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Bridging the Gap: A Comprehensive Guide to Implementing an Internship Program for Businesses

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Bridging the Gap: A Comprehensive Guide to Implementing an Internship Program for Businesses

by

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Introduction

What is an internship?

A 2022 internship report by the National Association of Colleges and Employers Internship Report found that companies are expecting to hire 22.6% more interns in the following academic year (NACE, 2022). An ideal internship offers meaningful and practical work related to a student's studies and interests and is often used as a "launchpad" from undergraduate education into the workforce. Internships can act as a bridge between undergraduate programs and real-life work by allowing students to learn through practice. Internships can teach students important skills that are not easily taught in the classroom such as communication, time management, networking, and problem-solving. Research conducted by Harvard University and Stanford Research Center has concluded that 85% of future job success comes from having these well-developed soft skills (NSSA, 2011). Internships can last anywhere from the duration of a semester (4 months) to a full year. Whether paid or unpaid, providing interns with the necessary resources and goals to be successful within the organization is the most important measure of a successful internship program. Ultimately, an internship should be a mutually beneficial relationship through which both the student and employer can create value.

Importance of internships for businesses

An internship program is unique in the sense that it can drive value in ways that normal employees cannot. In today's world, it is more important than ever for companies to not only implement these programs but continually restructure and improve them based on their needs. There is a reason "virtually every corporation – Fortune 500, Fortune 1000, and more, has an internship program" (Internship Finder). According to an AACSB accredited University (Marshall), listed are five key benefits of internships for businesses:

1. Organizational productivity- Having a steady flow of interns helps take the load off employees doing day-to-day tasks. This positions these employees to become more strategically focused and drive more value for the company.
2. Early training- Interns can see many facets of the company and processes within three months. This in-depth training comes at a cheaper price than training a salaried employee.
3. University relationships- Internship programs help drive future recruiting efforts with universities. As more and more awareness about the company is created at a university level through the interns, future recruiting efforts become stronger and easier to maintain.
4. Cost efficiencies- Mid-level staff is provided with the opportunity to gain valuable management skills that they would not have otherwise received. The cost efficiencies are seen up the entire value chain, providing personal and career growth within the entire organization.
5. Fresh perspectives- Interns can bring a fresh and new perspective to an otherwise "stagnant" organization. Bringing in new ideas and skills can reap benefits beyond measure.

Implementation overview

Developing a successful internship program can be divided into three main stages. The first stage is planning and designing. This is where the organization identifies internal needs, determines the timeline and structure of the program, establishes roles, and creates a high-level budget to be presented to key stakeholders. The second stage is recruiting and selecting. This includes defining the eligibility criteria for potential candidates, creating a job description, marketing and connecting through various ways, screening, interviewing, and selecting. The

final stage is managing and supervising. This stage includes onboarding and orientating, setting performance expectations and goals, evaluating performance, and managing relationships. Organizations can use this guide as a framework to build and implement a new internship program.

Stage 1: Planning and Designing

Identify needs and objectives

The first and most important step to implementing an internship program is to identify the needs of the company and the objectives of the program. To ensure success, you need to identify both goals that the program should achieve for the business and the skills and knowledge that the program should aim to generate in interns. Every company is unique and has different needs, so this step is crucial to ensuring that interns can have a meaningful impact and bring value to the company.

Performing an internal needs assessment is the most effective way to accomplish this first step. The needs assessment should be completed by key stakeholders within different parts of the company, allowing for an unbiased overview of the current needs of the organization. The assessment should answer three main questions:

1. *What are the current ongoing tasks of the organization?*
2. *What processes currently need extra hands to complete?*
3. *What projects have been ignored due to a lack of resources?*

This assessment will uncover areas of improvement for the business and will help the program better align with the needs and objectives of the business. For example, it may be found that Company A is losing a competitive advantage due to a lack of market research because employees are tied up in day-to-day tasks. An intern can alleviate this issue by either assisting in the day-to-day tasks or performing external research that current employees do not currently have the time to do. Interns can bring great value to a company, but only if the overall needs of the business are identified early on and the program is structured to assist these needs. If an internal assessment is not thoroughly completed and evaluated, then the future interns will lack structure and focus, leading to a less-than-desirable outcome for both the company and the intern(s).

Determine timeline and structure

Once the needs and objectives have been identified, you can begin to plan the timeline and structure of the program. Most internship programs are either throughout the fall or spring semester or over the entirety of the summer. Detailed academic calendars can be found on the university website. It is important to note that you will have to be more flexible during semester-long internships, as interns will also be enrolled in classes.

After determining the duration of the program, the next step is to draft a detailed timeline of the program, including the schedule of activities, training sessions, site visits, and project deadlines. These activities should be directly pulled from the needs assessment that was completed in the previous section. A timeline will help structure the program beyond the intern's day-to-day tasks. The following is a condensed example timeline for reference:

Week 1:
- Onboarding and orientation

- Meet with supervisor to discuss expectations and goals
- Introduction to the company
- Training on tools and software

Week 2:
- Introduction to daily tasks
- Shadowing and training on "day-to-day"
- Meet with supervisor to answer questions

Week 3:
- Assign first project
- Project related research and analysis
- Collaborate if necessary

Week 4:
- Continue work on project and tasks
- Attend meetings / trainings

Week 5:
- Project check-in
- Show findings to supervisor and stakeholders
- Gain feedback

Week 6:
- Work on revisions from feedback
- Collaborate if necessary

Week 7:
- Continue work on project and tasks
- Meet with supervisor for final input

Week 8:
- Present final project to team
- Discuss internship with supervisor (strengths, areas of improvement)
- Conduct exit interview (Deloziere)

Define roles and responsibilities

To ensure the program operates smoothly, defining the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved is a necessary step. First, the supervisor should be identified. A main reason many internship programs become ineffective and fail is because "they do not have a leader with a set vision in charge" (Peek). The supervisor shall help create the program and oversee its implementation. The supervisor will essentially "run" the program, including the assignment of tasks, scheduling, performance evaluation, and provide guidance to interns along the way. The chosen supervisor should have a clear vision of the goals and objectives of the program that were identified in stage one. Secondly, identify potential mentors for the interns. This should be someone who can work closely with the intern, providing more direct guidance on tasks. Ideally, the mentor role is filled by someone who is currently completing tasks that the future intern will work on. The mentor role should be filled by "entry- or junior-level employees who come from a similar path and have similar professional goals" (Peek). The mentor will play an essential role in the professional and personal development of the intern through the creation of a close, personal relationship.

Develop budget

Lastly, developing a budget for the program will ensure that it is financially feasible and sustainable. A proper budget will layout all costs and can then be presented to key stakeholders within the company, such as human resources and finance, for final approval. Listed are the main costs associated with internship programs:

1. Salaries
2. IT Hardware (laptop)
3. Access to programs (MRP)
4. Training
5. Travel (if included)
6. Relocation (if included)

Stage 2: Recruiting and Selecting

Define eligibility criteria

The eligibility criteria can be divided into two sections: qualifications and attributes. Qualifications include anything such as educational background, major, certifications, and prior experience. Attributes, while harder to define, are the desired traits of a candidate. This can include motivation levels, teamwork, communication skills, and leadership. For this process, the supervisor and key stakeholders should discuss and list out the minimum qualifications and desired attributes for potential candidates. This step will help paint a clear picture of an ideal candidate while also aligning the company with the type of intern they are looking for. While the eligibility criteria does not have to be followed to perfection in the final decision, it will help eliminate underqualified candidates in the early stages of the screening and interviewing step, saving valuable time and resources.

Marketing and job description

The next step is to develop a detailed job description that effectively and accurately communicates the objectives and requirements of the internship program and "tell[s] employees exactly what tasks you expect them to perform" (Brannen). This should include the specific role, expected duties, performance expectations, minimum qualifications (educational, experience, technical), and a timeline of the program. The description should be as detailed and accurate as possible, to help narrow the pool of applicants. The job description is usually the first time a person is introduced to the company, so having a strong one will help leave a good first impression and attract stronger, more qualified candidates. Ideally, the chosen candidate for the position should have a clear understanding of their duties and expectations before they walk in the door on the first day. This will also help streamline the process of onboarding and orientating.

A recruiter can connect and interact with students in three ways. The first is to simply post the job and description on a multitude of job board websites (Indeed, Handshake, etc.). This is the most common and simplest way to find and attract potential interns for the position. These websites include features that send students alerts when new jobs similar to their interests and career goals are posted. This will bring in a large initial influx of students to the candidate pool. Second, connect with professional organizations on local campuses. These organizations contain the highest performing and achieving students, many of which have already held leadership roles within their group. Membership within these groups often comes with academic eligibility standards. Connecting with these organizations will help recruiters quickly vet out the best potential candidates for the internship. Lastly, attend local University career fairs. Career fairs

give employers the ability to interact with hundreds of students in a face-to-face environment. Not only will you be "increasing brand awareness" (Smith), but this can also be used as an "initial screen of talent" (Smith) before the application process even begins. Ultimately, in this digital world, it is easier than ever to find and attract potential candidates. However, it is important that recruiters continue to utilize traditional methods of outreach to help foster more meaningful connections and interactions with students.

Screening, interviewing, selecting

Compile resumes and cover letters from candidates and compare each one against the previously chosen eligibility criteria and desired qualifications. The first stage of screening is not about finding the perfect intern, but instead helping narrow down the pool of applications to only those that meet the given criteria. From these qualified applicants, conduct a phone or video interview as an initial screening and assess their fit for the company. A short phone interview can tell a lot about a person- their background, communication skills, and other interpersonal skills. From there, invite back top candidates for an in-person interview. This will be a more formal interview that can be attended by numerous stakeholders to get various perspectives on each candidate. The purpose of these interviews is to assess the candidate's potential for future success using behavioral-based interview questions. At this point you know everything about the person, so use this interview to let them go into further detail about their experiences and see how they would respond in certain situations. Finally, deliberate with key stakeholders from the screening and interviewing process and come to a consensus about the most qualified candidate. Notify this candidate and make a formal job offer.

Stage 3: Managing and Supervising

Onboarding and orientating

The first day or two of an internship program should begin with onboarding and orientating sessions. This will help interns get a sense of the company's values, culture, and norms. Use this as a comprehensive introduction to the company. This is the first step to fully integrating interns into the company and making them feel welcome. After this, the interns should feel a greater sense of connection and purpose towards the company. The next section should dive deeper into the specifics of the department, roles, and workflow. This will go into more detail about the interns' specific duties, including the current state and operations within their assigned department. Do not expect them to fully learn everything on day one, but this will lay a strong foundation for future success.

After the completion of onboarding and orientation, introduce the chosen mentors to the interns. Explain that the mentor will help assist and guide them throughout this process, and they are the first point of contact for any questions or concerns. It is important to create a strong mentor-intern relationship on day one so that the intern has a sense of security throughout the entirety of the process.

Set performance expectations and create goals

Create a list of specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals that align with the internship's program objectives and the intern's professional development. The goals should be a collaborative effort between the supervisor and the intern. This will help the intern better understand what their duties are going to look like and how they can best contribute to the organization. Next, present the drafted program timeline to the intern. Explain performance expectations and introduce deliverables that are reasonable, clear, and

challenging. Establish with the intern that regular feedback and coaching will be provided to them to ensure success.

Evaluate performance

Regularly monitor and measure the intern's performance against the established expectations and goals. An internship program should be mutually beneficial to both parties and "giving an intern comment on their performance and skill set gives the student a wonderful opportunity to learn" (Deloziere). Conduct one-on-ones with supervisor and mentor to review performance and provide constructive feedback that is actionable, specific, and timely. These performance reviews should be completed at regular intervals and provide a comprehensive assessment of the intern's progress in the program. It is important that interns receive consistent feedback, starting "on the first day and [lasting] the whole internship" (Deloziere) to ensure that they are on the right track and developing professionally. Without standardized performance reviews, you can run the risk of the interns feeling a lack of purpose and in return performing poorly. Lastly, encourage interns to self-reflect on their performance and brainstorm ways to boost productivity and provide more value to the company overall. In the end, the intern is only going to benefit from this experience if they are fully committed to their own personal growth in a professional setting.

Managing relationships

Effectively managing relationships is the key differentiator between successful and unsuccessful internship programs. Internships that lack benefits are most often the ones where interns feel forgotten and like they are just taking up space. To best avoid this situation, first, encourage open and transparent communication between interns and their peers and supervisor. This is "key to fostering trust and respect, which are necessary building blocks of solid workplace relationships" (Sharma). Develop this line of communication as early as possible before it reaches a point of no return, and the intern feels isolated. Also, quickly establish a collaborative and positive work environment. This can be done by fostering a place of teamwork and mutual respect. An intern is more likely to contribute to a positive environment where they feel wanted and heard. Lastly, continually recognize the intern's progress and achievements, no matter how small. Words of appreciation are a powerful tool that can help interns become more confident in their work and abilities.

Conclusion

Summary of findings

Internships are a powerful tool that can bring many benefits to an organization. They can help increase productivity, streamline the talent and training pipeline, bring fresh perspectives, and create cost efficiencies. Before implementation, an internal needs assessment will help align the objectives of the program to the objectives of the company. A properly designed and well-managed program can create value for both the business and the intern. A detailed planning and designing stage is critical to the structure of the program, and thus, the ultimate success. If done correctly, a successful internship program will bring immense value to growing companies.

Further research directions

The internship landscape is constantly evolving, so it is important that organizations are continually evaluating and improving their programs. After each rotation period, perform reviews and surveys to gather information about the previous internship group. Utilize this data to restructure and make improvements where needed. Track company KPIs and look for patterns

of improvement related to the implementation of the program. Identify shortcomings of the program and adapt accordingly. Measure the long-term career outcomes of past interns to evaluate the impact of the program. This guide is meant to be used as a framework; however, every company is unique and will need to tailor it to their specific needs.

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