

Who Are the New Interns, and How Can They Help You?

The new economy offers priceless opportunities for you to build organizational capacity. Here's how.

By Amy J. Good



What if you were faced with the daunting challenge of rebranding your organization, launching a new Web site, and hosting a major event—all in eight weeks? The communications director of a small nonprofit in Madison, Wisconsin, was faced with just such an overwhelming task. Not only did she deliver on time, but she exceeded expectations and created quite a buzz about the organization.

Her secret weapon? She quickly recruited a team of eight interns to help her meet her goals. This team was made up mostly of a new kind of intern—one who wasn't available to nonprofits until recently. With these interns by her side, she was able to achieve the seemingly impossible.

You may be pleasantly surprised at how much you can accomplish with interns. Most work without pay or with a small stipend to cover travel expenses, so their contributions are doubly valuable. And, in this new economy, you may find unexpected kinds of interns to help you.

How to Prepare

Before you reach out for interns, prepare for the experience. If you limit interns to rote tasks like filing, copying, or entering data, you're doing a disservice to them and your organization. Interns should be able to expand their skills while performing meaningful work that benefits

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your organization.

Strategize with your staff to assess how interns can enhance your organization. Perhaps they can take over part of someone's duties to free that person for higher level functions or reduce a crushing workload. Maybe they can plan a special event or infuse new energy into a project that's been on the back burner.

To find the best fit, create a detailed job description to use in your outreach. Writing it will help you define qualifications and responsibilities.

Consider bringing aboard several interns if you're well prepared and can provide quality supervision. You may wish to start with just one or two interns to test out your internship program before securing a larger intern team.

Be sure to prepare staff members to welcome and mentor your interns. Emphasize that having interns is an opportunity for employees to gain new ideas, skills, supervisory experience, and the chance to build strong teams.

Where to Find the Right Interns

Traditionally, interns have been pre-professional college students,

high in energy and enthusiasm, with new, untried skills and little work experience. Consider these traditional interns, and then look even further to find the non-traditional intern impacted by a down economy.

Workers with decades of experience have found themselves downsized and are looking for internships to build their skills and prevent gaps on their resumes. In addition, people with work experience and college training are going back to technical schools or earning certificates to become more marketable or change career paths. These interns have a motivated work ethic with a strong desire to build their skills and portfolios.

Other non-traditional interns are recent college graduates who can't find a job in their chosen career and seek practical experience. They may be juggling part-time or full-time jobs unrelated to their field to make ends meet, so you'll need to be flexible in scheduling their hours. Be prepared to provide work references for them, and don't be alarmed if they find the career-related job they've been seeking and need to cut their internship short.

Also consider virtual interns, especially for tasks such as research, graphic design, social media, and other activities not requiring interaction with clients or other staff. Make it a point to check in with virtual interns regularly. In addition to e-mail and phone conversations, tools such as Web meetings and video conferencing can help you keep

Look beyond your backyard.

in touch with them even if they're halfway across the world.

How to Recruit Interns

When recruiting non-traditional interns, local universities are still a good place to start. Look for departments that relate to your intern position even if they don't have required internships.

Don't look only to four-year colleges. Consider two-year campuses, technical schools, private schools, and for-profit schools. Contact the career services department to reach students and alumni looking for opportunities. Also look for student organizations and student chapters of professional groups for your outreach. For the right internship fit, motivated students may be willing to drive quite a distance, move to your city for the summer, or intern virtually, so look beyond your backyard.

In addition to colleges and universities, use several other avenues to get a diverse group of applicants. Look for professional organizations related to the skills you're seeking, and ask them to send information to their members. Some Web sites offer free listings for nonprofit internships. Free sites like craigslist.org are another option. Join relevant groups on LinkedIn, including college alumni groups, networking groups, and professional organizations, and post to their jobs tab.

Don't forget to reach out to your organization's network of staff and supporters. Identify board members, volunteers, and others close to your organization who can recommend applicants. Cast a wide net via your organization's Web site and social media. Your highly social-networked staff can spread information about your opening virally via tools like listservs, Facebook, and Twitter.

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How to Assure Success

Once you've recruited your interns, prepare them for success from their first day. Provide a thorough orientation. Introduce them to other staff members, and let them know where to get their questions answered. If possible, give them a space to call their own with the supplies and technology they'll need.

Meet with your interns regularly to check on their progress, answer questions, and provide guidance. During the interview process, you should have ascertained your interns' learning goals. Check in after a few weeks to finalize their goals. Ask them to identify any additional projects they feel they can assist with; they may identify an area you didn't even have on your radar.

Include interns at key meetings where they can network with professionals and stretch their goals. Share learning opportunities, such as free webinars and seminars, your favorite blogs and Web sites, and helpful books and articles. Take your interns on tours—to the company printing the piece they designed or the homeless shelter they refer clients to as part of their service. Have them conduct informational interviews of your staff and those at partner organizations. Not only will your interns understand how their work fits into the organization's mission, they'll learn things to better your organization.

Recognize your interns' work publicly to show your gratitude and help them get to the next step on their career ladder. Mention their contributions in meetings with staff members and partner organiza-

tions. Write letters of recommendation and offer to be a work experience reference in the future. If your intern is applying for a job at an organization you know, put in a kind word.

The interns of the new economy have tremendous potential to build your organization's capacity. Prepare well, expand your traditional recruitment methods, and implement success strategies to make the experience meaningful for all. ■

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Some Web sites offer free listings.

Make the Most of the Internship Experience

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- **Add Energy & Diversity to Your Organization with Interns** (Vol. 27, No. 6)
- **How to Create a Motivating Environment** (Vol. 28, No. 5)
- **Build a Powerful Staff Team** (Vol. 18, No. 4)
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