A guide for (small) companies:

Making the most of your interns
(even when they're remote!)

Introduction

Internship programs are an effective means of building relationships with qualified individuals who are eager to learn and contribute. It's no secret that a strong internship program is much more likely to convert interns to full time employees. However, a successful internship program no longer means coffee runs and filing papers. Internships are an opportunity for students to apply what they've learned in the classroom in a professional environment, and companies need to be intentional about how they make the most of their intern's strengths. While bringing on interns is certainly a chance for the company to test someone's skillsets, the internship is also a chance for the intern to assess whether they see themselves working for your company longer term. Thoughtful planning for your internship program can lead to an equal value exchange where the intern gets great experience and the company gets results.

Standing up an internship program comes with lots of questions, especially for a small company who might be operating on limited resources. What types of projects should interns work on? How much of my time will interns require? Who should they report to? How often do you communicate with them? *What happens in a world where ALL internships need to be remote?* In this guide we'll answer these questions and more about building a successful internship program, complete with **considerations for remote workers**.

Advancing San Diego is a regional effort to address talent shortages and expand access to talent for small companies.

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Planning for your interns

Ahead of your intern's start date, give yourself plenty of time to plan. Thoughtful planning even just 2-3 weeks ahead of time will directly impact your intern's ability to positively contribute and succeed from day one. Ideally, planning begins once your intern has gone through the recruitment process, because at that point you'll have developed an idea of their abilities, skillsets, and areas of interest.

"Nothing less motivating as a new person coming on board than the feeling that the company is not prepared for you to be there." – Mike Roberts, CEO, San Diego Code School

1. **Prepare relevant onboarding materials** to share with your intern ahead of their start date.
   - Process documents, to the extent they are available
   - Relevant tools, platforms, websites and links to demos
   - Single sheet with all login information

"Have a resource link/guide for support on each tool if the student has any questions about the tool. If you create this guide in advance, the student can attempt to get familiar with the tool before the internship program begins." – Ahva Sadeghi, CEO, Symba

2. **Provide any necessary equipment** and tools needed for your intern to do their job well.
   - Have all equipment and tools set-up and tested ahead of time to ensure intern can jump in on day one.
   - Any equipment will be used only during their time with your company, so equipment is a useful investment that can be used to accommodate future interns.

Remote consideration: Interns will likely not have a high-performing computer at home. It will take a bit of extra coordination between the company and the student to ensure their home office is setup with everything they need.

3. **Identify a supervisor** who will serve as the intern's main point of contact throughout their internship. This person should be patient and enjoy training others.
   - The supervisor might be someone responsible for the success of the larger project that the intern will be working on. However, this person should not be the busiest person on any project.
   - Supervisors don't necessarily require prior management experience, but find out if anyone on your team has managed interns before and see if they'd be interested.
   - Consider someone who isn't the obvious choice to supervise, but who might be the best fit for molding interns into professionals that are well prepared for the workforce.

"Intern supervisors serve as the intern's ambassador to the larger company." – Juliana Saenz, San Diego State University

Onboarding & training

Start with introductions to your company's core business functions, and then dive into the nuances how the intern's work will contribute to your company's goals. Explaining how the intern's role fits into the bigger picture will motivate them and help them understand how smaller, day-to-day tasks are relevant to the company's core functions.

1. **Be aware of tribal knowledge** and think of interactive ways for interns to observe and learn your processes, instead of just handing over a training manual.
   - Remember that this is likely your intern's first time in a professional environment, and learning common vernacular and processes unique to your company will take time.

2. **Decide on a training structure** that makes sense for your company. For example:
   - **Job shadow**: intern observes one or a few different team members in their first couple weeks. This approach slowly eases them into their role to ensure a solid foundation for future projects.
   - **Immersive**: throw your intern directly into a project, giving them small tasks to start and then progressively assign more challenging tasks. This approach allows you to test their capabilities right away.

Remote consideration: job shadows in the traditional sense may look different, but are certainly not impossible, in a remote environment. Have your intern spend 1-2 days "virtual shadowing" different team members, perhaps working on small projects for each team member as a way to get the person introduced to key personnel and break up training. Have the supervisor coordinate the shadowing schedule.

3. **Be clear from day one who is the intern's supervisor**. This person is responsible for the intern's success, but might need to coordinate with others to provide training.
   - Give your employee(s) responsible for managing and training the intern time to do so, especially in the beginning.

4. **Develop cadence of communication during training** so your intern grows comfortable asking questions.
   - When covering office processes, inform the intern of the typical channels of communication between their supervisors and trainers.

Remote consideration: Last thing you want is for an intern to struggle in isolation and not know how to gauge who's online or how to ask for help. Be mindful of their potential "imposter syndrome" and use video for touching base!

Communication & feedback

Communication, especially in a remote environment, is will be essential for your intern's success. It is a common thread throughout this guide because communication needs to be intentional.

1. **Establish clear communication channels** so your intern knows where to go for help, but is also aware and respectful of preferred communication methods among the team.
   - The intern should have access to and be comfortable with any tools that your office uses to communicate whether it's chat tools (Slack, Microsoft teams), project management tools (Trello, Jira), or regular email.

2. **Set regular check-in's** with your intern and stick to them! Especially for remote interns, touch points should happen at least 1-2 times a week.
   - Check-ins should be with the intern's supervisor, and is a recurring opportunity for the intern to share progress on projects and receive guidance.
   - Ask how they are doing to ensure they are having a positive experience and if not, you can identify challenges early on.

"The top complaint we hear from interns is that they didn't have enough to do and they didn't know who to talk to." – Jill Litschewski, CSU San Marcos

3. **Offer feedback to your intern upon completion of projects**.
   - Be patient while they are getting up to speed, but don't hold back when offering feedback when deliverables are not up to standard.
   - Check in with other team members that have worked with the intern to gain a sense of how other projects are going.

Remote tools considerations:
1. *Remote internship management – Symba*
2. *Face to Face Communication – GoToMeeting, Zoom, FaceTime, WebEx*
3. *Other communication tools – Microsoft Teams, Slack*
4. *Free Project Management Tools – Trello, Atlasian (Jira), Teamwork, Asana, OpenProject, nTask, Monday, Project.co, Wrike*
5. *Online file sharing – DropBox, Box, GoFile, OneDrive*
6. *Screen sharing: Screen.so*

Integration with the team

Especially when you're working remote, integrating into the team can be tough for an intern. Instead of viewing interns as short term help, use their time with your company to assess whether they'd be a good fit for the team longer team. This requires being intentional about getting to know them, and allowing them to get to know the team.

1. **Let the team know you have an intern coming on board**, and share some details about them with the team ahead of time. That way, they receive a warm welcome from the team when they arrive.

2. **Use first week for meet & greets** to give the intern an opportunity to interact with people beyond those who they'll work with day-to-day. Schedule *short* intro (or virtual!) meetings (less thorough than the job shadow approach) with:
   - The CEO or senior management. Setting aside time for them to interact with leadership really makes the intern feel welcome.
   - Staff & managers related to projects that intern will be working on (i.e. who will they need to reach out to with questions)
   - HR staff or roles that support typical functions of the office
   - Any alumni from the school where students is enrolled
   - Other interns to develop comradery

3. **Include your intern meetings**, even just to listen in, so they feel part of the company. Be sure to mention the intern's work in meetings as a way to publically acknowledge their contributions.
   - All-hands meetings
   - Recurring team meeting, standups

   Remote consideration: Schedule recurring semi-social or fully social virtual meetings; social hour on Friday or Lunch & Learns for the team during the week are a great way to maintain connectivity and facetime with one another as people, not just as professionals.

4. **Set up a mentorship program** to encourage the intern's professional development.
   - Someone other than their site supervisor such as an early-career peer mentor to help with the transition, or a technical mentor to help answer questions.

Intern projects

Understanding your intern's capabilities and interests will help you plan projects that are both a fit for their skillsets and useful for the company. Remember that interns not only solving a problem for the company but also applying what they are learning in the classroom to a real-world experience.

1. **Understand your intern's skillsets** by asking them which relevant courses they've taken or what types of projects they've worked on.
   - Ask them ahead of time what their goals are for the internship, such as skillsets they'd like to develop or areas of interest that they'd like to explore further.

2. **Ensure your intern has plenty to work on**. Create a longer list of tasks than you might need, prioritizing what you need fastest or things that will take the longest.
   - Treat them as a potential employee and see what they're capable of.
   - Give them an opportunity to wear many hats. This will give them a true sense of what it's like to work in a startup or small company.

"Don't underestimate the grit and determination of the student and the amount they can get done. The last thing you want is for them to run out of things for them to do." – Mike Roberts, San Diego Code School

3. **Consider giving your intern one larger project** that is broken up into sub-projects and mini tasks.
   - Having a large project enables interns to feel proud about their work and take away a tangible outcome of the experience.
   - Define the scope of the project prior to the intern arriving and then dynamically adjust the project specifics with the intern to make sure the intern feels aligned with the project goals.
   - Regardless of how you choose to structure them, all projects should have very clear expectations and deliverables.

When the internship is over, there might be an opportunity to hire the intern into a full time position with your company. Of course this depends on current job openings and what stage of their educational journey the student is in. The internship can still be extremely beneficial for the intern even when it does not result in full-time placement at the company. Internships are necessary and valuable resume-builders that can provide a learning opportunity, networking, and perspective for the student's career path. If you're in a case where you have to part ways with a great intern, consider leveraging your own professional network to connect the intern to other opportunities.

More resources on building a successful internship programs:
Courtesy of our partners at San Diego State University, CSU San Marcos, and Mesa College.

- What to do about internships in light of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- SDSU's Employer Internship Toolkit
- CSU San Marcos, Internship Handbook
- Updated statement (from 2018) about internships from the Fair Labor Standards Act
- Internship resources on the SHRM website
- Internship resources on NACE website
- An Employers Guide to Building a Quality Internship from the Institute for Local Government

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