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Internships help employers and students

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Fairfield and Westchester County is blessed with a bevy of colleges and universities, filled with talented students who are looking to build a solid foundation for their upcoming professional careers. In addition to the coursework each student pursues, there is the need to secure "practical" experience in the form of actual work experience in their field of interest. This comes via Internships. As valuable as these engagements are for the student, their value can be even greater for the business employing the student.

Internships are best defined as the engagement of a student in your workplace to perform a semi-meaningful role, while also offering that student an opportunity to learn. Typically, the goal is to have an equal give and take between parties. Where the employer is giving the student an education on their business and/or a specific area of their business, the student is there to perform what are typically administratively oriented tasks that would normally be handled by others, or possibly simply left un-addressed. The relationship has a finite time period, usually correlating with the semester calendar or covering the entire summer.

Internship opportunities tend to be more prevalent in larger businesses where Human Resources Departments are there to organize and administer the program. Ironically, the smaller the business the greater the impact for all involved. Smaller operations offer the student a chance to be exposed to a broader range of day-to-day issues, thereby enhancing the learning experience. Best of all, the business itself benefits greatly by the added help.

Establishing an Internship program in your organization takes some planning. The idea is to insure you truly have a role for this person for each day they are with you, keeping in mind it must be at a level suitable for someone with limited experience and raw skills. Further, you need to insure the proper level of supervision and guidance will be available as needed. Here are a few things to consider when planning an Internship program:

- Determine where in your organization you would like to place an intern. Don't be overly concerned about locating the opportunity in the area that is most directly tied to your core business. Opportunities within the Marketing, Sales, or even the Finance/Accounting department will be deemed as just as attractive.

- Develop a job description. The more specific you can be at this stage the better. To do so consider talking with all the members of the area who will receive the intern, having each deliver a few tasks that could be handled by a student. They should be simple in nature, easily taught, and capable of being completed with minimal supervision. Don't have the internship go from being a benefit to your business to being a drag on your business, forcing you/your staff to baby sit the student instead of being productive.
- Look at any ongoing initiatives, identifying tasks involving research, data collection, data entry, or even simple phone contact. All of these types of tasks could, with appropriate limited training and supervision, be handled by a college student.
- Review the assembled description, looking to assess the amount of work there truly is to complete. Given that interns can join you for a varying number of hours (i.e. 15 hours a week all the way up to a full 40 hours), you need to insure you have a role that meets the hours to be worked. Internships become burdensome and uninteresting for all parties when you are struggling with the tasks to be completed each day.
- Once you are ready to post this opportunity contact the Career Center at the local universities. Be prepared to develop varying means of communicating your opportunity as each school has a slightly different way of posting internships. Look for feedback from the school on your position and its description. Don't be afraid to ask for some specific referrals. These folks are keenly aware of the best talent at their respective schools and usually have someone in mind when reading the postings they receive. They are your best advocates.
- Many consider posting their internship opportunities internally...but beware. Hiring the child or relative of an employee is fraught with risk and potential for disaster. Bottom line – strangers are far better.
- Compensation is generally best determined by securing input/advice from the university. They are aware of the “going rates” based on other postings received. It is important however to level the playing field a bit by considering the quality of the learning experience. Larger firms may pay higher, yet tend to offer far more clerical work paired with a less meaningful learning experience. Smaller businesses typically offer a richer experience, allowing the student to learn more about multiple facets of the business. Therefore a slightly lower hourly rate in exchange for a more substantial learning experience is fair and reasonable.
- Handle the interviewing of any applicants like any other hiring you do. Have the parties who will work closest with the student participate in the interviews. Have executive management involved as well, looking for them to assess the student's skills as well as sell the student on the company. When a final candidate has been identified follow your normal procedures for extending an offer, including an offer letter and other usual documentation.

While establishing an Internship program involves a great deal of planning, the results usually far exceed expectations. Your business will benefit from the added resource, not to mention the youthful perspective a student may offer. The student will gain immense knowledge and insight, establishing a foundation for their upcoming careers in the business world. With the proper administration, looking toward challenging and testing the student's limits throughout their tenure, you as a business may also gain a future employee. Whether you look at the experience as a breeding ground for future growth, or simply as a way to give back and get some help in return, the results can only be positive.

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