

Finding new employees is challenging these days. Are interns an answer?

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Many large employers are planning to increase their internship hiring by more than 22% in 2022, according to a new study from the National Association of Colleges and Employers. Getty Images

When you ask most small-business owners what their biggest challenge is heading into 2023, you'll likely hear about labor — or lack of it.

According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), more than 10 million job openings remain unfilled in the United States. Most of my clients are struggling to find good talent.

Which is one reason more companies, even smaller ones, are offering internships to college-age students.

“The competition to hire is stronger now than it has been in recent memory,” said John Doherty, director of Cooperative Education at [Drexel University's Steinbright Career Development Center](#), which places thousands of students every year in co-ops and

internships at companies in the Philadelphia area. “There’s just a lack of skilled workers. Internships give employers of all sizes the chance to develop the skills of young professionals to take on greater responsibilities.”

Although more than half of employers canceled their internship programs during the pandemic, according to a [report from the job platform Glassdoor](#), the pendulum is swinging back. A [new report from](#) the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) finds that many large employers are planning to increase their internship hiring by more than 22% in 2022.

It’s not just about filling open positions. “It’s really valuable to have a fresh perspective from a younger generation in our workforce,” said Kendra Linton, a senior associate and designer in the Philadelphia office of architecture and design firm Nelson Worldwide. She helps to supervise two to five internships a year, which last three to six months and often lead to full-time jobs.

“We totally embrace having interns around, especially in the design and architecture industry, where things are changing very rapidly,” she said. “They’re learning the newest tools in school, and it’s not uncommon for one of our interns to show us something like a cool app or technology that they’re using to help them do their job better. So it’s really a reciprocal relationship.”

Maybe it’s time for your business to consider an intern. If so, you’ll want to make sure you’re taking the advice of those who have already have.

Set clear expectations

For starters, there must be clear expectations of the job. Keep in mind that the person you’re hiring likely has little or no corporate work experience, so you can’t just assume the person knows how to behave in a professional environment.

“Provide the intern with more instructions than you would need to provide to a new employee,” said Shelby Keating, who started as an intern and now helps to run the internship program at biotech firm Century Therapeutics in Philadelphia. “You need to tell them what to wear, what people do for lunch, and what time to arrive to the office.”

These are things the intern might not know and may be afraid to ask, Keating said.

Interns learn more in person than on Zoom

While many companies are still trying to figure out the best work-from-home arrangements with their employees, most employers still agree that due to the age and inexperience of an intern, the more face time in the office, the better. Nearly half of employers surveyed in the

NACE report (46.8%) plan to provide a blend of virtual and in-person experience, while 25.8% plan to hold internships exclusively in-person. Just 2.2% are planning internships that are fully virtual.

“We’re working in a hybrid work environment,” Linton said. “But we encourage our interns to be in the office five days a week or as many days as they can be because it’s that communication that’s really important for us.”

Have a written contract

If you’re going to hire an intern, you’ll want to make sure that person is classified as an employee and paid market rates. It’s also very important to stipulate this pay as part of a written contract that defines the intern’s title or role, a brief description of duties, the name of the supervisor, and the duration of the agreement.

You should also include “at-will” status, which gives you, the employer, the ability to terminate that person at any time and for any reason (except unlawful) or even for no reason at all without incurring legal liability. There are plenty of free examples of internship contracts available by searching online.

Keating said that interns are handled through the company’s human resources department, just like any other employee.

“We have full contracts with all of our student interns,” she said. “I know for the student, the number of hours is very important as well as their salary in writing. We determine all of that in early one-on-one meetings with the student where the terms and expectations of the internships are outlined.”

Give lots of feedback

Finally, it’s critical to provide regular performance reviews. Thanks to technology, today’s students come from a generation that expects more frequent conversations. Linton said her company has a “360 review” process in which all teams that the interns has touched are continuously providing feedback.

“Our aim is to give them the most valuable feedback possible and as quickly as possible about their experience with us and make sure that they’re set up for success in the future,” she said.

That’s because although an internship program can certainly provide needed help to employers, the benefit goes beyond just that. It’s to help those interns succeed in whatever they do after they finish school.

“If they stay with your company or they go work for somebody else in a different role, it’s important to recognize you’re a part of somebody’s personal and professional path,” Doherty said. “And I think that’s a great responsibility.”

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