

Add Energy & Diversity to Your Organization with Interns

Here's a great way to put new life into your organization.

By Erica Barton

Interns are an often-overlooked way to receive skilled, energetic workers at no (or very little) cost. Usually college students looking for on-the-job experience, interns can add a great deal to your organization.

Why Use Interns?

Interns are a year-round source of highly motivated pre-professionals, available at no cost or for a small stipend.

Interns are up-to-date on the latest trends and technology and bring valuable new perspectives.

The time interns spend on projects frees employees for other projects they may have previously neglected.

Interns may transition into paid employment with your organization. Since you've both had a realistic preview of their fit with your organization, you can forgo the recruitment and orientation process, saving time and money.

Before You Hire Interns

Develop an intern recruitment plan. List goals you hope to achieve.

Write a job description tailored specifically for the intern.

Create a recruitment message detailing what you can provide interns in place of salaries. For example, if your organization produces plays, you might offer free admission to your interns and their families. Perhaps you can refer them to organizational partners, where they might receive free food, discounted living expenses, or other perquisites. Simply providing a

unique, rewarding experience is often all that's needed. Build the value of your organization in your recruitment message, stating what they'll gain from the experience, especially if there's a possibility of a permanent position. Note whether you can pay a small stipend or reimburse travel expenses.

Develop relationships with local sources such as college placement offices.

Post your job description and recruitment message in strategic locations, such as university departments. Contact local high schools and ask them to inform their seniors of your internships. It's also useful to develop relationships with local sources such as college placement offices. Many schools provide living expenses or stipends to help students take part in unpaid internships. Recruiting at these campuses will give you a greater pool of applicants.

After You Hire Them

Orient interns with information about your organization, including your mission, culture, and policies.

Introduce interns to other employees, explaining everyone's role and how that role relates to the interns' work.

Assign interns projects that have concrete results and can be completed within a finite time period.

Draft a learning contract outlining learning objectives, with the intern's input.

Design an intern program that

offers more than work. For instance, provide training, invitations to lunch, meetings in which you announce the intern's accomplishments, or a celebratory dinner in the intern's honor. Something as simple as including interns in staff meetings will go a long way to making them feel included and excited about their work. Activities such as field trips to work-related attractions will help develop cohesiveness and make interns feel part of the team.

Give interns weekly feedback on how they're performing and how their work is contributing to the organization.

Ask interns to prepare a report for future interns, summarizing their accomplishments and explaining the challenges and idiosyncracies of the job.

Be Sure You're Meeting Legal Requirements

In taking on an unpaid intern, legal issues pertaining to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) are unavoidable. Rules mandate that the intern meet certain criteria to be classified as a "trainee." To satisfy this requirement, the work must have educational value for the intern. This means you must be sure that the learning objectives you and the intern create mesh with what the intern is studying in school. ■

Erica Barton (ebarton@rollins.edu) recently participated in an unpaid internship in which her main project was developing an intern recruitment plan for the organization. She wrote this article in a Master of Human Resources program at Rollins College (www.rollins.edu) in Winter Park, Florida.
