



THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON GUIDE TO INTERNSHIPS:

*How To Recruit, Train, and
Retain Top Talent*



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Internships are increasingly important both for students' educational and professional advancement and your business's productivity, growth, and talent pipeline development.

But what makes for a great internship experience for both you and your interns? The best internship experiences—whether traditional on-site programs, remote experiences, or [micro-internships](#)—include experiential learning, skill building, and mentorship opportunities that will help form the career readiness skills students need for their future success.

The Employer Engagement team is here to support your internship recruiting and development efforts. Have questions or feedback, or need additional resources? [Contact us](#) today!

The Business Case for Hiring Interns

Hosting interns can provide your organization with many benefits, whether you represent a large company that has been in business for many years or a small start-up venture that is only a few years old.

An internship program can help you to:

- **Identify early-career talent:** Internships are great opportunities for you to view potential employees in action and manage training costs by investing in their future success.
- **Gain an outside perspective:** Interns can bring a fresh approach to situations, provide insightful solutions from an external point of view, or even serve as an audience for market research.
- **Enhance supervisory skills:** Develop members of your team who demonstrate leadership potential by having them mentor or supervise an intern.
- **Build your early-career talent pipeline:** When you create a reoccurring university internship experience, you will build a pipeline of great entry-level talent. If your interns are happy with your program, the word will get out to other students and your program and quality of applicants will grow.
- **Conduct community outreach:** By hiring an intern, your organization is demonstrating its commitment to community and economic development in your area. And, you are helping to keep college-educated talent in our region and create a network of mentors invested in recruiting and training our next generation of leaders.

Job or Internship . . . What's the Difference?

An internship is a supervised, career-related learning experience where students can explore a career field for potential fit while gaining work experience that builds a wide range of professional skills—all while contributing to an organization's mission and goals.

Internships ARE:

- Planned, experiential learning arrangements that are primarily for the student's educational benefit.

- Short-term engagements of typically eight to 10+ weeks.
- Often complementary to a student’s coursework, but can also be an opportunity for the student to explore a different field.
- Available during the summer or academic year.

Internships are NOT:

- A free or low-cost source of labor to catch up on filing or other low-level office tasks.
- A replacement for the work of a current employee.

If your company needs to hire someone who has skills that nobody else in your organization has—for example social media or other specialized computer skills—that’s a job, not an internship.

Should My Internship Be Paid or Unpaid?

Whether a student interns for a nonprofit or for-profit employer, we encourage paid internships.

Paid internships:

- **Broaden your applicant pool:** When you offer unpaid internships, you exclude many talented students who can’t afford to work for free.
- **Encourage a diverse workforce:** If diversity is something your company values, setting up financial barriers for internships does not align with those values.
- **Build your brand:** By providing fair wages, it gives you an edge over competition to recruit top talent as well as providing access to all students.

At the Career Center, we follow [NACE guidelines](#) and the [Fair Labor Standards Act](#) when determining whether an internship at a for-profit employer should be paid. The FLSA requires for-profit employers to pay employees for their work. Courts have used the “primary beneficiary test” to determine whether an intern is an employee under the FLSA.

If any of the following are true, then students are considered employees and must be paid:

- They provide essential services to the employer;
- They are working in a position where someone is normally paid;
- There is a history of paying someone to do the same or similar work;
- Other people are currently paid for the same or similar work; or
- There is no corresponding academic program with academic credit.

If the employer is the primary beneficiary, the intern must be compensated as an employee under at least the minimum wage provisions of the FLSA.

If your unpaid position does qualify as an internship according to the FLSA, be thoughtful about the number of hours you are requesting the intern to work. Many students are taking a full course load

and working part-time elsewhere to support themselves or to pay for the internship course credit.

Remember: an internship is a learning experience. Thus, the work that the intern does has to be for their primary learning benefit, not the employer's primary benefit.

Note that the primary beneficiary test applies to internships at *for-profit* employers. There is an exception for individuals who volunteer their time, freely, and without anticipation of compensation for religious, charitable, civic or humanitarian purposes to non-profit organizations. In those situations, internships can be unpaid even if the employer is the primary beneficiary in the relationship.

For more information, see the Department of Labor's [website](#).

The Role of Academic Credit in an Internship

Many academic programs do not require an internship course to graduate, but it is a great way for students to have additional support and mentorship from the University while they are interning.

Academic credit is between the University that offers the credit and the student who needs or wants it. Credit is earned for the demonstrated learning that comes from the internship experience. Students receive academic credit when they are enrolled in a class and complete class assignments.

The UO Career Center typically offers an internship for credit course, and some academic departments may have their own internship courses. If your intern is interested in receiving academic credit for their internship, encourage them to speak with their academic advisor for more information.

Not all intern candidates need, want, or can afford academic credit for their internship. Including a requirement for academic credit on your job description limits your pool of talented, diverse applicants.

Requiring an intern to receive academic credit for their internship does not exempt a for-profit employer from minimum wage laws if the position is considered a job according to the primary beneficiary test of the FLSA.

Launching Your Internship Experience

Creating a high-quality internship experience takes careful planning. Follow our step-by-step guide to create a mutually beneficial experience that will be a good fit for your business goals AND a student's learning objectives.

First Steps: Planning Your Program

- **Determine capacity:** How many students can you support at one time or over the course of the year? You can always start with one and build capacity over time.
- **Get organizational buy-in and budget approval:** It's important to ask how long and to what extent your company can support a student with the resources you have, including training, supervision, technology, and salary. If there is no budget or administrative/supervisory flexibility available right now, develop a proposal to advocate for funding at least one internship next fiscal year.

- **Identify internal areas for internships:** Are there specific departments or teams that are well suited for mentoring students in this capacity? Are there team projects coming up that could use a fresh set of eyes or an extra set of hands?
- **Identify your top needs for your future workforce:** What are the skills you want most in new hires? What kind of projects would build those skills under the mentorship of your team?
- **Find the internship type that works best for your environment, resources, and time commitment:** It's important to design with flexibility in mind, as students may have class or other part-time jobs. Consider also the time and energy it will take your employees serving as supervisors on top of their regular job responsibilities.

Types of Internships

- **Traditional Internship:** Traditional internships take place during summer breaks or during the academic year, typically over an eight to ten-week period. When students are in class, internships are usually anywhere from five to 20 hours per week. Longer work hours are common during summer break.
- **Rotational Internships:** Over the course of a rotational internship, interns rotate through multiple departments and roles within your company to help them assess various skills and interests and see where they shine. Rotational internships often work best at organizations that already have experience running a traditional internship program.
- **Remote/Virtual Internships:** Sometimes referred to as “telecommuting” or “offsite work,” remote or virtual internships are becoming more and more popular. With a little [creativity and thoughtful design](#), you can [integrate remote interns](#) into your team and benefit from their contributions as if they were in the office. Handshake has put together a guide for employers on how to [host a virtual internship](#).
- **Micro-Internships.** The newest type of internship experience, micro-internships are short-term (one to nine months/20 to 40 hours of work), paid, professional remote work experiences that gives students the opportunity to build skills. A micro-internship also provides employers the chance to “test drive” a potential hire. See Parker Dewey’s website for some examples of [successful micro-internships](#).

Not sure what type of internship is right for your organization? Contact the [Employer Engagement team](#) for a consultation.

Setting Your Program up for Success

- **Design the program:** A comprehensive internship program should include information on learning objectives and goals, daily responsibilities, short- and long-term projects, supervisor assignments, evaluation procedures, policies and expectations, and orientation and off-boarding processes.

- **Write the job description(s):** Students want to know what to expect and what is expected of them. The more robust a job description, the more quality candidates you will attract. Check out some [sample internship job descriptions](#) by role and industry.
- **Determine how much you will pay:** Wages should be based on job duties, required experience, and budget limitations, and should meet at least [minimum wage laws](#) in the state where the intern will be hired.
- **Identify mentors:** Do you have some great early or mid-level talent in your company that would make for great mentors? Taking on additional leadership responsibilities will help them grow as professionals while also demonstrating to interns that you invest in entry-level talent.
- **Design your mentor/manager toolkit:** Provide your intern managers and mentors with a toolkit that includes checklists, expectations, and evaluation forms. Keep track of your own best practices and metrics for making sure your intern is on track for success.
- **Post internship opportunities to Handshake in advance of term/semester start:** Many students start looking for summer internships in January, if not before. Leave ample time for students to apply and provide them with contact information to reach out and ask questions.
- **Identify recruitment opportunities:** Career fairs, practice interviews, or college event days can connect you with top talent for your program. Visit the [UO Career Center website](#) for a full list of center-sponsored events and to learn more about hosting your own recruitment opportunity.
- **Review applications and interview candidates:** Start by identifying the specific skills, traits, and training you're looking for. Next, devise a system for evaluating applications to decide which prospective interns you will interview. Remember that this might be their first job ever, so don't let a lack of work experience deter you from an otherwise coachable and innovative candidate. Look for values alignment over hard skills.

Signs of a High-Quality Internship

- **Are designed with the intern in mind:** Consider the student's learning goals, career objectives, and the career readiness skills they are wanting to build. How do those align with the projects, professional development and learning opportunities you can arrange for them?
- **Engage interns in meaningful work:** When students know their contributions matter, they will put in more effort and take ownership in the project's success. Interns want to demonstrate they are responsible, trustworthy, and can contribute in a meaningful way.
- **Integrate interns into the team:** Be intentional in integrating your intern(s) into the team. Set aside time for the intern to job shadow team members or conduct informational interviews. Design projects that allow for the intern to collaborate with as many colleagues as possible. Include the intern whenever appropriate (e.g., staff meetings, project meetings, team lunches) to expose them to more situations in which they can observe supervisor behavior and team interactions and learn more about workplace culture and industry norms.

- **Invest in their success and learning:** It is critical that supervisors set aside time each week to meet with their intern(s) to discuss their what they are learning, progress towards goals and project completion, and things they need help with. Interns also want opportunities for mentorship and professional networking. While a supervisor can provide that, other colleagues might be a good fit to mentor the student around an area of skills training, professional development, advice as a young professional, or joining an employee resource group (ERG).
- **Give interns detailed direction and learning resources:** You never realize how many acronyms, industry jargon, and unwritten norms your workplace uses until you onboard a new intern. It may be obvious to you, but it may not be to someone who is new to the workplace. Patience, encouragement, and a few extra minutes at the beginning to explain terms or norms will pay off later when your intern can produce good work independently.
- **Provide effective and timely feedback:** Students want to succeed, but the only way they'll know if they're meeting expectations is through feedback. Give interns the opportunity to grow, and don't wait until the end of the experience to blindside them or finally praise their efforts. In highly-rated internship experiences, evaluations are structured, scheduled regularly, and include both praise and critique. Most importantly, constructive feedback should be coupled with clear guidance on how to improve.
- **Set aside their own space and access to technology:** Just like permanent employees, interns want somewhere comfortable to work, on both a physical and personal level. Interns should have a workspace where they don't feel like they're intruding on another person's territory. If your intern is working remotely, do they have the resources to communicate and collaborate?
- **Provide reasonable compensation and perks:** Consider offering at least a modest wage so that you don't miss out on talent who cannot afford to work for free. Show them that their presence and their work are both valuable. Not all benefits have to be monetary. Flexible schedules, remote workdays, professional development experiences, and paying for their lunch every now and then goes a long way.
- **Are honest about expectations:** Beginning with the job posting, it's important that employers are honest about what the student can expect from the internship. Misrepresenting the ratio of meaningful work to menial work, the number of expected hours, or the skill set and/or subject matter involved can cause your program to develop a negative reputation. Moreover, pretending a program is something that it's not in order to attract candidates takes away an intern's ability to choose the position best suited to their academic and career objectives.

Finding the Right Students for Your Internships

- **Post your opportunities on Handshake:** [Handshake](#), our jobs and internship platform, is free for employers to join and post jobs, internships, and events (like virtual information sessions). If you want a UO student to learn about your internship, this is the place to be! Create a detailed employer profile and a well-formatted and clear job description to showcase your brand in a positive light.

- **Participate in career fairs and other campus events.** The UO Career Center hosts university-wide career fairs open to students and alumni in the fall, winter, and spring, as well as niche industry events for networking and targeted recruitment of specific majors and interests (e.g., Tech Connect). Internship opportunities are promoted year-round, and many employers attend all three university-wide career fairs.
- **Host or attend career readiness events.** Resume reviews, practice interviews, workshops on the job search or networking, and other career readiness events provide you with an opportunity to share your expertise and experiences while you build your talent pipeline. *Got a workshop idea? Contact the [Employer Engagement team](#).*

Other Ways to Engage With Students

- Share about your business and opportunities through informational interviews and networking nights.
- Schedule on-campus interviews with students or utilize our smart meeting rooms for video interviews.
- Sponsor an event—students love free food/coffee!
- **Join the UO Career Center’s Partner Program.** Benefits include recognition and branding on campus, VIP access to recruiting and career fair events, consultation services, reserved parking on campus, appreciation luncheons, and so much more! *Contact [Johanna Seasonwein](#), Associate Director of Employer Engagement, to learn more.*

The Interview Process . . . It’s Different

The recruitment process for interns is NOT the same as the process for hiring interns. Remember: you are interviewing students for a learning opportunity, not potential employees with years of previous work experience.

It is common for students to have most of their skill development grounded in academic experiences or unpaid opportunities. Therefore, it is important to give weight to these experiences and their growth potential when you are making your decisions. You might be their first employer!

Interns are eager to show you that they are on the path to career readiness with their transferable skills and life experiences. Here are some sample interview questions for a successful intern interview:

- Focus on *future goals* in place of professional experience:
 - Why are you interested in this internship/company/industry? (*Did they do their research?*)
 - What skills or experiences do you hope to gain?
 - How will this internship prepare you for your career?
 - What are two things about your work ethic that will make you a good intern?

- What are your plans after graduation?
- Inquire about *academic/extracurricular experiences* rather than work experience:
 - Tell me about a time you had a heavy course load. How did you manage your time?
 - What's the best team you've ever been a part of, and why?
 - Tell me about an assignment or project from start to finish—what went well, and what would you have done differently?
 - What's one challenge you've faced, and how did you overcome it?
 - Tell me about a time you had to learn something completely new.
 - How does your campus involvement relate to the professional workplace?
 - Tell me about a class you've taken that has helped you feel more excited and prepared to take on this internship.
 - Tell me about a project or accomplishment you're proud of, and why.

Remember to leave time for students to ask questions of you. It's a great way to see how they organize their thoughts, if they researched your company, and what they value.

The Intern Experience

- **Design an onboarding program:** It's important that interns learn their way around the office, get set up with technology, understand their schedule and expectations, and get to know others' names and roles. More importantly, they want and need to understand company values, culture, and communication preferences. Talk with others on your team, especially early talent and project supervisors, to determine what they think might be most helpful in creating a framework and learning objectives.
- **Organize intern training:** Students want to develop both hard and soft skills as part of their internship. Inventory the skills students will need to be successful, determine what they already know, and create a learning plan to help them develop new skills that will be vital to their success. Build time into their daily work to watch tutorials, job shadow, or other effective methods of training.
- **Develop an intern task list:** It's a good practice to have a back-up list of tasks that interns can work on if they finish their current project or reach a barrier. Are there things that they can research, new technology they can be learning, other office tasks they can assist with that will help them develop other professional skills?
- **Be available for questions and on-the-spot training:** Let the intern know how to best ask for help. What are the types of questions that can be asked over email or via a collaboration platform (e.g., Microsoft Teams) vs. those that should be answered in person or on a video call? Encourage interns to submit questions ahead of time for your weekly meetings so you can have resources available for them. And, identify others in your organization who can help answer questions or provide on-the-spot training.

- **Provide periodic feedback and evaluation:** Get in the habit of creating feedback loops to help students celebrate small wins and learn along the way. It's also a [best practice](#) to have a mid-point and end of experience evaluation for more formal written and verbal evaluation. And, make sure you give your interns opportunities to provide feedback to you on their experience.
- **Create opportunities for networking and collaboration:** Interns want to work collaboratively and get to know others in the organization. What are some formal and informal ways that they can have these kinds of interactions? For example, build informational interviews with colleagues into their internship or make a certain percentage of tasks be a part of larger, collaborative projects.
- **Share final presentations:** While not required, a final presentation is a great way for interns to share with colleagues about what they have done and learned as part of their internship. It can also be a great way to give them experience and feedback on a professional presentation, but make sure to connect it to the final step of a project they have been responsible for.

The Supervisor Experience

No matter how many professionals you have supervised during your career, supervising an intern is a very intensive, hands-on mentorship experience. An intern is not an employee but an active learner. This may be their very first time working in a professional environment, having to wear professional attire, being held accountable to a supervisor for showing up on time, meeting hard deadlines, and communicating in a professional manner.

It's important to determine what skills your intern already has and help them get the resources and training to get them up to speed. Maybe they have used Google Docs for class and they're now expected to work in Microsoft Word. Maybe they've never even seen a fax machine or a conference room speakerphone!

You don't have to give all these tutorials and trainings on your own. This is a great way to help other team members get to know the intern and share with them about how they use different technologies to do their jobs better. It is your responsibility to communicate your expectations, hold them accountable for learning, and make yourself available for questions.

At the end of the day, you are the intern's biggest advocate—their success is your success. You are preparing them for all of the future managers they will work for. This is a great opportunity to help them grow as young professionals and future colleagues.

Supervising Interns: Pro Tips

- **Mentorship:** Each intern should be assigned at least one mentor who is responsible for effectively supervising the intern. This person should be accessible to the intern most of the time.
- **Communication:** Communicate with the intern the frequency and channels in which you expect them to communicate with you during the workday, about project progress, or even how to call in sick.

- **Supervision:** Supervising an intern includes (but not limited to): orientation/onboarding, training, assigning projects, monitoring workload, answering questions, providing other necessary information and evaluating the intern's performance by providing constructive feedback.
- **Setting Expectations:** It's important to set expectations upfront and hold each other accountable. You will have plenty of expectations for them, both in their professionalism and their output, but allow them to also express their expectations from you as their supervisor and mentor. Having these conversations early on can mitigate miscommunication and conflict. Be willing to revisit these expectations together as you get to know each other better. For example, is your intern working remotely, but you still expect them to sign on to Microsoft Teams for collaborative projects during traditional work hours? Let them know that. Did your intern just email you at 11 p.m. about a project due at 8 a.m. tomorrow? Make sure they understand how much lead time you need to provide feedback and what professional boundaries you have put in place to maintain your work-life balance.
- **Project Assignments:** It is essential that each supervisor provide meaningful projects or assignments to the intern. Projects should be planned in advance and designated in a manner that allows the intern to experience the importance of teamwork, organization skills, and communication, as well as the rewards and frustrations that are part of a real working experience. Get the whole team involved in planning to determine projects, learning opportunities, and showing how the intern can be helpful to your collective work. There are plenty of tasks interns can help with, but it's the projects and collaboration that will get them excited to go to work every day.
- **Resources:** To be effective, an intern must have access to company resources. Typically, this includes a desk or workstation, computer/laptop, company e-mail account, and access to any technology they might need to communicate internally. These resources may vary depending upon the types of projects the intern will be assigned, as well as differences for remote vs. on-site interns. It is the supervisor's responsibility to provide and equip the intern with resource materials, training opportunities, technology, and an assigned workspace.
- **Networking:** Students want opportunities for mentorship, collaboration, and professional networking. Supervisors can act as great connectors for interns by making introductions and setting up collaborative projects that will help students gain skills training, learn about professionalism, and build relationships with people at varying levels of the organization. It's also a great morale booster for students to know they are part of a team not just for this period of time but for years to come.

Evaluation and Feedback for Developing Professionals

Feedback and evaluations are an important part of an internship. An intern cannot improve their performance if they do not know what they are doing wrong. Similarly, positive feedback can help to reinforce successful behaviors and encourage an intern to continue to contribute in a meaningful way.

As a supervisor, it is your job to both manage and coach your intern. Reinforce positive attitudes and performance and give constructive feedback on those behaviors that are standing in the way of the intern's success.

Meet with your interns regularly to provide feedback concerning their performance. Weekly check-ins are a great practice where an intern can report on status of the project, ask questions, learn how their work is contributing to the organization, etc. Formal evaluation (recommended at the mid-point and the conclusion of the internship) is important, but don't wait to deliver feedback. Encourage your intern to share ideas and concerns with you—and vice versa.

Types of Evaluations

- **Informal evaluations** can be anything from discussing interns' strengths and weaknesses over lunch to short meetings where feedback is given.
- **Formal evaluations** provide written and verbal feedback. Interns have the opportunity to ask questions and a supportive, educational discussion can occur. Lack of formal written evaluations can lead to problems with work concerns or disciplinary actions.

What To Do When Your Intern Isn't Meeting Expectations

Communication is important, even if it's a tough conversation. Ask the student how they think the internship is working out. If they offer concerns, work together to see how they can be corrected. Share your concerns as well. Together, be clear on the issues and what needs to happen. Also let the intern know the consequences if performance or behavior doesn't improve.

Even when the decision is to terminate the internship, look for a win-win. Find something positive for the intern to take away from the experience. Remember: an internship is all about learning. There is learning happening even if things don't go as planned or challenges arise.

It's the End But Not Goodbye: Completion of the Program

Are there certain deliverables that you need before the student departs, technology or access codes you need back, etc.? Want to have the student help you with recruitment efforts on their campus? Willing to be a reference for the student during their job search? Set aside some time to talk with your intern about these topics or others before they leave your organization.

Tips for Maintaining Relationships with Interns Post-Internship

It is important to maintain the relationships the company has developed with its interns when they return to campus. Whether you want to bring the student into your early career pipeline or just want to maintain positive relationships, here are a few ideas to consider:

- **Stay in touch:** Have the intern's buddy/mentor/supervisor stay in contact by periodically checking in to see how they are doing and update them about any key developments at the organization. Or, when your recruiters visit campus, have them take your intern out to lunch or dinner.

- **Offer to serve as a reference:** Offer to write a letter of recommendation for the student and be a resource if they need someone to help them communicate about their internship experience as part of their resume or a future interview.
- **Create a campus ambassador program:** Ask former interns to serve as campus ambassadors for your organization. Have them share about their experience with their peers at your career fair booths and during your information sessions.
- **Connect on social media:** Add your intern to your LinkedIn network to help them build their growing professional network and stay connected. Do you have a large group of interns annually? Create a LinkedIn group and add students and mentors to keep them in touch and up to date about what's going on in the company.
- **Share stories from your program online:** Create a newsletter, blog, social media account or website where you can highlight your interns' experiences. Take a photo of them on the job and have them write a reflection you can post along with your gratitude for their contributions. This information can also be used as a future recruitment tool!

Thank you for helping to recruit and train the next generation of leaders!

Have questions or want additional resources? Contact a member of the [Employer Engagement team](#)!