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How do I do this Internship Thing?
Internship "How-To" Guide

Internship programs are more than just short-term staffing solutions—they are strategic opportunities to cultivate future talent, strengthen your employer brand, and bring fresh perspectives into your organization. A well-designed internship program benefits both the business and the intern: companies gain motivated individuals eager to learn, while interns acquire valuable real-world experience that enhances their career readiness.

This guide will walk you through the essential steps for creating and managing an effective internship program, from planning and recruitment to onboarding and evaluation. Whether you're a small business looking to build your first program or a larger organization aiming to refine your approach, these best practices will help you attract top candidates, deliver meaningful experiences, and maximize the return on your investment.

Step 1: Recruitment

Recruiting an intern is an opportunity to bring fresh ideas, energy, and talent into your organization while helping students or early-career professionals gain valuable experience. A well-structured internship program can strengthen your talent pipeline, enhance your employer brand, and provide meaningful contributions to your team.

When recruiting interns, it's important to clearly define the role, outline learning objectives, and communicate the benefits of joining your organization. Interns are looking for hands-on experience, mentorship, and opportunities to grow—so positioning your program as a stepping stone for their future career will make it more attractive.

This guide will walk you through best practices for sourcing and interviewing to ensure a successful experience for both your business and the intern.

1. Create a Job Description that Defines Clear Roles and Expectations

- **Create detailed Internship Job descriptions** outlining responsibilities, required skills, and learning outcomes. *Pro Tip-Use AI to help with this! (See example below)
- **Use the job description to help recruit** the "right" students by providing a strong foundation for expectations (this increases the success of the internship).
- Be thoughtful in the **variety of tasks they will be completing.** Clarifying tasks helps the students know the variety of tasks they get to do, as well as expectations for tasks they may not think of.
- **Specify duration, compensation (if any), and potential for future employment.**
    - Compensation-Providing paid internships is a good practice. Most college students are working to help pay for their expenses, so paid internships open the doors to more high-quality interns and help to cover the cost of the course they take to gain course credit. In addition, it increases buy-in! Pay rates will differ, so please double-check those numbers, but we suggest average pay is $2-$5 above minimum wage.

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2. Leverage Multiple Channels for Recruitment

- CMU Career Services
- Handshake
- Connect with CMU Faculty: Engage professors who can recommend strong candidates and offer to guest lecture or do workshops to increase visibility
- LinkedIn
- Indeed
- Instagram

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3. Highlight Learning Opportunities

- Students are looking for a variety of things from an internship. Make sure to highlight:
  - Mentorship
  - Exposure to real projects
  - Training and Development of hard and soft skills
  - Networking opportunities
  - Application to education
  - Feedback
- Include testimonials from past interns to build credibility.

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4. Offer Flexible Arrangements

- **Provide an expectation of hours worked**. It is helpful if students have a clear understanding of the expectation for hours, as this helps you recruit the "right" student.
- Flexible hours appeal to students balancing coursework.

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6. Streamline the Application Process

- Keep it simple: resume + short statement of interest.
- Avoid lengthy forms that discourage applicants.

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7. Showcase Your Employer Brand

- Share success stories and career paths of former interns.
- Highlight diversity, inclusion, and growth opportunities.

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8. Incentivize Referrals

- Encourage employees to refer students from their networks.
- Offer small rewards for successful referrals.

Step 2: Interviewing

The interview process is not just an assessment—it's a powerful learning experience for the student. For many interns, this may be their first professional interview, so creating a positive and supportive environment is key. The best interviews help candidates start off feeling confident and successful. Begin with simple, conversational "get-to-know-you" questions to ease them in and build rapport.

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To make this process even more effective, below are examples of strong interview questions and a scoring rubric to guide your evaluation. These tools will help you assess candidates fairly while ensuring the experience is educational and encouraging for them.

Internship Interview Questions

Here are some strong interview questions tailored for interns that help assess skills, motivation, and cultural fit:

General Background & Motivation

1. What attracted you to this internship and our organization?
2. How does this internship align with your academic or career goals?
3. What skills or experiences do you hope to gain during this internship?

Skills & Problem-Solving

4. Tell me about a project or assignment you're most proud of—what was your role?
5. How do you approach learning something new when you don't have prior experience?
6. Describe a time you faced a challenge in a team setting. How did you handle it?

Work Style & Adaptability

7. How do you prioritize tasks when you have multiple deadlines?
8. What type of work environment helps you perform your best?
9. How do you handle constructive feedback?

Communication & Collaboration

10. Give an example of how you've worked effectively with others on a group project.
11. How would you communicate if you were unsure about instructions or expectations?

Interview Rubric Example

Internship Interview Evaluation Form
Candidate Name: _____
Position Applied For: _____
Date: _____
Interviewer: _____

Evaluation Criteria
Rate each category from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent):

Criteria	Score (1–5)
Communication Skills	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
Motivation & Interest	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
Problem-Solving Ability	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

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Criteria	Score (1–5)
Adaptability & Learning	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
Teamwork & Collaboration	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
Technical/Role-Specific Skills	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
Professionalism	☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Total Score: _____ / 35
Overall Recommendation:
☐ Strong Candidate
☐ Good Candidate
☐ Needs Development
☐ Not Recommended
Comments:

Step 3: Onboarding

Onboarding is a critical step in ensuring interns feel welcomed, informed, and prepared to contribute effectively. A strong onboarding process sets the tone for the entire internship experience, helping interns understand their role, integrate into the company culture, and build confidence from day one. When done well, onboarding increases engagement, reduces confusion, and enhances productivity—ultimately making the internship mutually beneficial for both the intern and the organization.

Additional Tips Beyond Standard Onboarding

In addition to the usual HR paperwork and orientation, consider including:

1. **Clear Role Overview**
    - Provide a detailed explanation of responsibilities, expected outcomes, and how their work contributes to the organization.
2. **Learning Objectives**
    - Have students **create learning objectives** for their internship. Once created, they should share the outcomes with their supervisors, ask for feedback, and then all sign off on them. This helps the supervisor and the student be on the same page from the beginning.
    - Refer back to the learning objectives throughout their internship, helping to create intentionality in the process.
    - This link can help with this task.
3. **Mentorship Assignment**
    - Pair interns with a mentor or buddy for guidance and support throughout the program.
4. **Project Kickoff Session**
    - Introduce interns to their first project with clear goals, timelines, and resources.
5. **Company Culture & Networking Opportunities**

- Include sessions on organizational values and schedule meet-and-greets with key team members.

6. **Feedback Framework**
   - Explain how and when feedback will be given, and encourage interns to share their own input.

Step 4: Hired! Now What?

Hiring an intern is just the beginning—the real impact comes from how you engage, and support them throughout their experience. A well-structured approach ensures your intern feels welcomed, understands expectations, and contributes meaningfully to your organization. This is also your opportunity to help them develop critical professional skills and gain confidence in a real-world setting.

In the following steps, we'll cover best practices, setting clear goals, providing mentorship, and creating an environment where interns can thrive. Remember: the effort you invest now will pay off in stronger performance, better engagement, and a positive reputation for your internship program.

Tips for Supporting Interns Effectively

- **Communicate Success Clearly**
  Provide frequent guidance on what success looks like in your organization. *Pro Tip:* Many interns are accustomed to academic rubrics that define success, so help bridge that gap. When they understand your expectations, they'll rise to the challenge—they just need clarity on what success means to you. This is a great place to reflect on the learning objectives that were created during onboarding.
- **Create Space for Questions**
  Interns often hesitate to ask questions. Schedule dedicated time, such as a 15-minute weekly check-in, focused solely on them. This gives them a safe space to ask about tasks, your career journey, the industry, future growth opportunities, and more.
- **Promote Networking and Mentorship**
  Help interns build connections within your organization and industry. Introduce them to colleagues in different departments, invite them to team meetings, and encourage participation in networking events. Pairing interns with mentors can provide valuable career insights, foster confidence, and create lasting professional relationships. Networking is often not comfortable for the intern, but it's a necessary skill for current and future success. Encourage them to embrace challenges and remind them that great growth happens when they step outside their comfort zone.
- **Remember They're Learning**
  For many interns, this is their first professional role. Offer guidance on the "little things" like professional communication, appropriate attire, and building confidence. These details make a big difference in their development.
- **Encourage Reflection**
  Provide weekly questions for interns to contemplate. This intentional reflection helps them process what they're learning and connect their experiences to future goals. See examples below.

Examples of Weekly Focus Questions

- **Focus on One Area of Improvement**
  Choose one skill or habit you want to improve—and commit to it! This may require asking questions and stepping outside your comfort zone, but that's where real growth happens.
- **Clarify What You Want to Gain**
  What do you hope to achieve from this experience? It could be tangible (a specific skill) or intangible (confidence, networking). Write these goals down and revisit them regularly. *Tip:* Writing down goals is powerful tool for action.
- **Evaluate Company Culture**
  Reflect on what you like and dislike about the organization's culture. For positives, consider how they enhance your job satisfaction. For negatives, note them so you can avoid similar environments in the future.
- **Seek Missed Opportunities**
  Is there something you hoped to learn but haven't yet? Speak up! Ask your manager for opportunities to explore those areas. Be bold—initiative is valued.
- **Celebrate Your Growth**
  Where have you seen personal or professional growth? Think deeply about how your skills, interests, and knowledge have evolved—and take time to celebrate your progress.
- **Assess Your Career Path**
  Has this internship confirmed or challenged your career goals? Why? Reflect honestly.
- **Gauge Your Enjoyment**
  Do you truly enjoy your internship?
  1. If not, why? What steps can you take to improve your experience?
  2. If yes, share this with your supervisor—good news is always appreciated!
- **Commit to Continuous Improvement**
  Identify an area for growth and take at least one step toward improvement. Use resources like books, videos, peers, and mentors to help.
- **Visualize Your Future**
  What is your ultimate career goal? How can this internship help you get there? Visualization works—use it!
- **Discover What Excites You**
  What tasks energize you? Keep this in mind as you plan your next steps. Not sure what's next? Visit CMU Career Services to help!
- **Build Relationships**
  Have you made an effort to connect with colleagues? Relationships enrich your experience and can lead to mentorship and future opportunities.
- **Finish Strong**
  As the semester gets tougher, how will you "finish well" at your internship? Plan your strategy for a strong close.

Conclusion

An internship program is more than a short-term arrangement—it's an investment in future talent and your organization's growth. By creating a structured, supportive, and engaging experience, you not only help interns develop essential skills but also strengthen your company's reputation as a place where people learn and thrive. Remember, clarity, communication, and mentorship are



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the cornerstones of success. When interns feel valued and challenged, they rise to the occasion—and often become your best advocates and future employees.

Know that you are not in this journey alone. Colorado Mesa University Career Services is here to help. Please reach out to us at (970)248.1404 or career@coloradomesa.edu.