



## **TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS**

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*Jane has worked with interns in a variety of different capacities for many years. During that time she realized that the key to successful internship programs for everyone involved was organization. Following is a three part series on how to make internships a win-win for everyone.*

### **Part One**

*How to make internships a win-win for everyone*

### **Part Two**

*An employer's perspective – A practical guide to developing and achieving best results from intern programs*

### **Part Three**

*For interns - How to get the most from your internship*

## **TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS – Part One**

### ***How to make internships a win-win for everyone***

*Whether internships are a nightmare or a positive experience depends on the approach taken to hiring and managing interns. If you're considering hiring interns; already have interns, or have managed them in the past and sworn you'll never do it again, this series of articles may be helpful. If you're considering doing an internship this is for you too.*



*U.S. Green Building Council Central Texas–Balcones (USGBC CT-B) Chapter's first interns with author Jane Baxter Lynn, the Chapter's Executive Director at the time.*

## **THE TOP LINE**

Interns have saved me many times and once I figured out how to work with them it became a win-win for everyone.

Interns can significantly impact an organization's ability to develop. Equally, an internship can help students gain real life experience and networking opportunities that can potentially lead to jobs. When done right, the rewards far outweigh the downsides; the key is developing a system that benefits both parties.

Over the years, many friends and colleagues have said they won't use interns or don't enjoy doing so because it's too stressful. Many have said it's a constantly revolving door and that it requires too much time to seek, train and manage them. It seems quicker and easier to do it oneself. Engaging interns so they actually show up is even difficult. And, for those of us who are out of the office a lot, keeping interns occupied and motivated when one is not around is also a challenge.

I felt the same way until I figured out how to work with them. Like anything in life, if one plans ahead; has clear objectives; assigns roles up front, and goes into it with the right mind-set a great deal can be achieved with less time involved.

In hind-sight, it probably wasn't productive for the interns either. They likely felt they were in the way and weren't learning or achieving much. While there are undoubtedly some wonderful intern programs available to students, feedback I have heard from many interns highlights how often they feel that their value is not appreciated and how little they learn from their internships.

## **THE KEY COMPONENTS**

The key to a successful intern program is ensuring it is a two-way street. It comes down to these fundamentals: a mentoring approach; providing mutual benefits; encouraging open communication; clearly defining roles, responsibilities, goals, timelines and expectations early in the process; empowerment, trust and flexibility.

Providing interns with a project or assignment they can own will give them something to do even when you are unavailable. It will also challenge them to use their initiative and creativity.

A well-developed intern program includes reaching out and participating with career services departments at universities and colleges. This, along with internship information on your online properties, will eventually have interns applying for positions instead of you having to spend time searching for them.

From experience, I would also recommend that you don't take on an intern unless they can commit to at least 12 hours a week. Less than that, it generally becomes more trouble than it is worth.

## **THE REWARDS**

The obvious benefit from an internship program is readily-available labor at minimal cost. However, there are other rewards as well.

You gain contribution from fresh thinkers who are willing to work hard and to learn with relatively limited commitment on your part. Having an intern, means that you can focus on the strategic tasks, while getting the necessary day-to-day work completed. Additionally, an intern program gives you first pick from a talented pool of potential employees who already know your business.

If you're new to managing staff, you can gain valuable management skills through the development of interns. For me, a large part is the personal satisfaction of mentoring someone at the beginning of their career. At the same time, learning new skills and behavior from upcoming generations can be highly rewarding and may help you get your job done more easily.

## **THE MOTIVATION**

Motivating your interns to give you desired results, first and foremost requires you to be a mentor, understanding that for many this is their first experience working in an office environment. I've seen some significant changes in interns as they gain confidence and take ownership of their work. The reward is engagement and a willingness to achieve results beyond your expectations.

Early on, establish what the intern would like to gain from the internship and what he or she would like to do career-wise. It will enable you to provide activities that will assist them in future.

Also ask the intern to identify any weaknesses that he or she would like your help addressing – this can be as basic as learning how to make phone calls on behalf of an organization; developing technical computer skills, or understanding how to present themselves in a professional manner.

Other actions include:

- Being clear about your needs, expectations, job requirements, and resources available to help them be successful
- Listening to their needs
- Allowing flexibility to accommodate school schedules
- Explaining how their contributions are important to the organization, no matter how menial the task
- Giving them credit where credit is due.

Emphasize the benefits too. These may include working for school credit; learning workplace behavior; training opportunities for career growth, and gaining from a mentor's experience and network. Importantly, don't lose sight of why they are doing the internship. After all, interns are hoping to gain the knowledge and experience necessary to get a "real job" when school is over.

## **EXPECTATIONS**

As one of my ex-interns put it, "Be prepared to get your own coffee"! She wasn't saying that interns shouldn't make coffee ... what she meant was that you should expect more from them than just being your lackey.

Having said that, remember that it's a two-way street! Interns need to understand that they are expected to behave like employees. This might entail adhering to committed schedules, meeting agreed deadlines or dressing appropriately for the office. Even when our interns were working out of my home office, we had formal office hours, dressed as if we were in an office environment and learned to work together as a team by having regular 'staff' meetings to review progress, check in with how they were doing, and share any lessons learned.

Make it clear from the start that if they don't do what is expected, you may end the internship and please don't give a positive reference when it is undeserved as you will not be doing them a favor in the long term. On the upside, they can expect your support if they do a good job. Be proud of the work they are doing, and give them credit for their contributions.

The next part in the series provides a quick tips checklist, along with some useful reference links. Part Three will look at internships from the students' perspective.

## **TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS – Part Two**

### ***An employer's perspective – A practical guide to developing and achieving best results from intern programs***

*Following on from Part One of my Tips for Successful Internship Programs, I thought it would be useful for you as an employer to have a check list and some references to use when developing your intern program.*



Summer interns working together on their clearly defined projects with the USGBC CT-B Chapter

## A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Just to reiterate, the key to a successful intern program is ensuring it is a two-way street - a win-win for both parties. It comes down to these fundamentals: being a mentor; providing mutual benefits; encouraging open communication; early in the process clearly defining roles, responsibilities, goals, timelines and expectations; empowerment, trust and flexibility.

## QUICK TIPS

1. **Have a plan** - clearly define needs, roles, responsibilities, goals and related tasks.
2. **Are you legal?** Decide whether the internship is paid or unpaid and check that you aren't violating The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)<sup>\*(1)</sup>.
3. **Identify benefits** - Consider if you have sufficient benefits to offer the intern to make it worth their while.
4. **Formalize hiring process** - Have a formal hiring process that includes an application with cover letter explaining why they are suitable for your position, and hold at least one interview, either by phone or in-person. Assures you he or she is the right fit and gives the intern a real-life interview experience.
5. **Provide orientation** - Use the first day to introduce them to the organization and their role. Have them read marketing materials and guidelines/handbooks, as well as your social media and web sites. Simple as it sounds, don't forget to show them where the facilities are and introduce them to other people in your office. It will help them to understand how their work fits into the overall organization's success. It will also show that you value their involvement.
6. **Involve them** - For example, ask them to contribute to enhancing the orientation process. A group of my interns at the U.S. Green Building Council Central Texas-Balcones Chapter took the initiative to create an Intern Handbook, designed to bring new interns up to speed quickly without my having to spend too much time with them.
7. **Protect your organization** - Have interns sign confidentiality and conflict of interest agreements, if you have them, not only to protect your organization but also to introduce the interns to the legalities of a professional workplace. It's fascinating to see how many of them will willingly sign these documents without finding out first what their implications are. This always serves as a great lessons learned moment.
8. **Confirm timeline** - Find out the intern's end date upfront so you can work backwards from there to determine appropriate goals and timelines for their work. Consider an ongoing program that doesn't restrict yourself or the intern to semesters etc.
9. **Set measurable goals** - Identify tasks and projects that will result in the intern owning their work for their portfolios. It will also make managing them less time consuming and enable them to work on projects without constant supervision. They will be more efficient if a vested interest exists.
10. **Don't micro-manage them** - Particularly today's generation does not like being micro-managed as they are so used to multi-tasking and getting 'stuff' done. Many young people have the ability to learn fast. Give them clearly defined projects and encourage them to use their initiative and you'll be amazed at what they can produce for you, above and beyond your expectations. Having said that, do have checks and balances to ensure positive outcomes.

11. **Trust them** to produce results as they'll feel a commitment to produce for you. Equally important explain how their contribution matters to the organization's success.
12. **Encourage open communication** – If they are having issues with balancing school, with second jobs and their internship, encourage them to talk to you about it. If they don't, you'll get frustrated because they will become unreliable and work will be left incomplete. They need to learn that more often than not there is a solution to a problem that works well for everyone. Only by letting you know is problem solving possible.
13. **Be flexible** – Understand that their first priority is passing school so work with them to ensure that they achieve that result. By doing so, you'll generally find that they'll make up the time and more to get your work done.
14. **Check-in** – Checking in regularly with the interns to see if they are on track or have any questions.
15. **Evaluate performance** – Do this on a regular basis and guide them (constructively) on ways to enhance their performance. Also highlight their accomplishments regularly. Students undertaking internships for credit will require at least two evaluations during the semester with you. Please take them seriously, as what you say in them can impact on their success both in school and beyond. Ideally involve the student in your evaluation and ask them to give you feedback on how you can help them more.
16. **Help them create a network** – Introduce them to other professionals and be proud of the work they are doing, giving them credit for their contributions to your organization, particularly with your leadership group or peers.
17. **Don't keep an intern if it's not working out** - Let the intern go if his or her contribution or reliability is being counterproductive to your organization's operations.

## TOOLS & RESOURCES

Hiring and managing interns requires pre-planning and a structured approach. To help manage your interns with limited stress and great results here are some tools and resources to develop:

- General Intern Program outline for use on your website and when publicizing opportunities to college career services and other outlets, incorporating organization background, purpose of program, location, whether paid or unpaid<sup>\*(1)</sup> organization, dates positions open, overall role, benefits, and job requirements.
- A page on your website dedicated to your Internship program<sup>\*(2)</sup> so students looking for intern opportunities will find it when searching.
- Job descriptions and requirements for each role (if you have more than one).
- A spreadsheet of universities and college career services departments; related college advisors; college job fairs, and other online outlets such as job boards on professional association and company sites; related sites like indeed.com, USAjobs.com<sup>\*(6)</sup> for submission of intern opportunities to them. Don't forget to encourage your existing interns to spread the word to their peers about the opportunities.
- A tracking spreadsheet for your interns, particularly if you employ multiple interns at one time to include name, contacts, days of the week work, hours/times, school name, discipline/college, degree, starting date, end date, whether for credit or not.
- Task list spreadsheet to assist both of you with tracking activities and prioritizing.

- Performance review process.
- An intern handbook/orientation so that they can get themselves up to speed on the organization and how your operation works without needing a major time commitment by you.

## REFERENCES

- \*(1) The Unpaid Intern, Legal or Not by Steven Greenhouse, New York Times April 2, 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/03/business/03intern.html>
- \*(2) U.S. Green Building Council Central Texas – Balcones Chapter Intern program <http://usgbc-centraltexas.org/volunteer/internships-2> - web page created at the suggestion of the chapter's interns, highlighting the roles, requirements and benefits
- \*(3) Five Reasons to Hire an Intern & Three Reasons Not To by Heather R. Huhman @YECWomen, founder and President of Come Recommended - in *Forbes* online 12/6/2011 [5 Reasons You Should Hire an Intern -- and 3 ... - Forbes](#) - Great piece on reasons for and against taking on interns
- \*(4) ["Ripping off young interns is routine, but it's still wrong"](#) - an opinion piece on unpaid internships by Zoe Williams @zoewilliams of *The Guardian* online 3/21/2012 - from a UK perspective.

## TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS – Part Three

### ***For interns - How to get the most from your internship***

*Students are often required to undertake an internship or may choose to do so. Either way, working as an intern can provide a tremendous opportunity to gain real life experience and build networks potentially leading to jobs. Making the most out of an internship will depend a lot on your approach and how much you capitalize on the opportunity.*

*Part Three of my series on tips for successful internship programs looks at how to be successful as an intern. My sincere thanks to the many amazing interns who assisted me with this article and in so many other ways.*



Interns focused on their clearly defined projects with USGBC CT-B Chapter

## **What to look for when applying for an internship**

There's nothing worse than turning up for an internship and realizing that the person for whom you are going to work does not really know what they want you to do. When seeking an internship, here are a few pointers to consider:

- Look for companies or organizations that have a formal intern program. If they don't, determine whether the potential employer has a clear idea of the job scope or roles available and the expectations of you.
- Know what you would like to get out of the internship, from both a professional and personal development perspective.
- Find out what the benefits are, whether it is a paid or unpaid internship.
- Ask if the employer is willing to be your mentor and ensure that you gain experience relevant to your future career.
- Decide if the person is someone with whom you will be able to communicate as you attempt to juggle school schedules, second jobs, your home life and the internship.
- Do you feel that you will learn something and, ideally, add value to the organization?

In a PR News Week Career Guide article on internships, the writer Lisa LaMotte emphasized that finding the right fit within a program is just as important for an intern as it is for the organization. Discuss with your potential employer how you can work together to identify projects and tasks that will teach you, either career specific skills or general business acumen. Be open to new ideas.

As one of my interns said: "I enjoyed having a choice as to where I could use my talents, and I wound up working on something I would never have thought of doing. The benefit to me working as an intern was the access to people in the organization and their knowledge. I also enjoyed having a lot of autonomy, with clear responsibilities and deadlines." Jennifer

## **The Benefits**

There are many benefits to doing an internship. I have had some amazing interns work with me. They all 'got' that the more they put into it, the more they would get out. Those that didn't, either didn't work out or didn't really gain much from the experience.

Some of the benefits include:

- A salary, if it is a paid internship.
- Opportunity to experience an office situation and how a business is run before formally heading into the job market.
- Job prospects, either within the organization or through the employer's network and clients, if you do a good job.
- Earning school credit.
- On the job training opportunities for career growth.
- Possibility of gaining a mentor who will use his or her network to facilitate your career decisions and may be with you throughout your career.
- Working with your peers, if there are more than one, and potentially making life-long friends.
- Chance to teach an older generation new skills such as how to be tech-savvy.



## **The Challenges**

There are challenges involved in undertaking an internship. Finding a position with the right balance of opportunity and time commitment to fit your degree plan and income is the most common. Once you start, managing the internship and a full course load and paid jobs and relationships can be extremely stressful. Also, staying motivated and on task when your employer doesn't make the time to clearly define your role and goals can be very difficult, particularly if you end up doing only menial tasks like getting the coffee. Not feeling like your contributions matter in the organization as a whole can also be challenging.

"I feel the word "intern" has taken on a somewhat negative connotation that leads some people to believe the position isn't important, so the intern needs to know that what they're doing is impactful. If you give the intern a meaningful role and explain how their contributions are important to the organization (present and future), you will have an intern who is excited to contribute." Brad

## **Some suggested Dos and Don'ts**

**Make the most of your internship** – Help your new employer to identify your strengths and weaknesses so the internship can be tailored to helping you grow.

**Set yourself some objectives** – Triston had three objectives when he joined our intern team:

1. Learn more about the green/sustainability industry
2. Cultivate a network capable of advising me on entrepreneurial projects
3. Meet my degree internship requirement

"All three objectives were met with added benefits. As a result of participating in the USGBC CT-B internship program, I am better able to determine angle of approach, whether corporate or government, to achieve favorable feedback or support for my projects."

**Behave like an employee** – It is your choice whether you take on an internship, whether paid, unpaid or for credits; once you've made that choice you must treat it like a real job and commit to it as such. Above all be reliable. This might entail adhering to agreed schedules, letting your employer know in advance if there is a problem, meeting agreed deadlines or dressing appropriately for the office. If you do a good job, you can expect support from your employer in your job search.

**Be Honest** – Tell your employer exactly what your availability and goals are upfront so that you can design a timetable that fits both of your expectations.

**Be Flexible** - Working for someone who only gives you dull or skivvy jobs to do is totally unrewarding. However, you need to be prepared to do both innovative and mundane tasks, which may include making coffee and doing photocopies. Realize that all tasks are essential and no job is too small or insignificant. As one of my interns Aubri said: "Having a variety of tasks/projects/assignments on which I could work during my internship made things exciting and gave me more experience with different types of events and administrative functions".

**Get them teaching** - Ask thoughtful questions of your employer or peers. Demonstrate how teaching you to do something will directly benefit them and/or make you more efficient.

**Capitalize on constructive criticism** – When given corrections embrace them as a way to better yourself. Learn not to be over-sensitive.

**Listen** – At the risk of sounding like your lecturer, the best way to learn is to listen! Don't assume you know it all. Sometimes listening to someone else's perspective on a situation can show you that there is more than one way to do something. While you're listening look at the person speaking and please don't text, tweet or message while you're being spoken to. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is still considered inappropriate to do so!

**Be Proactive** – If your employer doesn't seem to be clear on what needs to be done, prepare a draft timeline and project outline based on what you know and the length of time you'll be there; see if there is a task or project that you can own for your portfolio. It also enables you to get on with work without requiring constant input. If it doesn't already happen, request a regular check-in with your employer to ensure you're on course in achieving your goals.

**Don't be afraid to ask** – An employer should never be too busy to respond to a carefully thought out question that could enhance your work. Before you ask, do as much research as you can unless you know it is something your employer already knows, in which case don't waste time, ask. Always check if it is convenient to discuss this matter now or if you can arrange a time to review?"

**Get involved** – Think creatively about how the job could be done differently and propose possible alternative solutions (when presenting your thoughts do so in a positive manner, using the word 'enhance' rather than 'improve' when recommending a change to something that already exists so it doesn't imply that it isn't good!). Do not go ahead and make changes before you have discussed it.

**Keep a log** – Make notes of outcomes of conversations about schedules and other important decisions you and your employer make. Many employers are so busy they forget some of the details of those conversations, so an intern following up afterwards to confirm the details helps to ensure a clear understanding of what needs to be done, by whom and by when.

**Communicate** - If you are having issues with balancing school, with second jobs and your internship, talk to your employer about it. Being unreliable and not communicating leads to an untenable situation for you both. More often than not, if you let him or her know you have a problem, you can work out a solution that works well for everyone.

**Take Evaluations Seriously** – If you are undertaking internships for credit, you will be required to complete at least two evaluations with your employer. It is really important to take these evaluations seriously, as they can impact your future job opportunities. Give your employer plenty of notice to complete the form and outline clearly what needs to be done. It's also a good time to give your employer feedback about what you would like to achieve before the end of the internship.

Above all, have fun!

## REFERENCES

- \*(1) U.S. Green Building Council Central Texas – Balcones Chapter Intern program <http://usgbc-centraltexas.org/volunteer/internships-2> - web page created at the suggestion of the chapter's interns, highlighting the roles, requirements and benefits

- \*(2) Mission Capital, an Austin-based non-profit that provides non-profits with valuable services and resources that are either free or affordable, to help strengthen their organizations – has a comprehensive intern program <http://www.501community.org/jobs/category/12>
- \*(3) Lauren Berger’s InternQueen.com <http://internqueen.com/> - wide range of tips, thoughts and connections for students looking to intern.
- \*(4) For interns, ten helpful tips at <http://the99percent.com/tips/5786/Insights-For-The-Interns-Among-Us>

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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