



## How to Design and Implement a Winning Internship Program — and One That Will Grow the Ideal Employee of Tomorrow



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Gone are the days of hiring interns to fetch coffee and complete administrative work. Today, interns are recognized as providing a true value to the workforce — both for the work they complete during their internship and for the experience they will bring to their first job right out of school. My organization, a mid-size firm, launched our internship program in 2012, and I want to share what we've learned about what success looks like.

While we immediately saw the need for strategic concepts like giving interns work assignments that contribute to team projects, setting clear reporting lines, and offering objectives for the summer, it wasn't until our second iteration of the program, in 2014, that we evolved to our current model. Since then, the program has produced returning interns, data analytics that track the success of our program, and full-time hires in many of our offices. While there is no single way an internship program should look, of course, and while the sophistication of internship programs differ depending on the size of a firm and its resources, these experiences have shed light on some winning concepts that can be implemented at most any firm. Here are a few you might want to try out.

**Make the intern feel like a true employee.** Giving interns responsibilities and the sense of what it's like in a career is the most important part of a strong internship program. This is what ultimately prepares them for life after college, and builds a better workforce that you can then recruit from.

Shortly after the intern is hired, make them fully aware of what your company does by offering an introductory 101 course. This could be done by conducting a shortened version of your full-time staff's orientation process. Interns, too, benefit from understanding what each department does, hearing from owners or higher-ups, and interacting

with employees and other new hires. We have a tendency to *not* go to such lengths for an intern because we think they're only here for the summer and it's too much work for too little payoff, but investing the time and effort brings value — generating positive word of mouth about the company, bringing them back as interns next summer, keeping them on as full-time hires, and boosting general employee morale. Again, hiring interns may seem like its more trouble than its worth, but getting your employees to better embrace and understand the values interns can provide, in addition the value it provides to the interns, will benefit both them and the company.

As part of, or immediately after the intern orientation process, set expectations. Make it known to the intern who they report to. We've found that giving interns the opportunity to report to someone one or two levels up, and in their selected area (vs. HR, for example), offers clarity and ensures they get real work assignments. And since this person is typically in a similar age range at our company, the pairing could be less intimidating for the intern and invites questions and allows for mistakes. That constructive feedback is essential for someone learning how to navigate a new industry/career; this can take place during regular check-ins with the supervisor or team. These conversations are also good opportunities for interns to raise their hands and share ideas.

Another way to ensure your interns feel like true employees is to expose them to senior-level employees or owners. This could be through interactive lunch-and-learn sessions led by the owner or executives, one-on-one meetings, or other gatherings. Outside of owners and executives, expose the interns to as many people within your organization as possible; this builds their professional network and soft skills, and prepares the interns for real-world experiences. If your organization has clients, the same goes for exposing interns to clients.

Whether the interns go on to work for you full-time, or to do so for another company, these real-world experiences and interactions prepare them fully to step into demanding positions. Miles McCollum participated in an internship with our firm in summer 2017 while studying at Harvard. He worked with our higher education group, and is now a full-time employee with us. He says, "As an intern, I was exposed to a spectrum of the firm's work as I contributed to actual projects. On a day-to-day basis, I could be meeting with various campus stakeholders, helping conceptually reprogram an existing building, studying the various on- and off-campus housing markets, or conducting demographic research. Interns here are given many of the same responsibilities as other employees, and given extensive opportunity to demonstrate their value. I'm happy to say I'm still with the company today."

**Include the interns and help them *feel* included.** Giving interns autonomy and responsibility — as mentioned above — is absolutely important, but interns' work — however rewarding — won't ultimately inspire and change them if they're working in isolation. The interns' experience should be about more than just their work; it should be about

making connections with colleagues at all levels and building their networks. So here are some ways to include them and set them up to feel inspired:

- Create a collaborative work space for the interns that builds comradery (we affectionately call ours the “intern bullpen”).
- Invite interns to staff meetings and reoccurring or standing team meetings.
- Schedule group meetings or video calls with representatives from across the company so that interns can ask questions and gain perspectives from different levels of the organization. Provide question guidelines, but follow their lead and allow them to ask anything from navigating work-life balance to dealing with project deadlines.
- Plan a fun event to close out the interns’ time with your company (e.g., baseball game, trivia night, escape room, improv workshop [Improv is great for public speaking!]).

The goal: show that work is so much more than our daily responsibilities, and reinforce how organizations contribute to workers’ experience. Danny May, who’ll be senior at Miami University of Ohio, participated in an internship this past summer with our firm. He says, “One of the biggest contributions for the internship being a success was the way the staff made me feel like family. Whether it was working with the president, the VP for business development and marketing, or someone in HR, I felt like I wasn’t just an intern; I was part of the Brailsford and Dunlavey family.”

Of course, inclusion becomes a greater challenge if your firm is spread across multiple offices. Our organization has 10 offices across the country and we’ve found that it’s best, if you’re planning something in one city, to plan the same event or a similar event in other cities. Stay uniform with your program to ensure equity. Another tip: Services like BlueJeans, WebEx, and Skype help interns connect with everyone over video chat, while Slack is great for quick, day-to-day messaging.

Finally, be sure to communicate to full-time employees how you hope they’ll engage with the interns. Working with interns can admittedly feel like a drag — can be a lot of explaining, tasking, checking in, etc. Remind your employees that these interactions might take time and effort, but can be immensely rewarding for all involved. The full-time employees can get help on their work and experience coaching, the company can get stronger work and happier workers, and the interns can get incredible skill-building and enjoyment.

**Build your brand by investing in your interns.** Create a budget early on to determine how much your company will spend on your program. Does that mean buying your interns lunch once a week? Or maybe it's a fun, branded T-Shirt. Whatever you decide, make sure it's something your interns will want and feel glad they received. Think of this as investing in brand recognition for your company. In turn, they should value their experience and ideally want to return for another internship, be excited to seek full-time employment with you, or share their positive experience with someone they know — or *everyone* they know, in the case of social media. And don't forget about National Intern Appreciation Day in July. All of these efforts will contribute to your interns' positive experience, helping them see workplaces as spaces of appreciation and opportunity. Since we all want to hire employees with this attitude, it makes sense to help *build* it where we can.

Our budget allows us to pay our interns an hourly rate over minimum wage that is based on the area of the country they work in. We've found that a paid intern is a happy intern. This truly makes them feel like part of the workforce and, at the end of the day, will contribute to their success at your company because lessened financial worries can increase one's ability to work harder and better. If you're not planning on paying your interns, you must provide skills and opportunities that benefit them; check the Federal Labor Standards Act-specific criteria before going that route.

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Another way that we invest in our interns, as briefly aforementioned, is through lunch-and-learn sessions. Some are led by firm executives, but really we take advantage of the skills and expertise found throughout the firm. We've done lunch-and-learns on general topics such as professional etiquette, interview prep, and resume review. We've also provided sessions on company- and industry-specific topics, such as an Excel 101, public speaking, or market analyses. It takes time/resources to put these sessions together and give them. But our interns are going out into the business world as more capable, more confident professionals.

From Danny May's perspective, as well, the investment is worth it. "One of the highlights during the internship program was getting to expand my business skill set through the lunch-and-learn meetings. I got tips from HR, advice on public speaking, and practice using Excel spreadsheets — which was great to get comfortable with outside of the classroom."

**Finally, track your success. No program is complete without this knowledge.** Create and send out a survey prior to your interns' departure. Be specific in your survey in order to evaluate each piece of your program.

After analyzing our results, we learned which lunch-and-learn sessions were the most helpful, and we were able to improve our future program. Interns really enjoy interaction with the owners and colleagues across the firm at different levels; this is how we decided to implement our group meetings with representatives from across the firm. In any event, analytics can only help your program get better and better. And of course the best measure of success is having interns return in future years!

