

Today's Interns, Tomorrow's Employees

As the labor market shrinks you might be wondering how some organizations continue to find such good help. Many of these organizations discovered a long time ago that it pays to promote the landscape industry to students by providing effective internships. Often today's interns are tomorrow's employees.

Goals and objectives

Internships differ from other kinds of work experiences in that they focus on pre-professional education. An effective internship combines educational classes, demonstrations and trips with regular job assignments. Short-term or seasonal employment without educational components does not qualify as an internship.

An overall goal of any internship program should be to inspire students to become more interested in and dedicated to their professions. If an additional objective is to recruit employees, you must make certain that students have a positive experience and come to feel a sense of loyalty to your organization. This is accomplished through a shared commitment to the goals of your program and to those of the student.

With this in mind, take time to evaluate your organizational goals and give some thought to why you would start an internship program.

- Do you want to promote professionalism in your industry?
- Do you recognize a need to establish good relationships with local schools and instructors?

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- Do you have current employees who would welcome a new challenge as intern supervisors and trainers?
- Would you respond positively to an intern bringing new ideas and insights to your organization?

Components of an internship program

Length: Internships are short term, lasting three months to a year. The length depends on the organization and the type of work interns would be doing.

Type of work: Interns will generally do garden and landscape maintenance. You may also want to include planning, sales, record keeping, other administrative tasks or specialty projects to add interest and broaden their experience. Develop a job description or task list. It doesn't help anyone to make the job look better on paper than it is. You and the intern need to be realistic about the nature of the work.

Consider providing a work rotation exposing the interns to different departments and tasks. When possible, the rotation plan is preferred, but this usually requires more work on the part of the supervisors to coordinate work loads.

Compensation: Interns usually receive an entry-level wage. In some cases, interns can arrange to receive college credit for their internship. Credit is usually linked to the completion of special projects, journals or papers during the term. Some programs provide housing or help interns locate housing. (Short-term housing is difficult to find; the more you can help interns find housing, perhaps with staff or volunteers, the more appealing the internship.) Interns will need health insurance and workers compensation insurance. Some year-long internships provide a paid vacation of one to two weeks.

Be clear and realistic about what you can provide. Keep in mind that educational programs during work hours are a form of compensation. In many cases grant funds are available for internships through local colleges, botanic gardens and civic organizations.

Supervision: Effective supervision of the program, and of the interns themselves, is vital to success. This can only happen when the entire organization, and especially the administration, gives full support to the internship program.

One person should coordinate internships. The coordinator's responsibilities would include advertising the positions to prospective students, interviewing, helping to prepare job descriptions, coordinating educational activities, aiding with scheduling work rotations and with evaluating the interns.

In addition to a coordinator, interns must be placed with working supervisors who have the ability to train and

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