

Internships vs learnerships: Choosing the right option for your business

Here we look at the differences between internships and learnerships, and what to consider when choosing the right option for your organisation.



Sean Sharp, executive head of sales for EduPower Skills Academy

Internship programmes can benefit businesses in various ways, address skills shortages in the country and give back to South African society. But internships aren't without their challenges as they take careful planning to implement. So is an internship right for your business or is there another solution?

Sean Sharp, executive head of sales for EduPower Skills Academy says that while some companies offer quality internships, just as many get it wrong. "Internships make business sense as they are a cost-effective way of bringing more people on board," Sharp explains. "But ask your team if they enjoy hosting interns and you'll probably get a different response. In reality, an intern often adds more work than return."

What is an internship?

Internships are relatively common and candidates usually have completed a diploma or degree. They allow inexperienced graduates to gain practical experience in the workplace, often in an entry-level position and industry that's suited to their qualification.

The duration of an internship can range from a few weeks to 12 months and it's up to the employer to choose whether interns are paid. If they are fortunate, graduates will land an internship that offers a stipend, enough to cover transport and food but whether paid or unpaid, internships give candidates a foot in the door in their chosen industry.

"For companies, despite the challenges, internships are still one of the most feasible ways to discover young talent. They give someone with little experience the chance to add value to your business while you have the opportunity to preview their work ethic, potential and skills," says Sharp. "You can screen candidates and hand-pick the interns who match your requirements for full-time employment."

What are the alternatives?

One of the options for internship programmes is learnerships. A structured training programme that has both practical and theoretical elements, learnerships provide young South African's a nationally recognised qualification.

"Learnerships are a popular approach being used by companies in order to develop individual skills and work experience. By identifying the skills the organisation needs in the long-term and planning learnerships around this, companies can proactively develop a talent pool that will grow and sustain their business into the future," Sharp explains.

Learnerships are tools to groom new recruits as they also give companies an opportunity to screen their candidate's capabilities – without hosting them in their own businesses – before employing them permanently.

"At EduPower, to add even more value for our clients, we've taken this screening process one step further. Our flagship Contact Centre Learnership presents a unique opportunity as our clients can deploy their learners on their own projects, providing a self-funded cost recovery model and a 12-month screening process," Sharp adds.

Incentives and rebates

While learnerships and internships are both supported as development mechanisms to provide youngsters with skills and experience, Sharp says that learnerships do offer more incentives, tax rebates and B-BBEE advantages.

"Via the ETI, a paid intern can reduce your tax by up to R1,000 per month and deliver up to 11 points for B-BBEE scorecards if your interns are absorbed into a permanent role. Learnerships however can add up to 25 points under the Skills Development element for B-BBEE and deliver incentives and tax rebates of up to R80,000 for an able-bodied learner or R120,000 for learners with disabilities," says Sharp.

While internships or learnerships may offer a variety of advantages, Sean says the choice boils down to business requirements. Both programmes, however, contribute to the development of South Africa's youth that adds to their employability.

"Whether your company chooses internships or learnerships, ultimately these initiatives are powerful interventions that can be the start of a long and successful career for the candidates. They provide important opportunities for our youth to become more accomplished in a specific field which will help companies to fuel their growth."