



Exploring the Benefits of a Strong **INTERNSHIP**

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PROGRAM



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As baby boomers continue to retire in hordes, the demand for highly skilled workers has steadily risen. Businesses and organizations are tasked with filling an increasing number of vacancies while maintaining or improving production. As a result, many companies have begun to utilize interns. The benefits of an internship program are widely known; they enable businesses to mold future employees by developing their skills and instilling values that define an organization's mission, all while fulfilling short-term labor needs. In the dynamic field of facilities management, a strong internship program can be the key to securing future success.



The Facilities Management Department internship program at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus (CU Anschutz) has been partnering with local universities and vocational schools for over a decade. With over 200 employees in a variety of

fields, the department maintains a campus responsible for millions of dollars in research, in addition to supporting facilities projects, managing building operations, providing a safe physical environment, and enhancing the quality of life of a diverse campus culture. The internship program provides a working environment that allows students to experience practical applications and apply their studies in the professional world. The program has also facilitated university recruitment of a diverse group of highly skilled workers. When it comes to attracting the best and brightest employees, a strong internship program can give any organization a competitive edge.

WHY IS AN INTERNSHIP PROGRAM SO IMPORTANT?

The internship program was originally created to address skilled-personnel issues facing the Facilities Management (FM) department. With a wide range of positions to fill, from accountants to project managers to HVAC technicians, the department often faced a lack of prospective experienced applicants in key fields. Due to increased economic growth and a higher demand for skilled workers, traditional recruiting methods were becoming insufficient. By teaming up with local higher educational institutions, the department was able to tap into an immense pool of candidates from the area's finest trade schools, vocational schools, community colleges, and universities. This concept, known as "growing your own workforce," ensures sustainable workforce development by utilizing the talent and education of local students.

The ability to recruit and transition local students from their education programs to full-time employees has been extremely beneficial. In addition to lowering the costs and scope of the hiring process, students can provide a fresh perspective and are often trained with the latest technology and methods. By mentoring and nurturing interns, the department can ingrain appropriate habits, values, policy, and culture that reflect the organization's mission.

CU ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS FACILITIES MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

The internship program has brought in new team members from a range of fields, such as health and safety, mechanical and trades, and project management, to name a few. The program

works with Pickens Technical College, Spartan College, Ecotech Institute, Emily Griffith Technical College, Lincoln Tech, Red Rocks Community College, the University of Colorado Denver, and Metropolitan State University of Denver to recruit candidates. Students must be enrolled in an accredited program and be within six months of graduating. Additionally, the student must maintain a certain grade point average (GPA) and complete a formal interview and hiring process with the department.

Once accepted into the internship program, the student is assigned a mentor from the FM department who provides insight, guidance, and consistency throughout the internship. Interns work in an area related to their classroom studies and are also rotated to the trades groups as well as the building zones, which includes different types of buildings (research, academic, clinical, and administrative). The rotation with trades and zones provides interns exposure to other facets of the department as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the organization and how it interconnects. Throughout the program, the intern is required to complete numerous technical- and safety-related trainings and successfully complete an extensive, specialized personnel qualification manual in order to be eligible for a full-time position.

The success of the facilities internship program at CU Anschutz, or any internship program, is predicated mainly on its design. In order to recruit the strongest applicants, the program must provide benefits and resources that are the most appealing to the student. Whether it is advanced on-the-job training, a good salary, professional relationships, hands-on work related to their field of study, or involvement in an organization with a reputation for consistently producing full-time workers from student interns, a better program will often result in better applicants. By working closely with advisors and instructors from local schools, the internship program at CU Anschutz has established a reputation for providing students with one of the best real-world work experiences available as they transition into their careers.

DESIGNING A SUCCESSFUL INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

When first designing an internship program, it is important to identify what positions and skill sets are needed the most. This can be accomplished by surveying managers and supervisors within the organization. In addition, it can be beneficial to identify areas or positions that may be improved by changing the culture. Interns are, in general, younger and more responsive to learning and accepting new policies, procedures, guidelines, and standards than seasoned employees. The next step is to develop a list of accredited local higher education institutions with which to partner, based on their degree programs and the needs of the organization. Involving current employees who are alumni of local schools is an optimal method for establishing this initial connection. Once a connection is established, a liaison should be assigned from within the company to work directly with the

schools to develop a strong relationship. Once needs are identified and academic connections are forged, the program itself must be formulated to meet the desires of the organization and appeal to potential student applicants.

Developing requirements for acceptance into the internship program should be your next step. These requirements should include criteria such as GPA, relevant coursework, technical skills, and length of time until graduation, to name a few. To ensure selecting the finest applicants, it is wise to require candidates to commit to a formal hiring process, which includes submitting a resume and completing an interview with a minimum of three selection committee members. Next, the organization must develop the requirements for completing the program.

These requirements should be based specifically on the positional duties that are intended to be filled. It can also be beneficial to rotate the intern through different departments, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how the company operates. Since the intern's highest priority is their formal

schooling, the workplace schedule should accommodate the intern's school schedule. The internship program should follow a timeline for completing various steps of training and work experience. Assigning a mentor from within the organization is also recommended to provide guidance to the intern, and to set an example of how leaders operate and set the tone in the company. The final step of the internship process should involve either a test or formal review to determine if the intern should be eligible for a full-time position. Once the internship program has launched, it is also important to perform routine audits of the program itself, in order to fine-tune the process and address concerns.

Funding an internship program can be challenging. Many organizations, including the FM department at CU Anschutz, use funds from vacant positions to support their internship programs. This is an excellent means to provide funding, as it also communicates which positions need to be filled and how many positions are vacant.



From left to right: Tony Preisner, Mike Duan, and Henry Choi - Utility Plant Operators



BENEFITS OF A STRONG INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

A good internship program benefits both the student and the organization in a variety of ways. As previously mentioned, internship programs grant businesses and organizations the luxury of grooming future employees, satisfying

short-term labor needs, and filling positions with skills that are hard to come by in a tight labor market, all while saving money during the recruiting process. In addition to these benefits, companies also have the ability to “screen” interns before committing to them as full-time hires. With an entire semester or summer to become acquainted with the intern, an organization has more time to evaluate if they are a good fit for the potential work group as well as the organization. Another advantage for businesses is low-cost labor; interns are generally a less-expensive resource. They are often expected to perform job duties as if they were regular employees as well as follow the company’s policies and procedures.

By providing interns with mentors, an organization is also motivating its seasoned employees to embrace leadership roles, which can improve morale and create more leaders within a business. Additionally, it gives the seasoned employee an opportunity to teach an eager and receptive student and later, to view the student’s success as part of their own success. Lastly, a strong internship program also helps to establish rapport with the local community. By hiring locally, organizations can establish themselves as community leaders.

The list of benefits for student interns is long as well. In addition to real-world work exposure, the intern finally gets a chance to apply their knowledge in a setting outside of the classroom. An internship also provides valuable opportunities to practice communication, develop work relationships, and improve teamwork skills. By gaining industry knowledge and experience firsthand, interns enhance their resumes, establish a network of professional contacts and references, and become more marketable. Many companies also require work experience in addition to education, which an internship can fulfill. Most importantly, an internship is a great way to gain permanent employment and start one’s career.

The FM internship program at CU Anschutz has been extremely successful in hiring and retaining interns in several areas. The Central Utility Plant (CUP) provides steam and chilled water to the entire campus. Due to the specialized skills required and a lack of qualified potential candidates, the CUP was struggling to fill vacant positions. Through the internship program, the department was able to hire and train three interns that became full-time CUP employees. Henry Choi, Mike Duan,

and Tony Preisner were accepted into the internship program in 2013. Despite coming from an HVAC background, these interns were selected by the department to become utility plant operators, mainly due to the hard work, enthusiasm, and intelligence displayed during their internships. After being hired on full-time, each of these employees went on to gain a Stationary Engineer License, which enabled them to become utility plant operators. “I wouldn’t have made such a speedy and smooth transition to a new career without the internship program,” commented Duan. “It helped to change my life for the better.”

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPANSION

As the FM department at CU Anschutz continues to expand, internship opportunities are expanding as well. As technology keeps evolving in the fields of engineering, energy management, computer-aided drafting, geographic information systems, architecture, and resource conservation, the desire to stay ahead of the curve goes hand-in-hand with recruiting applicants trained in the most current, cutting-edge methods and applications. Additionally, areas such as business management, HR, finance, and IT support will always require a steady flow of applicants. Seasonal work groups such as grounds maintenance and landscaping benefit from supplemental help using interns as well.

The FM internship program is constantly seeking to improve itself. Through year-round auditing and refinement of the program, the department aspires to sustain an internship program that continues to appeal to and attract the best applicants.

CONCLUSION

An internship program is an excellent solution to address issues facing both today’s workload and tomorrow’s workforce. By utilizing interns, businesses can achieve multiple goals simultaneously, such as meeting short-term labor needs and developing a highly qualified and relatively young workforce, all while saving the company money. However, an organization’s ability to recruit the best interns is dependent on the strength of its internship program. By investing time and effort in building and maintaining a successful internship program, a company can reap the benefits of a sustainable workforce. Regarding facilities management in particular, a strong internship program is an excellent tool when it comes to securing the organization’s future success. (E)

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