

EMPLOYER GUIDE TO A SUCCESSFUL INTERNSHIP

Note: This guide is intended to assist employers in developing successful internships. It is intended to be customized as needed. Users in the education and training fields may find it helpful as they work with employers to place students or jobseekers in internships.

Please note that the term "internship" is used loosely to include any work or service experience where an individual participates in work tasks on the jobsite on a temporary basis.

Why Hire an Intern?

An internship is a work or service experience in which a student or jobseeker of any age or experience level participates at a worksite as an active team member contributing to meaningful projects. The internship should be designed by an employer to accomplish the following goals:

- **To provide the employer with a competent, temporary individual** who can add value to projects and tasks during their internship tenure;
- **To provide the employer with an opportunity to gauge the knowledge, skills and work habits** of an individual, and to assess the individual's fit as a long-term employee;
- **To familiarize employers with the training and instruction that potential employees are receiving in schools, colleges and training centers.**
- **To provide the student or jobseeker with meaningful tasks and responsibilities** so that he or she learns from the experience and applies his or her own knowledge and skills to benefit the employer; and
- **To provide the intern with an opportunity to understand the industry, the company, work culture,** expectations, and day-to-day tasks and responsibilities of a job, so that he or she can make an informed decision about pursuing a career in the field.

Internships Offer Many **Benefits** to Employers, Including:

- **A "try before you buy" advantage:** Get to know potential job candidates before hiring them, and take advantage of the opportunity to train them to your specific company culture and expectations;
- **Reduced turnover and need for re-training:** Entry-level workers who are hired as interns come into full-time positions "ready-to-go" and fully aware of the expectations and responsibilities of the job. This is a cost-saver for employers who otherwise may hire new employees who may not be a good fit over the longer term.
- **Immediate, focused time on specific projects:** Interns can bring new energy and insights to your team. They are perfect for projects that need to get out the door, or for the longer term projects that need focused time.
- **More time for senior staff to devote to advanced projects:** Interns can play a key role in allowing senior staff to focus on big sales or higher impact, more advanced projects.
- **Supervisory and management experience for your existing staff:** Interns need mentors and supervisors. This is an excellent opportunity for your existing staff to gain management experience.

Finally, keep in mind that hiring an intern is easy. If you are hiring an adult jobseeker as an intern, it is no different from hiring a temporary employee. If you are hiring a student intern, find out whether there are any school requirements that must be met as part of their work experience, and whether their school covers costs such as workers compensation.

Designing Your Internship Position – Five Design Features

You will get the most out of your interns' time and talents if you plan ahead. Think about the needs an intern could fill at your organization, and design positions accordingly. Here is a checklist of design features and questions to consider:

1 Develop a strong job description that addresses the following decision points:

- What does the organization hope to achieve from hiring an intern? Will the intern work on a specific, high-need project, or will the work cover a variety of projects? What specific duties will they assume?
 - Internships that fail generally do so because the intern was not given enough work, or provided work that allowed them to sufficiently show their skills.
 - Consider mixing up their workload with the types of work any good employee might do, including specific responsibilities on unique projects, day-to-day general support work, and assignments to handle the unexpected, immediate needs that come up in any business.
 - Incorporating a variety of work allows them to demonstrate diverse talents and abilities, and allows you to see how they react to different tasks and responsibilities.
- What specific skills, talents and knowledge are you seeking in an intern?
 - Will this person be working with a team, on their own, or both? Will they be doing research and analysis, direct client relationship management, or hands-on technical work? Will the work require a high degree of creativity, or will it require an ability to follow precise instructions?
 - Are you seeking someone who already has knowledge in the field or job type, or someone you can train up to your unique needs and culture?
 - Create high, yet realistic, standards in your job description. You are hiring an intern, not an experienced, advanced worker. Look for interest areas, skills, talents and knowledge that can be developed and expanded.
- How long will the internship be? Are you looking for a student for a summer internship, or someone who is available during the school year? Would you prefer someone (such as an adult jobseeker or dislocated worker looking to transition into your industry) that is available full time for a short period, or part time for a longer period?
 - You have choices in internship length. You do not want an internship to be too short (one month offers little time to get to know the intern, and is probably not sufficient time for the intern to add real value to your business) nor too long (more than one year may leave your intern with a sense of missed advancement opportunities).
 - Summer internships can often mean a full-time intern since student schedules are more flexible, but they generally are shorter, between 10 to 12 weeks.
 - Consider a project-focused internship if you know you will have an intern for just six to 12 weeks.
 - ◊ For example, an intern may help develop and complete a new product launch, or do specific research. Set a clear end date, with specific accomplishments that must be completed.
 - ◊ Do allow them to also engage in other general support work and staff meetings. This will keep them motivated and allow them to see the full workings of your business.
 - Year-long or longer-term interns generally require more flexibility in scheduling, but have the advantage of providing more time to develop long-term projects, engage in multiple types of work, and demonstrate their skills and abilities.

2 Make a plan for onboarding or orientation, as well as ongoing engagement of your intern in staff meetings and team networking.

- Cover the basics: office tour, introductions to all staff, dress code, hours, other relevant policies of your organization, where they'll be working exactly (their desk), pay period and payment information, access to email and servers, resources and secretarial assistance available to them, staff meetings, etc.
- Review the internship job description together: discuss tasks, projects, expectations, responsibilities, supervisor/mentor, timelines, etc.
- Talk culture: describe the organization's culture, and make a specific appointment for the intern to talk individually with key team members he or she will work with, including his or her supervisor/mentor.

3 Set expectations up front about what could happen post-internship?

- Be clear about where this might go: a full-time job? A part-time job? No jobs available, but something may open up in the near future? Or simply be clear that this is a great opportunity for both of you right now, and that the experience gained by the intern may position him or her well for jobs with other companies in the field.
- Assure him or her that if the internship works well for both, at a minimum, you will serve as a reference for real, hands-on work experience.

4 Identify and assign a supervisor or mentor.

- Someone needs to be clearly assigned the role of supervising and mentoring each intern, including assigning work tasks and projects, providing on-the-job training and mentoring, acting as the "go-to" resource if the intern has questions, and offering regular, constructive feedback along the way. Let this person assist with developing the job description and interviewing candidates.

5 Establish benchmarks and performance criteria to assess progress.

- Interns will look to their mentors/supervisors for feedback. Effective supervisors will provide regular, formal feedback in addition to informal feedback on a variety of issues, including: quality of deliverables; timeliness of deliverables; ability to work with others; communication style and effectiveness; and ability to be creative, resourceful and independent, while also following direction.
 - Effective mentors/supervisors will assess an intern's performance by asking them specific discussion questions. This type of back-and-forth dialogue is often the best way for interns to self-reflect and learn about how their work applies to the organization more broadly. It is also an effective way for supervisors to understand how the intern thinks, interacts and applies their talent.
 - Discussion questions might include: Tell me about the status of X project. What is going smoothly? What is posing the most trouble? Can you see how your work is contributing to the overall organization? What do you see as particular strengths that you are bringing to X project? Where do you feel you could improve? What do you see as a next step on this project, or what do you see as future development opportunities for us related to this project?
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Recruiting an Intern

There are a number of avenues you can pursue to recruit an intern. Consider the following options:

- **The do-it-yourself approach.** Post the position on your website; access job posting sites at universities, colleges or workforce training centers; use your own employees to spread the word that you are looking for an intern; use any existing connections you have with education faculty, training or workforce organizations to spread the word; be a guest lecturer in high school and college classes (contact their career service offices to find out how to do this); or speak with your Workforce Center about opportunities to reach jobseekers and expose your business to potential candidates.
- **Connect directly to high school or college career service departments, Career and Technical Education instructors, pre-collegiate program managers or other points of contact in college programs related to your field and industry.** Ask whether they have an existing internship program, and how you can get involved as a sponsor. If no formal internship program exists, tell them you are seeking an intern and would like their assistance. Share your job description so they can help screen and recruit appropriate internship candidates.
- **Call your local Workforce Center.** These organizations typically work with employers to place youth and young adults in short-term or summer internships. Some also place experienced, re-careering adults in short-term internships. Share your job description with them so they can help screen and recruit appropriate internship candidates.

The Costs of an Internship

- **The financial costs:**
 - **Wages are not required, but highly recommended** in order to set the expectation that this is a serious work experience. Your intern candidate pool will improve if you offer some kind of compensation. A wage also increases ownership in the experience for both the business and the intern. Interns are more likely to take the work seriously if they know they are valued.
 - ◊ **If you do not pay compensation to your intern,** make sure you follow the Fair Labor Standards Guidelines for unpaid “trainees”: <http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.htm>.
 - **You can also offer additional benefits and compensation,** including working with an educational institution to ensure academic credit is provided, if the individual is enrolled in an education or training institution. Depending on the length of the internship, consider limited paid vacation and/or holidays. You may also consider allowing time worked as an intern to accumulate and apply toward benefits if the intern becomes a full-time employee.
 - **Expect to cover the costs of workers’ compensation.** If you are hiring a student intern, check to see if their school covers the costs of workers’ compensation. If they do not, you will need to cover these costs just as you would with a temporary employee.
- **The in-kind costs:**
 - **Assign and train a mentor/supervisor** to each intern in order to provide a “go-to” for interns to ask questions, use as a resource and guide, report to and submit assignments and projects;
 - **Give them an actual space to do their work,** such as a desk, cubicle or office;
 - **Assign an internship coordinator** who can screen, recruit and manage the onboarding process. This may be your existing human resources director, or someone else.

Other **Legal Questions** and Issues

- **If you choose to hire an unpaid intern** and you are a for-profit organization, make sure you understand the six criteria established by the Fair Labor Standards Act for an unpaid intern to qualify as a “trainee.” See Fact Sheet #71: Internship Programs under the FLSA, at <http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.htm>.
- **To limit exposure to liability**, it is generally a good idea to cover interns under your workers’ compensation policy, even if they are unpaid. Some high schools, colleges or Workforce Centers are able to include interns in their own policy, but this is not always the case.

What Happens **After an Internship?**

- **Conduct an exit interview.** This should be to the benefit of you as the employer, to help you improve future internships, and to the intern, so he or she leaves with constructive feedback about their performance. Discuss questions such as:
 - What did you like most about your internship? What tasks or responsibilities were the most satisfying? Did you understand what was expected of you? What specific strengths do you think you brought to this position? What are some of the most valuable skills and new information that you learned? Are there any areas where you think you improved significantly?
 - Did you feel supported by your supervisor/mentor and other staff colleagues? How could future internships be improved? What kinds of projects do you think are best for interns?
- **Clarify hiring expectations before the internship ends.**
 - If you want to transition an intern to a position of employment, make the offer before the internship concludes so you can discuss transitions and new roles and responsibilities in-person.
 - If you know you want to maintain contact with this person for possible future hire, tell him or her, and verify that you have all their current contact information. Connect on LinkedIn or another site in case his or her email or phone number changes
 - If you are not in a position to hire or not interested in hiring, let them know you will provide a reference as needed.
- **Provide letters of recommendation, if appropriate**, and if you can, make immediate recommendations to your exiting intern on potential employers they should consider as a next step.

References:

This guide was developed based on information gathered from interviews with high schools, colleges, nonprofits, workforce centers and employers in Colorado that engage in either placing or hiring interns, as well as the following existing guides:

1. The Nebraska Department of Economic Development *InternNE* Employer Guidebook: http://neded.org/files/businessdevelopment/internne/EmployerGuidebook_DevelopingSuccessfulInternshipProgram.pdf
2. Rutgers University Internship Program Development 101: <http://careerservices.rutgers.edu/interndev.shtml>