

Basic Guidelines for Employers on Student Internships

Is an Internship Program Right for Your Company?

The wood products manufacturing industry, like many other industries, needs a skilled workforce, yet students need adequate training and preparation to enter that workforce. An internship program can be the link that brings new talent to your company. It is often the motivated students who pursue internships so that is a plus. However you do need to be aware that implementing such a program is a serious commitment, one that will require ongoing effort on your part and on the part of your staff. It is likely to be quite labor intensive in the beginning until you get your team engaged and you put a system in place that works satisfactorily. But given that the labor shortage will persist into the future, taking a pro-active stance and accepting that industry must play a role is the first step.

Here's How You Can Benefit

- Developing a strong internship program will allow you to develop partnerships with local educational institutions – the potential wellspring of your future employees.
- The students who participate are motivated individuals who want to combine work experience with their formal education.
- Students can bring energy and enthusiasm as well as new and creative ideas to your business while they learn.
- Utilizing interns will allow you to assess young talent and potentially employ them before your competitors do. And if you do hire them, you minimize new employee training costs as they are already familiar with your company.
- The internship program gives your new managers supervisory experience.
- Students can provide extra hands during peak times or special projects.
- Once your program is rolling, interns can spread a positive message about your company, attracting the best to your door.
- Many students are very tech savvy. That is a plus in any field or company in today's market.

Preparing for an Internship Program

You will want to spend several months in the planning stages before you actually begin offering internships, giving thought to how to best utilize the interns and how to engage your staff.

If you know you are interested in hiring, let it be known to the intern that the internship can be considered an employment path opportunity and if completed successfully, employment is an option. You should be prepared that not all interns will choose to work for you; that is an inherent statistic everyone faces but as you hone the program over time, you are likely to gain insights as to how to maximize your return on the work contributed by the intern during their stay as well as how to retain them as a future employee.

Think creatively as to the areas where an internship might come into play within your company. This will be influenced by the age and experience of the intern (high school, college or even graduate student) and your areas of need. For example, if you are a cabinet shop, you might consider having them

develop a marketing plan, update your web site or develop an HR manual -- as well as learning machine and software technologies or plant floor operations.

Whether it is a short or a long-term relationship, ultimately, you will need to build a program appropriate for your company's size, operations, staffing, etc., but small or large, you and the students who comprise tomorrow's employees will benefit.

1. Create an employee task force of interested individuals who are willing to commit and work with students.

Tasks Inside Your Organization

- Identify those employees who exhibit expertise, patience and a willingness to participate as it will likely add to their workload. Choose individuals that can set standards and who are good communicators. Cam Marston, a leading expert on generational differences in the marketplace, states that people who were born at the end of the boomer age, beginning of the Gen X age, tend to be good at bridging the generational gaps. He calls them "tweeners."
- Discuss objectives of the internship such as which departments can offer current technology training or which might have a special project coming up that could use additional, short-term help (the parameters should be finalized after meeting with the candidates to ensure it aligns with their objectives).
- Discuss and assign the tasks for the employee team such as liaison with schools and submission of any applicable paperwork to schools; creating necessary internal forms such as the intern job description, application form, evaluation forms. (Note, you can get samples of most of these forms at www.AWFS.org/education/industry/). Members of the staff team can market the internship; conduct interviews; orient the intern; train and supervise the intern; and oversee the evaluation process.
- Develop a system for regular communication and feedback, such as weekly meetings with the intern as well as with company staff and managers.

Tasks Outside Your Organization

- Identify all high schools, technical schools, community colleges and universities in your immediate area that have related coursework/programs from which likely candidates would come. Make calls to identify the right people to work with and develop a relationship with them. At the college level, you want to contact the career services or job placement offices.
- Find out if the schools have a formal internship program. If so, they should be able to help you with some of the procedures and paperwork as well as the issue of liability of the intern. Liability is influenced by whether it is a paid or unpaid internship. An unpaid internship may be tied to course credit and therefore the school may cover liability. With a paid internship, the company

may be responsible for liability insurance. The Dept. of Labor requires that interns be paid at least minimum wage unless they fit the criteria of a “learner/trainee.” Obtain information from a human resource or legal advisor.

You might also ask the school if they know of any programs that pay for/match the salary dollars so the cost to the employer is reduced. Do make sure that any terms are clearly communicated and understood from the outset by all parties.

Note: California employers can get assistance with internship program aspects such as timesheet tracking, personnel and payroll recordkeeping and more through the Foundation for California Community Colleges Pathways Program. See www.foundationcccc.org. Companies in other states should make inquiries with their departments of education and/or their community college career services for similar programs.

2. Structuring the Internship

- If you choose to set requirements for the internship, line them out clearly. You can use the following items as possible requirements or as suggested information for potential interns to include in a brief bio.
 - Major
 - Number of credit hours towards their major
 - Experience in specific software, machines, etc.
 - Minimum 2.0 GPA
 - Prefer/require having taken a CTE class or classes
 - A teacher or other staff recommendation, or former employer if applicable
 - Essay or bio
- Create a WIN-WIN situation by tailoring the internship to your needs and what the student can bring to the experience, while aligning what you have to offer with a student’s educational and professional goals. Think about the qualifications you want the intern to have to achieve your goals for each internship. Over time, you might want to consider developing internship descriptions for any of the positions you might potentially offer and sharing that list with schools, students.
- Have a job description with clearly defined tasks (you can draw from regular employee job descriptions) and a learning plan/schedule for the duration of the internship.
- Create clearly defined measurable objectives. Gauge the scope of the project and tasks realistically against the timeline of the internship. Tasks should relate to their studies; non-related clerical, administrative or “grunt” work should not exceed 10-20% (unless you are specifically offering an administrative internship).
- Plan for and provide any applicable safety training.
- Make sure it is clear to the intern as well as staff who they will be working with and who will supervise them. Consider making them a list of “helpful people” they can call on in various situations such as HR, IT services and other pertinent areas.

- Provide a realistic work space for the intern with desk space, phone, computer and supplies.
- Include a job shadowing component that places them with multiple staff for at least a glimpse of the various roles within a department or within the company as a whole. Allow them to see other departments than the one they will be working in over the course of the internship.
- Watch for signs of boredom. Don't underestimate their abilities. Students learn quickly and want to contribute.
- Consider having the intern prepare and deliver a short presentation to company leaders at the end of the program.

3. Spreading the Word about your Internship

- The best avenue is through the interns themselves who have had a good experience.
- With the schools. They have the means to promote it and the volume of students to reach.
- Post it on your web site.
- If you use Facebook (you know the students do!), post it there.
- Try listing with www.internships.com or other intern or job related search sites.
- Spread the word to your vendors, reps, employees and even customers.

4. The Interview

Choose your interns carefully. You are making a significant investment and you want it to pay off. Conduct the interview as if they were a new employee (they may ultimately be!)

Tell them what you offer

- Today's youth want to know what's in it for them. Frame the experience as to how it will affect their life and future, who they will meet, etc. Discuss their expectations, skills and areas of study with which they would like to connect their intern experience. Take the time to listen and be flexible in adapting to their needs.
- They also want to feel they are contributing to a worthwhile event/product/company so find a way to verbalize your company as a worthy place of employment.
- Let them know you are offering a real-life learning experience, with skill development applicable to their major and intended career path. Talk about the specific training and challenges offered

by the internship. Explain aspect(s) of the business in which they will be involved (e.g. design, software/computer-related; front office; machinery; warehousing/inventory; manufacturing/production, marketing, etc.).

- Students are interested in flexible hours and talking about money. Be prepared to share your policies and pay scales, bonuses, etc.
- If they have wood shop experience, give them a safety test. Ask if they were WCA trained.
- If there is room for advancement in the company, declare it. If your company is small, talk about finding special projects or paths for employees that will keep them engaged.

Explain the Company Culture (for example:)

- Do employees work in teams?
- What is the mentoring process? (Today's generation wants training but they prefer a more informal delivery. Determine how you can impart information and wisdom without appearing "parental" or hovering.)
- Do employees have the opportunity to contribute to ideas?

Negotiate

- Negotiate the number of hours for the internship with the intern (hours may be set if following a formal school internship program. Check with the school).
- If you can't offer a paid internship, at least try to cover items such as mileage, lunches, etc.

5. Orienting the Intern

- Arrange a tour and staff welcome on the first day, orienting them to staff, office locations, restrooms, lunchroom, postal and copy machines, etc.
- Have them interact with staff other than their mentor; invite them to participate in staff meetings and lunches.
- Explain common practices and protocol such as answering phones, taking breaks and scheduling lunch.

6. Create Evaluations

Having an evaluation process will aid in improving the internship program over time. It will be most effective if the evaluation process goes in both directions.

- Have the supervising employee/mentor determine criteria for an evaluation of their intern. Discuss the evaluation with the intern at the end of the internship. Were objectives met? Give constructive criticism if not.
- Create a customized evaluation for the intern to fill out to gain feedback on what he learned, what was challenging/motivating, what was unexpected; were they comfortable with the approach and the mentors, etc.
- Lastly, create an internal evaluation of each internship; share and discuss with the employee team and the company president as to how the program can be enhanced in the next go-round.

An internship program can be a *WIN-WIN* for you and the interns. Have faith that the next generation can and will bring something to the table. Trust that your efforts will positively impact your hiring needs. Best of luck!



Prepared by the Education Department of the Association of Woodworking & Furnishings Suppliers (AWFS).

AWFS, 2400 E. Katella Avenue, Suite 340, Anaheim, CA 92806

(800) 946-2937

This and related documents can be found at: www.AWFS.org/education/industry/