week must be committed to an internship, and it must be for at least 10 weeks, although ideally closer to 12 or 15.” Overall, though, students with energy, enthusiasm and the right supervision can get these jobs done.

For smaller companies, not-for-profits, or in times of general economic downfall, management may seem less than interested in hiring student interns because of budgetary constraints. Concerns over available funding often contribute to the negativity associated with internship programs. Yet, data from the New England Internship Study (conducted during the fall semester of 2006 in which over 6,000 students from 31 universities in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire participated), illustrated that students favor several non-monetary components of an internship experience, including gaining real work experience, learning new skills, building resumes, completing challenging tasks, and making personal career connections. Monetary compensation is surely nice and much appreciated, but

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not necessarily the deciding factor as to whether or not a student will accept an internship opportunity. Given this information, by taking money out of the equation, managers may have to re-formulate their views on internship students and programs.

The Necessity of Creating a Win-Win Situation

Overcoming management's objections to internship programs can be a time-consuming and frustrating task for the staffing or recruitment manager of an organization. However, there is much to be gained from the battle, not the least of which is time. Managers need to understand that, by hiring and training student interns, they can actually gain time, thereby freeing them up for projects long put on the back burner. The advantages to an employer of a well structured, well implemented internship program are, consequently, numerous – more time to complete complex tasks, the cultivation of a recruitment pipeline for full-time hires and the infusion of enthusiasm and creativity from those who have not yet been jaded by the professional work world.

Ellen A. Patterson, Probation Supervisor/Volunteer Coordinator with the 31st District Court Service Unit with Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice, agrees wholeheartedly. She asserts, "I believe that well trained interns can be a tremendous advantage to an agency. They are usually very eager to start working, excited about the job and the opportunity to continue learning, and not demanding of high salaries. The time and energy that interns require up front usually always pays out in the end." First Peoples Adamson is of the same opinion. She concurs, "Done correctly, interns and the organization can both mutually benefit from the internship experience. In developing our intern program, we discussed in depth how interns would impact our office setting. Being that we are so small, there is a fair amount of energy we put into intern development. Despite this, we have seen our return grown on a large scale. It is imperative to think beyond the costs and time of bringing in interns, but instead examine what having an internship program can bring to your organization."

It is of great importance to remember that an internship is not just necessarily a semester-long, finite experience. Many interns work at the same company for more than one semester, completing a more complex assortment of projects and tasks, and/or are often invited back to work during school breaks or during periods when companies are extremely busy. At Beers and Cutler, the internship program receives a great deal of support from the partner and manager level since employees at those levels know how imperative the program is to the future of the firm. Staffing and recruitment managers must educate their managers by explaining to them that the internship program is not just an expensive summer job program. It is an excellent way to identify those who will make strong, long term hires. Jean Donis, College Recruiting Manager for Reston, Virginia's Veris Consulting agrees. "In my experience, those students who participate in internships and are then hired full-time usually perform better and stay longer than full-time hires right off campus. When you hire candidates straight off of campus, you have only a few hours of interview time to make a decision. When you have someone intern, you have them for the whole semester or summer and can place them on a variety of projects and get solid feedback from your managers. An added bonus is that, assuming the intern had a great experience, he or she becomes your best marketing tool once back on campus."

Navigating the Path Towards Commitment and Buy-In

To have a successful internship program, management must be committed to creating challenging, meaningful, relevant work assignments for the students and to providing frequent and constructive feedback. Likewise, managers must be comfortable acting as subjects, themselves, for evaluation as many companies allow interns the opportunity to assess their direct supervisors. More than anything, however, students want to be treated like full-time employees of the company. Enterprise's Artim says that her company considers interns real employees from the outset of the internship. The best internship managers are those folks who fully engage the interns, share the excitement of the internship program, and enjoy the aspects of teaching and mentoring. The primary reason students become interns is to learn; therefore, it is

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critical that managers be passionate about sharing their skills and knowledge. For individuals who do not have either the skill or the desire to teach, mentor, and/or manage, internship students may seem more a hindrance than a help.

In order to fully comprehend the value of internships to both students and employers, managers must be allowed to play an integral role in the development and implementation of the program. The lines of communication between upper management and the human resources/recruiting staff must be open and direct. Disney, Enterprise, IBM, and NASA, all large organizations with structured, well-run internship programs, leave all of their experiential decision making to the managers at each office. Company managers are regularly asked for their feedback, suggestions, and advice regarding changes to the program. It is crucial that managers see the personal benefits of hiring interns; they need to be educated on how interns can make their own lives easier. Ivel suggests that managers take a strategic approach to creating internship opportunities within their departments. She maintains that if managers look at current job descriptions of their employees, they can determine what types of work they would like to expand upon or complete and, subsequently, create an intern assignment from that data. UPP's Ritter has found that this process works well. "I would never hire an intern unless I had a substantial, defined project for him or her to complete. And I almost always do. I feel like I have always come out ahead on the deal."

Frequently throughout the internship, human resources professionals should maintain contact with managers, asking questions, soliciting comments, and reaffirming the value of the program. A relatively easy way to gain support for an internship program is to enlist the help of the individuals within the organization who are most enthusiastic about its mission and purpose. This can be anyone from a newly hired alum to a specific hiring manager to a designated buddy/mentor to the company CEO. In fact, gaining buy-in for internships is best done by developing a unified team of program supporters at all structural levels. Acxiom Corporation's management team understands this. Many of their leaders show their support for Acxiom's internship

program through direct involvement in the college recruiting program. And at Enterprise, managers view their role in the internship program as an honor, not an encumbrance. In fact, Artim states, "They are often competitive about it and want interns assigned to their departments."⁹

Since, at many organizations, interns work directly with the firm's partners, managers, and clients, it is essential that these personnel are fully comfortable with their role as mentors to younger, less experienced employees. Those cream of the crop employees who bring in the greatest sales, enlist the largest clients, and solve the most complex problems out in the professional business world may literally quiver at the mere thought of having to supervise a college sophomore. In the companies with the most notably the difference between supervising college students and supervising full-time, experienced employees. Other components of a successful internship supervisor training program could include: how to develop meaningful student work assignments, how to provide appropriate feedback and constructive criticism, how to create and manage both student and supervisor expectations, how to help students understand how their specific tasks fit into the bigger organizational picture and how to assist students in honing their communication, interpersonal, conflict resolution, and organizational skills.

The Struggle Ahead

While most companies have the best of intentions when it comes to providing their students with a significant and enjoyable internship experience, sometimes they inevitably struggle. Intern Bridge produced a 2007 Internship Data Report which found, based on responses from 6,200 students and 240 organizations, that companies need to do a better job of allowing interns to follow-through on tasks, keeping them busy with meaningful work and increasing project responsibilities as their time within the internship progresses. While a proper orientation to the organization is a great start to any internship program, interns must continue to receive positive messages throughout the entire experience. As Gael Keough, Manager of University Relations Programs for EMC Corporation says, "Students who take part in our internship

9. Gold, Melanie. "The Elements of Effective Experiential Education Programs," *NACE Journal*, Winter 2002

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program are looking for an environment where they can thrive. We incorporate executive networking, social events, company tours, and community service into our program. To round out the total experience, we do also offer competitive compensation, but students come to us because they are looking for the pace, influence, creativity, and strength of working for an industrial leader.”¹⁰ Companies who treat their interns as valuable additions to the organization stand out in the minds of students, and university career center staff members, as well. IBM Program Manager Marilyn Mayo sums up the potential for the ideal internship win-win situation, “The goal is to “wow” interns and to achieve 70 percent of the firm’s college graduate hiring requirements through internships and co-op programs.”¹¹ Mayo says that there is an expression at IBM that reflects the increased competition to acquire the best interns and convert them to full time hires: “Recruit them once, but hire them twice!”¹²

face increased skills shortages and harsh economic forecasts, they must take the time to create, and invest the effort in maintaining, worthwhile student internship experiences that both fulfill the student and satisfy the company.

Laura Szadvari has a Bachelors degree in Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania and a Masters degree in Secondary Education from Marymount University. Ms. Szadvari has spent several years in college recruiting, working as a College Recruiter for the Los Angeles branch of a national strategy consulting firm and as a College Recruiting Manager for the Eastern Region of a national information technology and business consulting firm. She was also hired as an independent consultant for two start-up technology firms wishing to develop and implement a nationally recognized college recruiting program. Before taking her current position as Associate Director of Internships at the University of Mary Washington, Ms. Szadvari worked as an Academic Advisor in the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences at The George Washington University.

Summary

Any business that hires entry-level employees stands to benefit from hosting college interns. By instilling their company with student enthusiasm and productivity, thereby improving their bottom line, employers will also experience the pleasure of assisting emerging graduates with career readiness skills. Successfully managed internship programs serve to lower entry-level recruitment expenses, improve retention, increase organizational efficiency and favorably market the employer on campus. Management collaboration and cooperation is key to this endeavor. The educating, training, and rewarding of supervisors is a necessary facet of any internship program, no matter how large or small, and should, ideally, be a non-negotiable stepping stone to success. World Travel Holdings Co-Chairman and Co-CEO, Brad Tolkin, believes that interns “help our company complete strategic projects cost-effectively and, simultaneously, feed our talent acquisition process.”¹³ As employers continue to

10. Bottner, Richard. “Show Me the Learning,” *EACE Bridges, Early Spring Edition 2006-2007*

11. Stevens-Huffman, Leslie. “College Internship Programs Graduate to a Higher Level,” *Workforce Management Online, April 2006*

12. Stevens-Huffman, Leslie. “College Internship Programs Graduate to a Higher Level,” *Workforce Management Online, April 2006*

13. World Travel Holdings Cast Study, as reported by Intern Bridge

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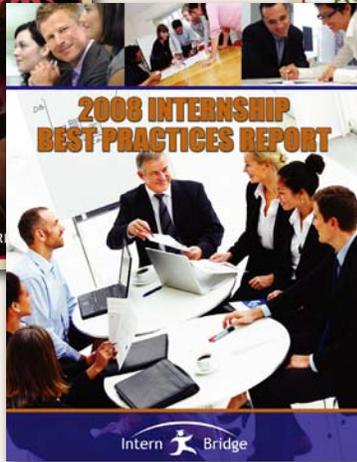
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