



Maximizing the Internship Experience for Interns with Disabilities

The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) is a resource for employers seeking to recruit, hire, retain and advance qualified employees with disabilities. It is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy under a cooperative agreement with The Viscardi Center. For more information, visit AskEARN.org.

Preparation of this item was fully funded by the United States Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy in the amount of \$9,241,750 (five year total grant amount) under Cooperative Agreement No. OD26451-14-75-4-36.

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Internship programs provide benefits for youth interested in exploring potential career options and for organizations aiming to expand the potential talent pool for entry-level positions. Youth with disabilities are increasingly looking for internships to advance their career development. All organizations have the opportunity to recruit and hire young talent by offering inclusive internships.

In order to create the best possible internship experience for interns and the organization, there are four components to consider:



The Orientation Process

Once you have recruited and hired your interns, the next step is to place them with specific divisions or departments. When determining the best fit for intern placement, there are three important factors to consider:

- The **knowledge, skills and abilities** that an intern already has;
- The intern's **academic and professional goals**; and
- The specific **needs of the organization** or a specific department or division.

After interns have been placed with specific departments or divisions, provide an orientation that includes an introduction to direct supervisors as well as other staff and interns in their assigned departments. This is also a good time to discuss the intern's expectations and goals for the internship and identify potential workplace mentors that may be a good match, if you offer mentoring.

Present interns with information about your organization's goals, structure, policies or rules. Even if you have addressed some of this information ahead of time in a welcome packet, it is helpful to reinforce this in person. Provide orientation materials in alternative accessible formats if necessary.

Some information to cover in the orientation includes:

- Who will serve as each intern's supervisor and to whom they should direct any questions about assignments;
- An overview of workplace policies and procedures including office hours, dress code, rules, use of office supplies and equipment, and the timing of lunch and breaks;
- Information related to time keeping and pay procedures if applicable (i.e., frequency of pay, process of receiving pay, requirements regarding timesheets);
- The location of the intern's workspace and other places where he or she may be required to go, such as conference rooms, a copy or storage room, the supervisor's office, etc.
- Important milestones, including events or evaluations;

- Information about networking and developmental opportunities available to interns, such as happy hours or recreational activities, or training and skills development opportunities;
- Ask interns if there is anything that the organization can provide to make the internship more successful or if there is a need for an accommodation or productivity enhancer. This may include assistive technology, flexible scheduling, teleworking, etc. Ideally, this information should be discussed prior to the start of the internship.

It may be helpful to provide this information in writing or in an email during or after the orientation so that interns can refer back to it at any time.

Development and Management of the Work Plan

Ask interns and supervisors to jointly create an internship work plan that defines what the intern will accomplish by the end of the assignment. The plan will help to clarify and track the short and long term tasks the intern will be expected to complete. As you develop the work plan, consider how the intern's assignments will provide opportunities to develop professional skills while fulfilling your organization's needs.

Developing the work plan collaboratively with interns provides them with an opportunity to indicate what tasks and substantive assignments align with their skills, interests, and goals. An intern's work plan may include a mix of general or administrative tasks and substantive assignments, which tend to be more long-term and forward-looking.

You might consider, for example, assigning an intern majoring in marketing or communications to write some promotional materials or social media posts for your organization, or having an intern majoring in Spanish contribute some of the Spanish-language content on your organization's website. A finance major might be able to work directly with the finance staff, while a public policy major might be able to write policy briefs relevant to your organization. Furthermore, a potential benefit of an internship program is the opportunity to test and develop an intern's abilities and consider whether he or she would be a good hire for future job openings. Substantive assignments may be a good way to see how well interns perform when given similar tasks that an existing staff might routinely perform.

Once a work plan has been developed, the supervisor should follow up and provide constructive feedback. The supervisor will also be responsible for ensuring that interns always have work to do and for adhering to a good balance between general/administrative tasks and substantive/meaningful assignments as much as possible to provide interns with a range of experiences throughout the internship. Keep in mind that while interns are there to help, the internship should be more than just an opportunity for gaining free labor but rather providing each party the desired and agreed upon outcomes.

Extracurricular and Development Opportunities

When developing and managing internships, aim to provide your interns with extracurricular and development opportunities such as:

- **Networking** with other employees and staff;
- **Social interaction** with other interns; and
- **Mentoring** by employees other than their supervisors.

Require interns to attend staff meetings of their department or division and encourage them to also attend more general or larger staff meetings. Give interns the option to attend other meetings in which your organization has an interest, such as partnership meetings with other organizations, strategy meetings, and off-site events. Be mindful of any accessibility issues during meetings and events and make accommodations wherever necessary to include interns with disabilities. Invite interns to attend staff social events as well.

Allow interns to participate in professional development opportunities and trainings that are normally available to or required for your regular staff. Consider giving interns the opportunity to attend local presentations, lectures, symposia or conferences relevant to your organization's work, and particularly to the work of the intern's department or division. Also look for opportunities for interns to meet and learn from staff with and without disabilities throughout the organization, either on a formal or informal basis. Organizations that have Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) can encourage interns to participate in meetings for groups of relevance (i.e., Disability Resource Groups or Women's ERGs). Participating in these meetings not only helps interns learn more about the organization, but also allows them to gain knowledge and support about issues that are specific to their experiences.

Consider inviting your interns to a group session with executive leadership or senior management to learn about their job responsibilities. You may also wish to create professional development opportunities or trainings specifically for your interns, such as inviting guest speakers or sending interns to skills training or knowledge seminars. Help interns identify and connect to other local organizations relevant to their academic and professional interests, especially those with which you have connections. It may also be helpful to connect interns to local disability-focused organizations or resources, as these can aid in helping them meet specific needs outside of the workplace, such as access to housing or transportation. By providing access to resources like these, you are helping ensure an intern can more fully and actively focus on their internship, rather than on outside concerns.

Create social opportunities for your interns to interact outside the workplace. This could include events such as lunches, off-site visits or trips, movies or game nights. Consider the principles of universal design when you are planning events meetings or changes to policies or rules. Make events and policies accessible and applicable for everyone.

Interns can benefit greatly from a formal mentoring relationship. Consider including a mentoring component as a part of your internship program by matching each intern with a mentor from your organization. When recruiting and matching mentors with interns, consider pairings based on mutual interests and aligned with competencies, responsibilities and the specific career goals of the interns. It is not necessary to pair interns with disabilities with mentors who have the same, or even similar, disabilities. While interns can benefit from having mentors whose experiences are similar, they can also benefit greatly from having mentors whose experiences differ from their own. In addition, ideally mentors should not have any supervisory responsibilities related to their mentees.

Encourage mentors to meet regularly with their mentees to provide support and guidance as interns acclimate to the work environment in general and to your organization's culture in particular. Mentors can also serve as a resource for interns in terms of professional development and advice. The ideal mentor will work in partnership with the mentee to provide individualized support related to professional goals.

Inclusive and Accessible Workplace

Establishing an inclusive and accessible workplace is essential when creating an internship experience that actively recruits and engages interns with disabilities. One major component of an inclusive and accessible workplace is the provision of reasonable accommodations as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). A reasonable accommodation is one that provides employees or interns with disabilities the tools needed to successfully complete their assignments. Accommodations might include, but are not limited to removing physical barriers, allowing a flexible schedule or hours, allowing people to telework, changing desk or cubicle placements, providing modified equipment, reassigning non-essential job tasks, or giving instructions in written or recorded formats. The core principle for the provision of reasonable accommodations is the interactive process which requires that employees (interns) and employers engage in a discussion to identify modifications that may be needed to facilitate the successful performance of job tasks.

Beyond the provision of reasonable accommodations, diversity and sensitivity training for employees and staff, especially those who will be supervising or mentoring interns, is also essential. The following guidance may be helpful in establishing an inclusive culture:

- **Workplace inclusion** of individuals with disabilities is a product of company-wide policies and the attitudes and practices of managers and supervisors. Managers' diversity behaviors and relationships with employees are directly related to employees' perceptions and engagement.
- **Better relationships** and more inclusive manager diversity practices are correlated with increased workplace satisfaction and reduced perception of negative workplace treatment.
- **Inclusive practices and policies** matter to employees with and without disabilities. Such practices are related to higher levels of psychological empowerment, perceived organizational support and less conflict among all employees.
- **Inclusive culture** demonstrates commitment to welcoming and valuing all individuals.'

Appropriate etiquette when interacting with people with disabilities is based primarily on respect and courtesy. Below are examples of basic disability etiquette principles:

- **Extend common courtesies** to people with disabilities as you would any other individual.
- Those working with people with disabilities should **avoid asking personal questions** about their disability and lives that are not relevant to the job.
- When referring to people with disabilities, always **respect language preferences** of the individual. For example, one person might prefer to be called "hard of hearing" while another might prefer to be called "Deaf." Or, one person may prefer to be called a "person with a disability," while another may prefer to be called "disabled."
- If you believe that an intern with a disability needs assistance, **wait for your offer to be accepted** before you provide help.

- If you are speaking to a person who is blind, be sure to **identify yourself** at the beginning of the conversation and announce when you are leaving.
- When utilizing a sign language interpreter for someone who is deaf, **speak directly to the person**, not to the interpreter.

The Evaluation

Effective internship programs value having a strong evaluation process for both interns and supervisors. Evaluations not only help interns reflect on their experiences, but also ensure the success and longevity of an internship program and organization as a whole. Feedback from interns can differ from employees, as interns are often more comfortable being honest about their experiences because they know their roles are temporary.

When crafting evaluations, consider posing questions that examine all aspects of your internship program and the relationship of the supervisor to the intern. Evaluations completed by interns can include questions such as:

- Has this internship fueled your interest in this career field? Why or why not?
- What do you recommend to improve this internship program for future interns?
- What overall challenges did you face in your internship?
- What was the most rewarding aspect of your internship experience?
- Was your supervisor supportive in helping you achieve your internship goals?

Evaluations completed by intern supervisors might include questions such as:

- Describe the ways in which the intern's performance benefited the organization.
- What development have you observed in the intern's skills, knowledge and personal or professional performance?
- What do you consider to be the intern's strengths?
- In what areas does the intern need to improve?

Evaluation results can be used to inform key stakeholders about your organization's internship program, including program participants, board members and staff. Sharing your program's successes can also help create a stronger reputation outside of your organization, helping to attract funders, prospective interns and prospective employees, including job candidates with disabilities.

Conclusion

Choosing to create inclusive internship experiences is a significant step forward in advancing opportunities for both interns with disabilities and business. Most interns benefit from experiential learning that enhances professional and social development. Having real-world work opportunities to gain additional confidence, understand work culture and become more productive in time management and project management are invaluable. Internships can provide companies with an early opportunity to gauge the talents of a new generation of workers and establish the company as a great place for graduates to begin their careers.

Although individuals with and without disabilities can benefit greatly from the internship process, the power of internships for those with disabilities takes on additional significance due to higher unemployment rates than their peers. Internships can serve as fundamental skill-building tools for interns with disabilities to obtain the critical career development and decision-making competencies needed to compete in an increasingly competitive job market.