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What are the Best Practices in Overall Intern Experience among Highly Desirable Internship Programs?

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What are the Best Practices in Overall Intern Experience among Highly Desirable Internship Programs?

Abstract

[Excerpt] Most companies hire college summer interns for one of two reasons: to build their talent pipeline of future full-time hires and “test drive” potential employees, or as a way to increase their short-term workforce in order to complete a project.¹ Both are legitimate business practices and, while some companies choose to hire interns for one reason or the other, the best internship programs are the ones where those purposes intersect. If the goal is to convert interns into permanent employees, it is of critical importance to provide students an experience that exposes them to new and challenging work. In fact, the top three reasons that students listed for pursuing an internship were to gain real world experience, build their resume, and learn new skills.

While it may seem simple to meet those criteria, companies that have exceptional internship programs dedicate considerable resources and planning to achieve their level of success. This paper will highlight a selection of practices that leading internship programs employ, divided into two categories – Structure and Perks.

Keywords

Human Resources, HR, intern, internship, talent pipeline, full-time hire, test drive, potential employees, structure, perks, program manager, internship advisors, orientation, flexible scheduling, relocation, corporate housing, brand, logistics, role models

Comments

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the best practices in overall intern experience among highly desirable internship programs?

INTRODUCTION

Most companies hire college summer interns for one of two reasons: to build their talent pipeline of future full-time hires and “test drive” potential employees, or as a way to increase their short-term workforce in order to complete a project.¹ Both are legitimate business practices and, while some companies choose to hire interns for one reason or the other, the best internship programs are the ones where those purposes intersect. If the goal is to convert interns into permanent employees, it is of critical importance to provide students an experience that exposes them to new and challenging work. In fact, the top three reasons that students listed for pursuing an internship were to gain real world experience, build their resume, and learn new skills.²

While it may seem simple to meet those criteria, companies that have exceptional internship programs dedicate considerable resources and planning to achieve their level of success. This paper will highlight a selection of practices that leading internship programs employ, divided into two categories – Structure and Perks.

Best Practices

Structure

Have a dedicated program manager – One of the key differentiators between good and great internship programs is a dedicated program manager who orchestrates campus recruitment efforts, selects intern advisors, plans orientation, and is the point-of-contact for interns throughout the summer whenever they have questions or issues arise.³ Typically, this position resides within the human resources function of a company and works year-round to ensure the program is attracting top talent, prepares the summer intern advisors for their increased responsibility, and collects exit data from the previous year’s cohort about their experience.

Ensure the work is meaningful – Nothing sours an internship experience like spending the summer doing seemingly pointless work. Students top three reasons for participating in a summer internship all revolve around bolstering their professional skillset. If they are not given assignments that stretch their capabilities or teach them new skills, they will walk away feeling as if they wasted their time and squandered an opportunity to better themselves professionally. The program manager plays a critical role in ensuring their summer projects are meaningful by selecting internship advisors who are willing and able to delegate important work to their interns. In addition to the careful selection of advisors, program managers ensure work is meaningful by communicating the purpose of the internship program to managers and interns alike. Whether the company hires college interns as a talent pipeline building and candidate try-out session or because they are attempting to complete a project, managers and interns should understand the reason the interns are there in the first place.⁴

Orientation should be comprehensive – A well thought-out, thorough orientation can set a positive all-important first impression. Executed poorly, it can give off the impression that the company is unprepared to host the interns. The first day that interns arrive they should be given a tour of the facility, receive credentials like badges to gain access to the building, get set up with all systems and technologies including computers and logins, be introduced to their team or managers, and receive all information on company policy and office norms. Exposing them to a realistic preview of the work environment can reduce anxiety and set an appropriate example of how they should interact with coworkers.⁴ The orientation process is one of the most commonly cited pain points in internship experiences. One study found that over 45% of interns report being unsatisfied with the quality of the orientation they received.²

Perks

Offer flexible scheduling - It's important to consider that college students are often accustomed to a daily routine that consists of short bursts of work followed by stretches of downtime. Making the adjustment from attending four hours of class per day to working from 8am-5pm straight is difficult and likely will not yield maximum productivity.⁴ Flexible scheduling that allows interns to start late, end early, or work remotely will more closely mirror the routine they are used to. Offering flexible work arrangements to interns is particularly important if full-time employees are able to flex their schedule. As a general rule, the company should do everything they can to make the interns feel like they are part of the team and receive the same benefits as their full-time peers.

Assist with relocation - One of the more popular perks among top-tier internships is paid corporate housing. Not only is it a financial benefit to the interns, but it also alleviates undue stress from needing to find short-term housing in what is likely a new city. Even if the employer cannot provide paid housing, assisting interns with finding housing is considered a major benefit.⁵ Many companies rely on corporate housing partners to assist the interns with apartment searching and other relocation logistics. In geographic locations where housing markets are particularly competitive, providing moving assistance can serve as a significant differentiator for the employer's brand.

Executive exposure – Q&A sessions and speaker series with executives provide interns with role models in the company. Exposing them to people whose careers they want to emulate deepens their association with the employer and makes them feel valued. Additionally, hearing about the varied career paths one can follow at their organization highlights the benefits of starting their career with the company.

CONCLUSION

Creating a best-in-class internship program requires significant planning and forethought. Companies that have communicated the purpose of their program to stakeholders, designed the program around students' motivations for participating, and invested resources in ensuring its success derive the most value from their efforts. By cultivating positive experiences for their interns, organizations are typically better positioned to convert students into full-time hires upon graduating.

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