

Designing mutually beneficial intern programmes

Internships have an important and sometimes often overlooked role in growing vibrant companies, in addition to the benefit they offer recent graduates. However in order to be successful, they need to work for both employer and student.



© ximagination – [123RF.com](https://www.123RF.com)

Dr Felicity Coughlan, Director of the Independent Institute of Education, says recent controversies have highlighted practices that are not mutually beneficial. “Employers, who initiate internship programmes only to benefit from the tax or to be able to report it as CSI, often struggle to sustain their programmes.

“Regular staff, who have to work with the students, follow the corporate messaging on the role and purpose of the programme in the workplace, resulting in interns being seen as cheap labour or a nuisance. Interns in these positions do not gain the benefit of learning and may become demotivated, which in turn increases workplace frustration.

“On the other hand, interns who simply take the position to tick the box on an experiential requirement, miss the opportunity to showcase their talents or deepen their skills. This means they will not have much to show for the experience other than a line on their CV.”

works closely with many companies on placing graduate interns.

“Our advice to companies is for them to deliberately design internship programmes to serve both the student and the employer. Students should look for certain features when accepting an internship or any other workplace-based learning opportunity.

Key factors

Two key factors may make the world of difference to the mutual value of an internship.

“Companies that routinely appoint their best interns to permanent positions and companies that take the experience of interns seriously and try in turn to learn from their interns, are likely to derive the best benefit.

“A winning strategy for companies is to approach the internship as a means of identifying future talent. Hence, the work allocated to interns will be designed to test that talent in real life situations.

“If interns are seen as potential employees, the supervising staff are expected - and will in turn benefit from - training and mentoring and the intern will be allowed to experience the workplace.

“Companies that do not routinely hire some of their interns may well be those more likely to use the programme only for corporate conscience and cheap labour purposes – something that is likely to become known amongst the most promising cohorts of potential interns who may then begin to avoid them.

Students vie for top posts

Year after year, the best students vie for the opportunities to intern at those companies that have a track record of picking the top of the crop from their annual intake.

“This competitive approach among the interns also improves their productivity and further benefits the company, in addition to them having access to the top talent coming out of higher education institutions every year.

“Well-structured, internship programmes further enable employers to get access to the latest thinking in certain areas, as well as the perspective of young people on the work being done.

“Equally importantly, employers gain fresh insight on the work environment, allowing them to focus on the adjustments that may well result in improved retention for all employees. Interns have not been co-opted into your organisational culture and monitoring their adaptation will give you important insights into how it feels to work in your company.

“Interns can, in turn, learn about adapting to new environments and new people – it is not only about the work, after all. A wise intern uses the time to test new social and professional skills and to network with those on the career track they are interested in. Even if they are not retained in that organisation, they will leave the internship with the start of a professional network that has actually experienced working with them.

“Interns should always aim to leave the internship with not only the work experience on their CV, but also with the details of a credible referee,” concludes Coughlan.