

Best Practices for Internship Programs

National Association of Colleges + Employers



Best Practice #1: Pay your interns.

Many organizations use their internship programs to feed their full-time hiring: In fact, employers have reported that their internship program is the single-best strategy for recruiting new college graduates.

To do this effectively, your interns need to be paid:

- The paid intern can be given real work—not busy work—so you will be able to assess performance and make an informed decision about whether to offer the intern a full-time job. There are legal constraints that will impact your ability to do this if your interns are unpaid.
- By paying your interns, you are increasing the size of and diversifying your pool of potential interns. Many students cannot afford to forgo a paycheck for the summer, so will not even be in your pool for consideration. Paid internships support an inclusive candidate pool.

Best Practice #2: Recruit for your internship program as you would for your full-time hiring.

Your internship program can be an effective means for achieving your goals for full-time hiring, but only if you approach it in the same manner. Take as much care in sourcing, recruiting, and securing interns as you would with full-time hires.

Research shows that organizations that are intentional in recruiting their interns are rewarded with higher intern-to-full-time-hire conversion rates.

Best Practice #3: Align your internship program with your organization's overall goals for your workforce.

NACE's research has found that, in many cases, organizations are working toward an inclusive workforce, but have ignored how their own internship program can and should play a role. Develop a pool of interns that matches up with your full-time hiring goals, and your program can help your organization meet its overall goals for its workforce.

As a start, consider your recent intern cohorts. Do your interns reflect your goals for your full-time, entry-level hires? Where are you doing well? Where are you falling short? If your recent cohorts don't match up, you have work to do to widen your pool of intern applicants. That may mean building relationships with additional schools or organizations, refocusing your virtual recruiting efforts, or considering what other tactics and strategies to engage to help you build your pool of interns.

Best Practice #4: Provide relocation and housing assistance.

Relatively few employers cover their interns' relocation and/or housing expenses, but you'll find a lot of appreciation if you can offer assistance. NACE research indicates that most employers that do provide assistance do so with a lump sum. Keep in mind that in-person or hybrid internships (where the intern is in the office part of the time and working remotely the rest) can be an issue for economically disadvantaged students if the internship site isn't nearby.

If you can pay for all or some of your interns' relocation and/or 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.

At a minimum, you should offer assistance to your interns 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.

Best Practice #5: Offer scholarships.

Few employers offer scholarships, but 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: Consider work arrangements that will work for your interns and your organization.

According to research conducted by NACE, more than half of students have a preference for in-person work arrangements, while about two out of five are interested in hybrid work arrangements—working part of the time in person and part of the time remotely. Very few (about one in 10) wanted to work exclusively in a virtual environment.

Keep in mind that it is generally easier to build connections among and between your interns and your organization when everyone is together, so in-person and hybrid arrangements are likely to be most effective for you. Still, depending on the nature of the work, remote internships can be a good option if your organization is seeking to attract students who are not able to take part in person even part of the time; in such cases, you need to recognize that building and maintaining connections with remote interns will require more time and effort.

You could also consider keeping our interns 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/or 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: 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 and/or skill set, that is challenging, that is recognized by the organization as valuable, and that fills the entire work term.

Feedback from interns indicates that real work assignments play a leading role in determining intern satisfaction.

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

Best Practice #8: Hold orientations for all involved.

It's important that everyone "be on the same page." 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 #9: Provide interns with a handbook and/or website.

Whether offered in PDF 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 #10: 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, one 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 early talent recruiting 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 intern.

Best Practice #11: Encourage team involvement.

Involve your early talent recruiting teams—whether they are “volunteers” who participate in early talent recruiting, staff members dedicated to early talent 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. Recruiting team members can serve as cooks at intern picnics, hosts at speaker events, and drivers for social outings such as ball games.

Best Practice #12: 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, many 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.

Best Practice #13: Hold new-hire panels.

New-hire panels are one of the best ways to showcase 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 insights 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 general, your interns are likely to ask new hires these questions: *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 in another? Is it better to go straight to graduate school after the bachelor's or better to work a while?*

It's also fairly typical 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.*)

Early talent recruiting staff should attend these sessions but 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 #14: 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 is personable, willing to answer questions, and willing and able to spend a little informal time with the students after speaking.

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 #15: Offer training/encourage outside classes.

Providing students with access to in-house training—both in work-skills-related areas and in general skills areas—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 #16: 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 #17: Showcase 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 showcases the internship program to all employees.

Best Practice #18: Conduct exit interviews.

Whether face-to-face or via Zoom or phone, a real-time exit interview done by a member of the early talent recruiting 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.

Best Practice #19: Collect, track, and analyze your program's statistics.

The only way to ensure your program is effective is to track and analyze related data. This is critical to success—from ensuring you are attracting and securing the students you want to determining how effective your program is at converting interns into full-time hires.

Best Practice #20: Stay connected with your interns after they return to school.

Maintain your ties with your interns throughout the academic year. If you have extended a job offer to the intern, make sure you stay in touch: It's a long time between fall, when they go back to campus, and spring, when they graduate and are ready to start work. Don't assume that extending a job offer is the end of your work with your interns.

It is also important to maintain ties to successful interns who aren't eligible yet for job offers—students who are only entering their junior year, for example—if you want them to return for another internship experience.