ACTIVITIES

High School Internships

For high school students, internships provide in-depth exposure to the STEM workplace, while supporting the development of core 21st-century skills. Internships can also help students decide if a specific job or career is right for them, while aiding employers in developing a pipeline of STEM talent for their businesses and industries.

What Is an Internship?

An internship places a student in a real-world work environment over a period of weeks or months to perform selected job functions while learning about careers in a specific company or industry. The purpose of internships for high school students is to open their eyes to the world of work—and to enhance their understanding of the core workplace skills they need to succeed, including STEM skills.

A high-quality internship is about much more than getting students to do busywork that a company's regular employees would prefer not to do. Rather, it is a meaningful and structured work opportunity for the student that combines task assignments with participation in day-to-day meetings and other activities that broaden understanding of industry norms and trends.

Internships are the pinnacle of work-based learning for high school students. Before creating an internship program, employers may want to consider some of the other activities described in this guide, from classroom visits and participation in school job fairs to job shadowing opportunities for students. These activities can be stepping stones to building a stronger relationship with schools and developing a better understanding of some of the principles of effective work-based learning.

Internships should target high school juniors and seniors who are beginning to think ahead to college and careers. The most common form of internship for high school students is the summer internship; students in these positions generally work between 35 and 40 hours a week for a defined period during the summer months. However, some employers provide internships on a part-time basis during the school year—for example, during afterschool hours or free blocks during the school day.

Many high schools and school districts offer academic credit for students participating in internships, provided that the experience meets school standards for educational content. While college-age interns are generally paid for their work, compensation policies for high school interns vary. See "Compensation and Legal Issues," below, for important information on pay and other policies.

The Benefits of Internships

Benefits for the student:

• Students gain experience in a real-world workplace and develop an in-depth understanding of what it's like to work in the employer's industry.

• Students see the value of developing and honing STEM skills so they can succeed in a STEM workplace.

• Students have opportunities develop and strengthen 21st-century job skills in areas from communications to working in teams.

- Students learn about the rhythms and requirements of the workplace in areas from punctuality and dress to norms and behavior.

- Students learn more about jobs and careers in fields they may be interested in pursuing.

- Students gain valuable experience for college and work resumes, while connecting with possible references and future employers.

Benefits for the employer:

- Employers spark student interest in careers in their industry while showcasing their commitment to furthering the education and development of young people.

- Employers demonstrate to students the importance of developing and honing key skills in STEM and other areas.

- Employers identify possible future workers for their business and their industry.

- Employers strengthen their relationships with students, families, schools, and the local community.

Making It Effective and Educational

Student recruitment and hiring. Employers should work closely with schools to identify students whose academic interests and college/career goals are a good match for the employer's business and industry. Consider the following ideas for finding good intern candidates:

- Make sure internships are available and accessible to a diverse range of students and not just employees' children, friends, etc. Offer assistance with transportation if needed so students from low-income families feel comfortable applying.

- Develop a detailed job description listing the intern's responsibilities, the duration of the job, technology and other skills required, and compensation (if appropriate). Clarify the expectations of the job when it comes to dress, hours, etc.

- Reach out to schools to get their help identifying specific students or groups to target— for example, students in a specific extracurricular club (e.g., a robotics or computer club) or high-performing students in a specific STEM subject.

- Encourage students to write short essays about why they are interested in your company and industry. Convene a panel of employees to review the essays and make recommendations about which students would be the best fit.

- Conduct interviews with students in the same way you would when hiring for a full-time employee. This gives students a valuable experience preparing for and participating in a real-world job interview, while allowing you to screen for the best possible candidates.

- Develop a contract for the position and ask the student to sign it.

Who is the Best School Contact for Internships?

In large school districts, an employer's main point of contact when exploring the possibility of an internship program may be the individual or office charged with administering youth employment programs, including summer jobs. In smaller districts and schools, it may be the school principal or guidance counselor. Some schools, particularly STEM-focused schools, have staff or teachers who are responsible for work-based learning. Employers should start by contacting senior leaders at the district or school level; these leaders, in turn, can help connect employers with the right people to initiate an effective partnership.

Administration and mentoring. Assign one employee to serve as an intern's supervisor/mentor and main point of contact before, during, and after the internship. Make sure the employee understands his/her role and has time to devote to making the internship a success. Responsibilities of the mentor include:

• overseeing the intern's orientation and day-to-day work;

• developing and monitoring the intern's tasks and assignments;

• making sure the intern has what he/she needs to meet expectations and complete assigned tasks (technology, supplies, office space, etc.);

• evaluating the intern's performance (see "Assessment and Reflection," below);

• serving as the main point of contact for the intern whenever he/she has questions or needs guidance/support; and

• providing references/letters of recommendation as needed for the intern after the internship is complete.

Coordination with the school. Clarify the school's expectations and policies about internships, and tailor the work experience to in-school activities (see sidebar, "Who Is the Best School Contact for Internships?" for more on whom to contact.) Many employers work with schools and students to develop formal learning plans for internships spelling out how the experience will advance the student's learning.

Ask school representatives what students are doing in class that could be reinforced during the internship. For example:

• What is the background of the participating student or students? What do they already know about STEM jobs or STEM careers?

• What are the students currently learning in their math or science classes? What general topics seem to excite them? What topics are they struggling with?

• Do students need help with specific "soft" skills like communication or teamwork?

• Are there plans to have students report or reflect on what they are learning in the internship? What can you do during the internship to help lay the groundwork for this reflection?

Whether or not students are getting academic credit for the internship, offer to provide schools with a final evaluation and assessment of the student's work (see below for more). For other tips on questions to ask teachers and schools, see "How Can You Put the 'Learning' in Work-Based Learning?" page 6.

Student preparation and orientation. Work to ensure that students start the internship with a solid understanding of your company and industry.

• Provide the school and/or the student with informational links/materials, including basic information that will orient them to the work. (Note: Don't overwhelm them with huge amounts of up-front reading and research, just enough to give them a strong sense of the company and its business.)

• Develop an orientation plan for the student's initial days at the worksite that includes a brief overview of the company and industry, a workplace tour, introductions and meetings with key employees, technology and safety briefings, and more. Work with human resources to ensure that the student's on-boarding process parallels the process for new employees

• If appropriate, provide an employee guidebook or handbook so students understand important workplace policies.

• Set aside space for the student in an office or cubicle with access to wifi, phone, computer, email, and other technology as appropriate.

• Clarify office policies about personal use of cellphones and technology, office hours, lunch hours, kitchen use, dress, etc.

Intern activities and assignments. An internship should provide opportunities for the student to do actual work while also learning about the company and its industry and the skills employees need to succeed. The stereotypical busywork tasks that employers assign to interns include filing, covering the phones, stuffing envelopes and the like. These types of tasks can constitute a small part of an internship, but employers should not treat these students as free or cheap labor. The focus should be on supporting them to learn, develop important skills, and broaden their understanding of jobs and careers.

The degree to which student interns will be able to do hands-on STEM work in areas from engineering to computer coding and web design will depend on the employer and on students' skills. But employers should strive to incorporate STEM content into internships as much as possible. This means creating opportunities for students to work with data and technology, complete technical assignments and projects, and shadow STEM workers in their jobs.

The following are sample activities to consider incorporating into the internship:

• Crunch data on key business and industry trends and produce a report for staff, including spreadsheets, "dashboards" and other visuals, and written analysis.

• Assess the efficiency and performance of key workplace technologies and processes and identify possible improvements.

• Conduct an inventory of key workplace equipment/technologies, their maintenance requirements, schedules, and needs.

• Research one or more new products (e.g., a software application or new and improved piece of equipment) and how they could potentially improve performance and results.

• Participate in/observe important team and client meetings.

• Attend industry events and conferences; and report to staff on key content and takeaways.

• Conduct research on a possible new initiative or product for the company; and present findings to key staff.

• Conduct an analysis of the company's website and offer ideas for improvements.

• Scan industry news on a daily or weekly basis and provide regular updates to staff.

• Complete a "backburner" project that staff have not had time to finish.

• Evaluate one or more aspects of the company's use of informational technology or social media (depending on student interest and expertise) and report to staff.

• Search for lower-cost sources for key materials/inputs.

• Write or edit initial drafts of internal communications—memos, newsletters, etc.

• Research an important strategic issue confronting the company and report to staff using video, slides, or other media.

• Generate a marketing plan, financial forecast, or other report; and/or create support materials such as charts, graphs, or other visuals (based on student interests and skills).

• Take responsibility for one or more regular tasks such as placing a weekly supply order.

• Plan and coordinate an event or meeting.

• Help screen and train new or additional interns.

Assessment and reflection. Like permanent employees, interns should be evaluated on the quality of the work they do. While these evaluations and assessments might not have tangible effects on an intern's pay or future prospects with the company, they will provide interns with an understanding of performance measurement in the workplace, as well as ideas and suggestions about their strengths and weaknesses and what skills they need to work on. The intern's mentor should coordinate the evaluation with input from other employees who have the opportunity to work closely with the intern. (See the Resources section for a sample intern evaluation form.)

The following are some sample guiding questions for the evaluation:

• What did the intern do well? Where did he/she excel?

• What were the intern's key accomplishments during the internship?
  What was the impact of these accomplishments for the company?

• Did the intern show competence and mastery in key STEM skills such as technology,
  web or quantitative skills?

• To what extent did the intern act professionally and meet the standards and requirements
  of the workplace in terms of demeanor, dress, punctuality, etc.?

• In what areas could the intern improve? What skills does he/she need to develop to be a
  more well-rounded employee?

• To what extent did the intern show an interest in and passion for STEM jobs and careers?

In addition to providing the intern with an evaluation document, it is important to sit down with the intern toward the end of his/her time at the company for a face-to-face conversation about the evaluation.

Understanding that evaluation and assessment are a two-way street, employers should provide interns with opportunities to evaluate their internships. Did the internship meet the student's expectations? To what extent did the intern feel he/she was assigned meaningful and important work? Did employees treat the intern with professionalism and respect? What skills did the intern develop in the course of his/her work? What did he/she learn about what it takes to succeed in the company and its industry? Did the internship make the student more or less interested in careers in the industry?

Telling the Story

Internally

Write it up. Consider writing up an account of the classroom visit for your company's intranet, newsletter, or other employee-focused publication. Emphasize the value of speaking with and inspiring young people in STEM careers. If the event is covered by local media, include that in your write up.

Externally

It is natural for an employer to want to be recognized for the opportunities it provides to students through internships and other work-based learning activities. Publicity also can help attract future interns while encouraging other employers and schools to launch their own internship programs. Some publicity suggestions include:

Send a press release. Determine, with your company's communications department and the school's, whether it makes sense to send a press release or coordinate with media

outlets about the internship. If you are sharing images or information about students, make sure you coordinate with the students' schools and obtain the proper releases.

Reach out to local newspapers/websites/radio/TV. Invite them to visit your company and prepare a feature story on the intern or interns.

Contact industry websites/journals with information about your internships, and encourage them to write feature stories that could encourage other companies to sponsor their own internships.

Write a letter, op-ed, or blog. Write about your company's internship programs, noting the importance of helping young people develop workplace skills.

Compensation and Legal Issues

It is generally recommended that employers pay all interns, including high school students. However, employers are not required under the Fair Labor Standards Act to pay interns. The following are the conditions under which not paying interns is legal:

1. The internship, even though it includes actual operation of the facilities of the employer, is similar to training that would be given in an educational environment.

2. The internship experience is for the benefit of the intern.

3. The intern does not displace regular employees, but works under close supervision of existing staff.

4. The employer that provides the training derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the intern; and on occasion its operations may actually be impeded.

5. The intern is not necessarily entitled to a job at the conclusion of the internship.

6. The employer and the intern understand that the intern is not entitled to wages for the time spent in the internship.

In the case of a paid internship, the pay should be at least minimum wage and comparable to the pay of others doing similar work.

Consult with your human resources and legal departments about other legal considerations related to hiring interns, including workers compensation, liability, etc.

Following Up

Look for a thank you note. Employers and mentors should expect to receive a follow-up thank you note from participating interns. If you do not receive a note in a timely fashion, it may be worth contacting an adult at the school to remind them that a follow-up note is an important part of work-based learning.

Consider staying in touch. Encourage the student to stay in touch as he/she proceeds to college and career. Perhaps the student will want to come back for a follow-up internship or job shadowing opportunity (for more on job shadows, see p. 51). In addition, consider offering ongoing mentoring and college and career guidance to students as appropriate, while following company guidelines on communicating with students, especially minors. Once a former intern has the appropriate education and experience to be considered a prospective employee, consider reaching out to him/her about available jobs with the company. Make sure to consult with human resources on recruitment and hiring policies.

Offer references. To the extent that you were satisfied with the intern's work and contributions, offer to provide letters of recommendation and references as the student applies to college and moves on to other jobs.

Resources

Sample Student Intern Evaluation

Intern Name: _____

Semester: Fall   Spring   Summer   20_____

Business Name: _____

Supervisor Name: _____

Business Phone #: _____

Please rate the student intern on each of the following categories.

Professional Qualities:

RATINGS	Excellent 4	Good 3	Fair 2	Poor 1	N/A
Establishes rapport with supervisor					
Establishes rapport with staff					
Establishes rapport with clients					
Communicates well					
Seeks new knowledge					
Shows initiative					
Manages time well					
Produces accurate reports/records					
Demonstrates STEM knowledge/skills					

Personal Qualities:

RATINGS	Excellent 4	Good 3	Fair 2	Poor 1	N/A
Is punctual					
Is dependable					
Accepts constructive criticism					
Demonstrates enthusiasm					
Dresses professionally					

I certify that _____ (student intern name) has completed

_____ internship hours.

_____   _____   _____
Supervisor Signature   Supervisor Phone Number   Date

Note: Evaluation form adpated from INVEST Internship Guide. www.investprogram.org.