

Best Practice #1: Provide interns with real work assignments.*

Providing interns with real work is number one to ensuring your program's success. Interns should be doing work related to their major, that is challenging, that is recognized by the organization as valuable, and that fills the entire work term.

You can guarantee that hiring managers provide real work assignments by checking job descriptions, emphasizing the importance of real work assignments during a manager/mentor orientation sessions, and communicating with interns frequently throughout the work term to determine who they perceive what they are doing.

****Note: The best practices presented here assume the organization's goal is to convert interns to fulltime hires and is therefore paying its interns. Unpaid internships present a number of problems for organizations focused on intern conversion, not the least of which is legal issues that arise if the unpaid intern is given real work assignments.***

Best Practice #2: Hold orientations for all involved.

It's important that everyone "be on the same page," so to speak. Make this happen by holding an orientation session for managers and mentors as well as a session for students. Orientations ensure that everyone starts with the same expectations and role definitions. This is time well spent—the effort you put into these sessions will pay off throughout the program.

Best Practice #3: Provide interns with a handbook and/or website.

Whether in paper booklet format, or presented as a special section on your website, a handbook serves as a guide for students, answering frequently asked questions and communicating the "rules" in a warm and welcoming way.

A separate intern website serves many of the purposes of the handbook, but has the advantage of being easy to change. You can use your website as a communication tool, with announcements from the college relations staff or even articles of interest written by the interns themselves.

Best Practice #4: Provide housing and relocation assistance.

Few employers can afford to provide fully paid housing for interns, but you'll find that you get a lot of appreciation if you offer any kind of assistance toward housing expenses. If that's not possible, provide assistance in locating affordable housing: For those relocating to the job site, the prospect of finding affordable, short-term housing can be daunting. Easy availability of affordable housing will make your opportunity more attractive to students, broadening your pool of candidates.

If you can pay for all or some of your interns' housing, be sure to design (and stick to) a clear policy detailing who is eligible. This will eliminate any perceptions of unequal treatment. In addition, be aware that employer-paid or employer-subsidized housing is considered a taxable benefit. Check with your internal tax department on exceptions to this.

You will also want to consider the issue of relocation, which is separate although related to housing. Many organizations pay some or all of their interns' relocation expenses to and/or from the job site.

Best Practice #5: Offer scholarships.

Pairing a scholarship with your internship is a great way to recruit for your internship program—and this is especially true if you are having difficulty attracting a particular type of student or student with a specific skill set to your program. Attaching a scholarship can increase your pool of candidates with the desired qualifications.

Best Practice #6: Offer flex-time and/or other unusual work arrangements.

Students mention flex-time as one of their most-desired features in a job. (A flexible time schedule during their internship eases their transition to the workplace.)

If you think about how students spend the day on campus (varied schedule each day, with varied activities such as work, class, social time), you can understand that 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday is a bit of an adjustment for them. A flexible schedule can make them feel less chained in by an unchanging routine.

Other work arrangements that have been found successful with students include keeping them on as part-time, remote employees after they go back to school (depending on the type of work they do for you and whether they have a willing manager), and having them come back and work over school breaks for a couple of weeks. These are excellent ways to keep communications open and build a stronger bond.

Best Practice #7: Have an intern manager.

Having a dedicated manager for your intern program is the best way to ensure that it runs smoothly and stays focused on your criteria for success. Unfortunately, the size and resources available to most internship programs mean that this isn't always possible. If your program isn't big enough to warrant a dedicated full-time staff member, an excellent short-term solution is to hire a graduate student (look for a student working toward an advanced HR degree) to be your intern, and put this college relations intern in charge of the daily operation of the internship program. This gives the interns a "go-to" person, and gives you and your staff a break from the many daily tasks involved in running a program of any size. For this to work, you have to plan the program structure in advance (don't expect your intern to do it), and be very accessible to your college relations intern.

Best Practice #8: Encourage team involvement.

Involve your college recruiting teams—whether they are "volunteers" who participate in college recruiting, staff members dedicated to college recruiting, or some combination of both—in your intern program. They can sponsor social or professional development events, and help to orient the interns to your company culture. In my experience, college team members served as cooks at intern picnics, hosts at speaker events, and drivers or social outings such as ball games.

Best Practice #9: Invite career center staff and faculty to visit interns on site.

Although some programs—especially those that are very structured on the university side—make visits by career center staff and faculty a regular practice, most do not. In general, career center staff and faculty members have relatively few opportunities to visit employer work sites to see firsthand the types of experiences that their students are getting. By inviting them to your site, you will build a better working relationship with these groups, which can lead to more student referrals, enhanced campus visibility, and increased flexibility on their parts when your business needs dictate it.

Best Practice #10: Hold new-hire panels.

New-hire panels are one of the best ways to show case an organization to interns as a great place to work. These are panels of five or six people who were hired as new grads within the last three years. They act as panelists in a meeting of interns, giving a brief summary of their background and then answering questions from the intern audience. Your interns get insight about your organization from your new hires—people who they perceive are like themselves and who they consequently view as credible sources of information.

In these meetings, I've found that the interns consistently bring up the same topics: Why did you choose this employer over others? What was your first year like? How is being a full-time employee here different from being an intern? Do you recommend getting a graduate degree? In the same field, or an M.B.A.? Is it better to

go straight to graduate school after the bachelor's or better to work a while?

It's also fairly consistent that the new hires will offer other types of advice to your interns, such as how to handle finances those first couple of years out of school. (Their typical advice: Don't run right out and buy a new car, and, Start contributing the maximum to your savings plan as soon as you are allowed.) College relations staff should attend these sessions, but should remain unobtrusive, staying in the back of the room so as not to stifle the conversation. By being there, you stay aware of what is on the minds of your target group, and you can answer any detailed questions that may come up, such as those related to benefits.

Best Practice #11: Bring in speakers from your company's executive ranks.

One of the greatest advantages to students in having internships is the access they get to accomplished professionals in their field. Consequently, speakers from the executive ranks are very popular with students—it's a great career development and role modeling experience for interns. Having a CEO speak is especially impressive. Best scenario: Your CEO speaker is personable, willing to answer questions, and willing and able to spend a little informal time with the students after speaking—your interns will be quite impressed.

For you, having your executives speak to interns is another way to “sell” your organization to the interns, and get your executives invested in (and supporting) your program.

Best Practice #12: Offer training/encourage outside classes.

Providing students with access to in-house training—both in work-skills-related areas, such as a computer language, and in general skills areas, such as time management—is a tangible way to show students you are interested in their development.

You may also want to consider providing interns with information about nearby community colleges: Many students will be interested in attending during their work term to take care of some electives and/or get a little ahead with the hours they need to graduate. If you have the budget, you may also want to consider paying the tuition for courses they take while working for you, but, as is the case with housing, any assistance you can provide—even if it's just providing them with information about local schools—will earn you points with students.

Best Practice #13: Conduct focus groups/surveys.

Conducting focus groups and feedback surveys with these representatives of your target group is a great way to see your organization as the students see it. Focus groups in particular can yield information about what your competitors are doing that students find appealing.

Best Practice #14: Show case intern work through presentations/expo.

Students work very hard at completing their work and are generally proud of their accomplishments. Setting up a venue for them to do presentations (formal presentations or in a fair-type setting such as an expo) not only allows them to demonstrate their achievements, but also show cases the internship program to all employees.

Best Practice #15: Conduct exit interviews.

Whether face-to-face or over the telephone, a real-time exit interview done by a member of the college relations team is an excellent way to gather feedback on the student's experience and to assess their interest in coming back. Having the students fill out an exit survey and bring it to the interview gives some structure to the conversation.