

Developing Interns as a Valuable Resource^[1]

Revised 2008

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Since I first wrote this article in 1993, internships have become a big business and almost a necessity for entering the job market competitively. From the perspective of an organization, Interns offer a considerable resource for the cash-strapped nonprofit sector. Besides the extra pair of hands, interns can bring a number of talents, including linguistic and computer skills, as well as general enthusiasm for the organization's cause. For an established agency with stable staffing, they can provide insight into the thinking of younger people or into new thinking about a discipline.

At a small nonprofit where I was director of the New York office, interns took on a variety of assignments. They researched educational materials used to prepare pastors as counselors in preventing violence against women, served as editorial consultants and researchers in preparing a video and guide about violence issues, assisted in marketing videos, edited training materials, and set up a system for program evaluation. Interns developed foundation files, drafted and tracked proposals, and provided general research assistance. Several had the opportunity to test educational materials overseas. Some had extensive work experience but were switching careers. All wanted internationally oriented experience, and many came because they are committed to women's health.

A mid-career woman who began as my intern in another organization was changing careers from work as a paralegal; she went on to become the agency's Director of Contracts. With the United Nations Association of the USA (UNA-USA) Westchester Chapter, where I served on the board and as Executive Director, high school students provided clerical assistance, outreach to other high schools, and assisted with events. College interns researched and organized events, and three coordinated the video series "Going Global with the UN." Three worked together to develop an exciting program working with schoolchildren in Yonkers.

Internships benefit both the individual and the organization. Many young people are eager to gain experience in their chosen fields. Some university programs require internships, and high schools now may require community service. (Requirements have grown considerably since this article was first written in 1993.) The nonprofit can provide experience while benefiting from the interns' commitment and developing alumni/ae who will spread the word about the agency. In today's era of Facebook and MySpace, this can evolve to an extensive network of supporters.

¹ *The author has worked with interns in many ways, from herself serving as an intern at the US Agency for International Development, to organizing and supervising a master's 'degree intern programs at the University of North Carolina School of Public Health. She has since engaged and supervised interns in her work whenever possible. These have included undergraduate and graduate students from Barnard College, Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, School of Public Health and Teachers College, New York University's Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service, Union Seminary, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Yale University, University of Michigan, Mercy College, Rhodes College, Marist College, Wesleyan University, Manhattanville College and others, as well as from local high schools.. In addition to U.S. nationals, they have included students from Argentina, Belgium, China, India, Japan, Liberia and Romania. These interns have worked in the United States and abroad, including in Nigeria, Kenya, Colombia, Liberia and the Caribbean.*

The nonprofit also can help interns learn basics about administrative operations, routine office procedures and many organizational features not taught in school. Interns, many of whom start as unpaid volunteers, can go on to become excellent employees or consultants at an organization.

Tips on Recruiting Interns

- Contact the career development office of your local college or university at least a month or two before the semester you would like an intern to start. Some colleges have formal, well-organized programs to match an individual with your agency; others may announce your internship on a bulletin board or in a newsletter. Internships may last a semester, a month during winter break, a whole year, or the summer months. For summer or full-time interns, you may want to contact organizations beyond your local area. www.idealists.org is an excellent recruiting resource.
- Don't overlook high school students. For the right job they can be enthusiastic and excellent volunteers. Many have superior computer and web-development skills.
- If you know a professor in a likely university department or want skills from a specific field, consider contacting the department directly. Some universities give interns college credit for their work; find out if you need to do an evaluation at the end of the assignment.
- Prepare a fact sheet that includes a brief job description; the skills, background, and experience desirable; a description of your agency; and whom to contact. Ask potential interns to submit a resume listing their areas of interest, work experience, and skills (such as computer skills). If your organization can offer even a small stipend, you will usually have more success recruiting.^[2] However there are some special requirements regarding international students.
- Make a personal contact, and follow up with the career development officer in charge of internships, if there is one, to be sure your announcement has been received and is being handled.
- Interview a potential intern as you would a potential staff member. If the job involves writing, ask for writing samples. If there is public contact, pay special attention to inter-personal skills including telephone skills. You may not need to explore the intern's abilities in detail, but you will probably want to contact a faculty member or previous employer as a reference.
- In your interview, be clear about the requirements and nature of the work. If you expect an intern to answer phones and make photocopies in addition to doing research, say so. Explain what percentage of time might be spent on what activities. Be clear about the position or person to whom the intern will report.
- Agree on the internship's duration of commitment and hours per week. Eight to fifteen hours a week is fairly standard for full-time students. If an intern expects to travel during college holidays or not work during exam weeks, you will want to know that. If such scheduling fits with your needs, fine. If not, say so. Put your agreement on a professional footing, because you are helping the intern prepare for the world of work.
- Convey the idea that being an intern with your organization is a privilege for the intern. It is!

Managing Interns

- Orientation is important. Tell the intern the philosophy of the organization, its mission, its program, and the responsibilities of other staff. If you expect to have a number of interns over time, develop a procedure manual or welcome kit to help them move quickly into the job.
- Short-term interns often work best if assigned very specific projects, with very specific outcomes expected. Several may be able to work as a team and learn the importance of teamwork as well as getting a project completed.
- Be sure you know whether interns are covered under your insurance plan if injured on the job. Check with your legal adviser about any needs for coverage.
- Develop a work plan with the intern. (The immediate supervisor can do this.)
- Establish a periodic review of progress. Ask interns about what they are accomplishing and if there are any specific problems. Deal with problems as they arise. If the intern will be with you for only a semester, you need to react promptly.
- Treat interns as individuals. Review any work habit or technical difficulties and seek solutions.
- Be generous with thanks and praise. If possible, confer a job title that will help the intern show on a resumé what she or he has done (project assistant, editorial assistant, etc.).
- Bring closure to an internship. If a product is expected, review it and help ensure that it will be used and that the intern knows how it has contributed. Ask the intern for any recommendations for improving the internship program.
- Add the intern's name to your mailing list. A non-profit can build an outstanding list of alumni/ae who will go on to responsible jobs in organizations similar to yours.
- Interns can be excellent recruiters. Word of mouth can bring you your next great intern.
- Provide the needed feedback to the college or university. If an evaluation is required, complete it in a timely way. If you had problems with an intern, be sure to discuss any issues that could be resolved through better communications with the university.
- Keep good records and be prepared to provide a reference for the intern in the future. (I have written many references for interns entering graduate school or seeking jobs, sometimes years after the internship.)

A 1993 version of this article was printed in *The Non-Profit Times*.

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