

Powering Up American Businesses

A Blueprint for Operationalizing Win/Win Internship Programs by David Chan

Overview

Let's face it. America is in a conundrum. Businesses aren't hiring because many are cash strapped. And, those that have cash are hoarding it because they fear a possible double dip recession. On the flip side of that coin, high school and college students, graduates, and the unemployed can't get jobs because they don't have the skills that businesses need. This vicious cycle is exacerbating America's losing battle of global competitiveness because we haven't figured out how to best leverage our greatest asset pool, which is our people.

How do we solve this problem without taxing our already overstretched budgets, time commitments and limited resources ... by implementing a decades-old program of hiring interns? The use of interns is not only an extremely viable option, but also a very rewarding one, as well.



One of the reasons why companies and interns don't explore this option further is because oftentimes neither side knows what to expect from the other. The "rules of engagement" are not clearly defined and there is no formal training on developing an internship program. This leads to misperceptions about process and procedures, as well as unmet expectations on both sides.

One of the shining examples of a clearly defined "recognition" program comes out of The University of California, Davis (UCD). Through the university, students can register for Transcript Notation, which is a 'notation' on their official UCD transcript documenting their internship experience. The notation process is handled through the UCD Internship and Career Center. Additionally, students can also apply for college credit for certain courses, depending on the discretion of the teacher. UCD is the only university in the UC system that offers this terrific opportunity.

Couple this recognition program with a well-defined company sponsored internship program and you have a recipe for a successful relationship between interns and businesses. Developing a well-defined internship program is the topic of this white paper.

How to Work With Interns

One of the most important things to remember is that interns are generally novices in the business / practical application world. That said, though, they are not “unskilled.” We have had extremely positive experiences working with interns because: a) they are eager to learn b) have a genuine desire to succeed and c) are truly grateful for the opportunity. I’d venture a bet that most employers have a few, if not many, employees that do not share these qualities.

The operative word, “skilled”, refers to areas of learning that interns have studied. The key is to apply the interns to responsibilities that match their knowledge base. This is true even for an employee that you hired on full-time. In other words, don’t try to give a website design project to an English major or a writing assignment to a biotech engineer. That’s like putting oil to water, so to speak.

Assuming you’ve match up skills with project, there are a number of best practices to consider when working with interns:

- **Assign Specific Tasks.** This is really a double edged sword. On the one hand, you’re very busy running a company and you know what needs to get done. So how do you translate the task that you’ve been doing for the last umpteen years into a task that a new person can easily get their arms around without a lot of guidance? No easy job indeed, but if you’re going to offload this task to an appropriate intern, you’ll have to be as detailed as necessary and likely guide the intern for a couple of iterations.



into small components, timelines are assigned and they match those timelines and tasks to certain milestones in order to ensure a timely completion. Interns, like all of us, need to know by when their tasks need to be completed. If they have no deadlines, then expectations on both sides cannot be measured.

- **Measurable Results.** Similar timelines, you need to be able to measure the results of your interns’ work. It’s best to be able to say “I need you to research 6 companies in the auto industry, with the following characteristics. And, I need to have it in two weeks,” rather than “I need you to research the auto industry.” The key elements here are the characteristics and timeline. These are measurable components.

- **Timelines / Milestones.** The bane of most small businesses and even large ones as well is to keep everyone on point for when things need to be completed. On a large scale, think about what’s going on with the San Francisco Bay Bridge, a \$6.2 Billion endeavor that Caltrans is trying to complete in order to beat the next “big one.” Every aspect of building the bridge is broken down

- **Regular Meetings.** You'd be surprised to see how regular meetings can really enliven your interns, keep them on track and even endear them to you as an employer. The interns love the interaction. It fits the basic law that we are social beings. Interns love to interact with you and with their counterparts. We hold regular meeting every week at the exact same day and time. Now, as intern schedules change throughout the year, accommodations will need to be made, but there is nothing more valuable than consistency. We've also held off-site meet ups, where we and the interns can interact on a more social level. This builds tremendous camaraderie.

- **Training.** If there is one thing I've heard over and over again from our interns, it's that they are extremely grateful for the training that we give them. Our training is on subject matters that they either do not get in school or could use more practical experience with to further their knowledge base. For example, we have continuous training on Internet, mobile and social media marketing techniques. Most schools do not offer these courses as a subject, thus the interns are getting tremendous value from what we teach them. Training gets to be more complex when you have dozens of interns working for you. At last count, we have 30. In order to manage the training process, we created a self-study learning environment which is hosted on our training website. This way interns that come on with us mid-stream can pick up topics on their own and communicate with us through our forum and / or speak to us directly about a particular topic. Training should be one of your top priorities, especially because internships are a two way win / win model.



- **Reward System.** The reward that's probably most coveted by interns is likely being offered a full-time job after successful completion of an internship. Short of that there are plenty of ways to show your appreciation for their stellar work.
 - 1) *Write a letter of recommendation.* These days a recommendation on LinkedIn is one of the most powerful and visible way of recognizing your interns to the business world.
 - 2) *Introduce industry contacts.* Introduce your interns to industry contacts that match their interests and goals. We've made introductions to several industry people in the entertainment, sports and medical communities.

- 3) *Provide positive feedback and constructive criticism, as necessary.* Remember, it's a learning and two-way communication process. The continuous feedback loop is critical to a win / win relationship.
- 4) *Treat them out once in a while.* Something to consider ... you're getting an eager, intelligent apprentice that will likely save you money, while helping you grow your business. Spend a few bucks to treat them every now and then.
- 5) *Sign their review papers.* If the intern is getting college credit or any other college acknowledgement, be sure to fill out their papers on a timely basis as well as provide realistic feedback.

Appropriate Intern Jobs

Interns are amazingly resilient and capable of many different tasks / jobs as long as they are provided with the right tools and support. Some jobs are more obvious than others. Here is just a sampling of jobs for which we've employed interns. Other jobs, such as lab assistants or paralegals would be very appropriate for the biotech / pharma and legal industries.

We are in the marketing consulting services business providing services to a variety of industries: legal, healthcare, sports & entertainment, retail and non-profits. Thus, our jobs lend themselves to these functions:



Research. This is an obvious job for an intern. Every individual, from elementary through college level has had to research something during their lifetime. The Internet and abundance of primary research / information on the Internet makes this job a no-brainer. But, don't limit yourself to Internet research. Interns can also help you with primary research, i.e. calling individuals / companies for surveys.

Content Writing and Editing. Who hasn't written a letter, a document, an email or a post these days? Who doesn't have an opinion about something ... anything? Writing is an essential skill for graduating from elementary, high school or college. Writing content is a great way to utilize interns. It works especially well if you assign interns to topics that they care about. It could be animal rights, urban renewal or even skin care for that matter. Just make sure to match the topic to the intern's interests.

Social Media and Mobile Marketing. This is the age of "social" and "mobile." Even if you are not particularly adept at social media or mobile marketing, this IS the mobile social media generation. They've grown up with this technology and are particularly adept at utilizing these

media tools: Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, iPhone, Android and the plethora of other media tools. Harnessing social media and mobile for business is a great use of interns and a tremendous competitive advantage.

Project Management. Mid-terms and finals are a fact of life for the college student. They all must learn time management skills if they plan to graduate. Utilizing this skillset not only helps the intern grow to become business leaders themselves, but also helps you in your day to day business management needs.

Analytics. No business can be successful without continually analyzing the health of your company or “tweaking” your ad spend and business traffic. The right interns can be very useful here in helping you dissect statistics related to your business. For example, where are your best customers originating from, what ad is producing the best results, which product is generating the most revenue? Analytics are a core component of your business. Why not have a fresh brain helping you with it?

Tools of the Trade

This topic may seem like a complicated and expensive endeavor. To the contrary, every business can do things the “old fashioned” way and use pen and paper. The key point is to operationalize the process, whether you use pen and paper or some software services.

The old saying goes, “If you don’t know where you’re going, how do you know when you get there?” This is just a sampling of tools that we use to help us not only run our business but also track the progress of our interns, so that we know we are moving forward and making progress.

As we are a “digital” marketing company, we are true believers in “cloud” services or inexpensive software that we “rent” on a monthly basis. Here is a sampling of what we use:

Project Management. I’m sure I don’t need to describe the benefit of a project management tool. Whether you are product manufacturer or a services provider, you need to stay on top of your deliverables. Because we employ 30+ interns we need to make sure we know how they are doing based on our timelines and milestones. This can certainly be done using a spreadsheet, but sometimes it’s clearer and more manageable using a project management tool.



Timesheets. In the case of interns who need to be accountable for their time at the college / university, there are plenty of Internet services where you can have them “check in” when they start their work and then “check out” when they are done for the day or session.

Meeting Space. Some companies have physical locations, while others run in a virtual environment. In either case, it’s a really good idea to meet with your interns on a regular basis – whether in person or online. The physical locations are obvious. Online meeting spaces are abundant on the Internet. However you meet, make sure it’s consistent, continuous and communicative. The 3 C’s of a successful feedback loop.

Document Repository. Sharing documents amongst yourself and your interns is an imperative. Google Docs is likely going to be a standard for many businesses. First of all, it’s free, but it’s also become a well-accepted tool for many colleges and universities. How can you beat free?



Communications. This is the one thing that can make or break an internship program. As I’ve previously discussed, providing constant feedback, whether positive or negative, is an important aspect of working with your interns. Many companies will use phone and email communications as standard tools. But, don’t overlook instant messaging, forums and even corporate “Twitter” like services. Communication tools help to reduce redundancy keeps everyone “in the loop” and most importantly keeps the whole team moving in the same direction.

Can’t Get Enough?

If you’re setting up an intern program for the first time, it can be quite overwhelming. I know. I made many mistakes in the beginning because I just didn’t have my act together. If you really want to know every element of setting up your own Intern Factory, we’ll be holding webinars on the topic in the very near future.

You’ll learn: the process of setting up an intern program, how to create a compelling job description that will entice students to work for you, what specific tools you should use, how to manage them with limited resources, how to reward them ... and a whole lot more.

Send us an email at info@adpublishing.org with “intern factory” in the subject line. We’ll notify you as soon as our webinars have been scheduled.