

What Makes a Great Internship—for Companies and Interns

Employers should think of this as a potential long-term relationship rather than a summer fling.

By Cheryl Winokur Munk April 13, 2023

Many companies use summer internships as a springboard for hiring. But they don't always do a good job of making sure their programs deliver big benefits to the interns and the company.

Getting it right can be especially important now, in a tight job market, where hiring off the street is challenging. To be successful, experts say, internships should be structured so interns set off on the right foot to be good employees when hired. But they should also ensure that interns are learning a lot, having a good time and getting a good impression of the company. After all, even if they don't get hired immediately, they may end up circling back to the company later in their careers when they're more seasoned. An effective program can also ensure that the company benefits from a fresh perspective.

"Think about internships like dating. Is the company looking for one date or a long-term relationship?" says Jennifer Deal, senior research scientist at the Center for Effective Organizations at the USC Marshall School of Business. "If the latter, realize that the intern will need to feel valued, get something they desire (like relevant experiences) and feel as if there's a future for them at the company, or you won't get the second date, let alone the long-term employee relationship you're looking for."

Here are seven ingredients to a successful relationship.

Set reasonable expectations

Some companies give giant sales pitches rather than helping interns understand what they are actually going to be doing, says Robert Kelley, distinguished service professor of management at Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business. Sometimes referred to as the "seduction strategy," managers might take interns to fancy restaurants with a top executive at each table or have nights out at professional sporting events.

This leaves the impression that these events will be regularly occurring when interns come to work full time, though this seldom actually happens. Similarly, managers might stress, for instance, how much fun it is to work there or how exciting the work is or how close-knit everyone in the organization is. They fall short, however, when it comes to setting realistic expectations about day-to-day work.

The rah-rah approach means that interns can't make informed decisions about whether it could be a good opportunity for them. Being straightforward can also boost the likelihood that interns will accept jobs with the company when the internship is over, and it may also lead to better longer-term retention.

Dr. Kelley points to a 1988 research study that found that recruits for the U.S. Army who were given a more accurate picture of both the positives and negatives of the job had significantly lower turnover in their military careers than those recruits who were not given such information.

Build a relationship

Robert J. Khoury, founder and chief executive of Agile Rainmakers, a business-development consulting and advisory firm in Chicago, hosts a series of individual 30-minute Zoom conversations with each intern who accepts a summer position at his company. Over several months, he builds a relationship with the intern by discussing topics such as school, the intern's interests, what's happening in the company and what projects the intern might work on.

"It's a 90-minute investment over four months, so when the intern shows up, you already know each other and their interests," says Mr. Khoury. "That 90 minutes will turn the experience into gold."

Make every day count

Companies have interns for a short time, commonly eight to 16 weeks, so every minute counts, says Scott Redfearn, executive vice president of global human resources for the global consulting firm Protiviti.

He recommends companies carefully think through what they want interns to achieve on a week-by-week basis. For instance, at his company, during the first week, interns learn about the organization, its values and priorities, and how interns fit into the teams. The company also gives the interns introductions to leaders and helps them build networks among themselves.

The next few weeks are project-based. Then, toward the end of the internship, the company organizes a day of service where interns pick a local project to volunteer on, so they understand that charity work is part of the company's culture.

Let interns multitask

College students are multitaskers, so giving them one project for the entire summer is "like a death sentence," Mr. Khoury says. With multiple tasks, interns can avoid the likelihood they will be bored and frustrated when there is natural downtime.

Keep close tabs

Interns don't need babysitting, but they do need someone who takes an interest in helping develop their talents, Dr. Kelley says. That person shouldn't have the role foisted upon them, but rather it should be someone, ideally closer in age to the interns, who wants to help them with networking and skill building, as opposed to just showing them where the bathroom is. "A lot of mismatches happen here," Dr. Kelley says.

Interns also benefit when they have an end-of-day check-in with their immediate supervisor or program coordinator, says Peter Cappelli, director of the Center for Human Resources at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. These are a time to discuss what they learned that day, and what was puzzling and most interesting. Interns appreciate the hands-on, personal attention, and it helps explain things to interns they may not understand and to get a sense of the big picture, he says.

Learning from the inevitable mistakes is crucial, says Jessica Schaeffer, vice president of LaSalle Network, a national staffing and recruiting firm. She says she could simply tell them about mistakes she found on pages 3, 7 and 9 of a presentation, but instead she goes into greater detail to make it a teachable moment. She might ask, for example, how many times the intern looked over the report and whether it was reviewed on a phone screen, computer or printout.

"They really appreciate it, and the best thing for the employer is they don't do it again and it makes your life so much easier," Ms. Schaeffer says.

Make it real

Be sure to give interns work that is valuable to the company, Mr. Redfearn says. Real work "lets you see them in action, and it gives them more experience from which to make their job decision," he says.

Another mistake companies make is to overemphasize the social aspects of the internship while underplaying day-to-day work aspects of the job. This sets the stage for disappointment and frustration when they join as a full-time employee and they aren't routinely taken on dinner cruises or to other elaborate social activities, says Heidi Brooks, senior lecturer in organizational behavior at the Yale School of Management.

Stay in touch

Companies that want to increase the chances of the interns returning for full-time work should stay in touch after the internship ends through means such as webinars with senior management and personal phone calls, Mr. Redfearn says. Protiviti also sends them emails and other updates about what's happening within the company.

"You have to keep that fire going," Mr. Redfearn says.

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