

Implementing a Successful Internship Program

Planning ahead is critical to successful implementation of an internship program. The first steps include:

Identifying an Internship Coordinator

The first step is to identify the person within your company or organization who will coordinate your internship program. This person will be responsible for implementing the various steps identified below to develop the program.

Assessing Internal Needs

The next step in designing your internship program is an assessment of internal projects or staff needs. The internship coordinator should work with staff to evaluate current projects and workload to determine appropriate situations where an intern might contribute. Staff should consider:

- What ongoing tasks take place in my department or organization?
- What is the workload of our department or organization?
- What projects are currently on the “back burner”?

One great use of an intern is to devote time to projects that might currently be on the “back burner” due to insufficient time or talent among existing full-time staff. For example, do you have new materials you would like to develop, or existing brochures you would like to have updated? Would you like to redesign your organization’s website, but just don’t have the time? Interns can be a great source of assistance, given proper supervision, for these labor-intensive tasks.

Allocating Resources

Before your intern’s first day with your organization, you should plan the allocation of resources.

Time Resources

- Will your intern participate in a new employee orientation session?
- How often will the mentor set aside time for regular meetings with the intern throughout the duration of the internship?
- Can others in the department set-aside time to answer questions as they arise?
- How will the intern’s schedule (usually Monday through Thursday, four days per week and offsite professional development seminars on Friday) impact the duties that may be assigned to him/her?

Material Resources

What will your organization need to provide for the intern? You should plan ahead to provide these resources so that your intern can begin work immediately on his/her first day. Some resources you may need to supply could include:

- A computer with particular software installed
- An organizational e-mail account
- A telephone extension
- A voice mailbox
- Office supplies

Implementing a Successful Internship Program (*continued*)

Identifying Mentor, Project Team and Supervisor

Each intern should be assigned to a mentor within your organization. The mentor may be a department head, project leader, or long-time employee who is knowledgeable on the project where the intern will work. The mentor's role should include some initial orientation for the intern, as well as developing an ongoing relationship.

It is beneficial for each intern to be integrated into a department or project team, where he/she will not only learn from completion of his/her own assigned tasks, but will also develop a sense of the bigger picture. Part of the learning experience should be an opportunity for the student to see how his/her own tasks fit into the timeline and outcome of the project as a whole.

Integration into a department or project team can also provide the intern with an opportunity to refine teamwork and communication skills. Others on the team can provide guidance to the intern, both on specific project tasks and on aspects of professional work ethic and culture, such as time management and meeting deadlines, or managing interactions with a difficult customer. Team members can guide the intern in overcoming challenges and learning from his/her mistakes. An intern can benefit greatly from the experience of others on the team.

Interns should be assigned to a supervisor, like any other employee. The supervisor may or may not be the same person as the intern's mentor— that will depend on your organization's size and work structure. The role of the supervisor is to assign day-to-day tasks, monitor progress, and to evaluate the intern's work products or outcome.

Assigning Meaningful Project Work

In addition to integration into a department or project team, attention should be paid to the assignment of meaningful project work. Your intern is not looking to spend the summer making photocopies or getting coffee. Certainly, this does not mean that interns should be exempt from occasionally stuffing envelopes with the rest of the team, but the focus of the internship experience should be devoted to meaningful project work.

Within the scope of your project, consider tasks where an intern will be challenged to apply his/her knowledge or improve his/her skills. Remember that your intern is there to learn and gain experience. Consider your intern's skills and strengths, and give your intern a chance to make a meaningful contribution to a project.