

Tips for Mentoring Student Interns with Disabilities

ASK YOUR MENTEE HOW YOU CAN BE SUPPORTIVE

The beginning of any mentoring relationship involves identifying and agreeing upon the goals and outcomes to be attained. While you may have your own ideas about what sort of help or support you can provide, ask your mentee about their expectations. This may include professional guidance or assistance navigating the workplace or profession, help meeting and networking with other professionals in the office or field, and input on how to address challenging situations at work. Your mentee may also simply want someone to listen and provide encouragement as they experience successes and challenges. Ask your mentee how you can be helpful and proceed accordingly.

CREATE A MENTORING PLAN

Once you know what your mentee wants, develop a plan for how you will provide the desired support and assistance through the mentoring relationship. A mentoring plan is a written document that clearly defines the mentoring goals and objectives agreed upon by the mentor and mentee. The plan also outlines action steps the mentor and mentee agree to take to achieve the goals and objectives.

Creating a plan clarifies expectations and responsibilities for both individuals and provides a tool for tracking the progress and outcomes of the relationship.

AGREE UPON HOW AND WHEN TO COMMUNICATE

Mentoring is most effective when mentors and mentees meet or communicate regularly and maintain consistent

contact. Ask mentees when and how they prefer to communicate or meet. Depending on your mentee's location, preferences and/or communication and learning styles, it may be best to conduct your conversations in written format, such as through email or internal chat functions, rather than verbally or in-person. Additionally, methods such as video conferencing can be helpful for mentors or mentees who work remotely.

Also, let your mentee know when you are most available and the best way to contact you. Often mentees hesitate to reach out to their mentors unless there is a significant circumstance or event. It's important to make yourself available to your mentee and give notice when you plan to be busy or unable to communicate for extended periods of time. You may decide together that meeting in person each week at a set time and location works best, or you may agree to have a flexible meeting schedule. In addition to regular meetings or conversations, let your mentee know how they can reach you in the case that an urgent situation arises such as an unexpected problem in the workplace. Make certain you are providing any communication or meeting related accommodation requests for your mentee.

TREAT YOUR MENTEE THE SAME AS YOU WOULD ANY INTERN

Interns with disabilities are just like interns without disabilities - they have many skills and talents to contribute to the workplace. They have a desire to learn and grow through the internship experience and want to succeed and advance in the world of work. Treat your mentee just like anyone else you may mentor. Have high expectations for what mentees have to offer and an appreciation for individuality.

DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS – SIMPLY ASK

Don't assume anything about your mentee or make judgments based on what you see or what you hear from others. Your mentees know themselves better than anyone else, so start getting to know them by asking questions you might ask any student intern such as: "What are your career goals? What are your strengths? What skills or knowledge do you want to learn or improve? What do you hope to gain through the internship?" Mentees may or may not choose to directly talk about their disability and this should be respected. However, if disclosure may be important to the success of the internship, you could approach this subject by asking for permission to discuss the disability and explain the advantages of doing so. If your mentee prefers not to engage in such discussion, do not insist. If they agree, keep your questions focused on what's relevant to the internship experience such as, "Is there anything we can do to make the internship experience better for you?"

ESTABLISH TRUST THROUGH ACTIVE LISTENING

The success of any mentoring relationship hinges on establishing trust. Being a good listener is an important strategy for building trust with your mentee. The more you ask questions and actively listen to what your mentee shares, the more you will learn about who your mentee is and what support you can provide as a mentor. While you bring a lot of professional and personal experience to the relationship, avoid the temptation to focus on yourself. Share your experience and knowledge as it relates to the mentee's interests and goals and respond to specific questions posed about career and professional achievements. Also, be open to sharing some of the mistakes you've made in your career, as these can serve as concrete examples for your mentee. Make mutual sharing and learning an objective of every interaction while keeping

the focus on what the mentee wants to discuss. Be careful not to tell your mentee what to do but rather help them think through options so they may come to an appropriate conclusion.

INTRODUCE YOUR MENTEE TO OTHER PROFESSIONALS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES

As someone who already has a network of professional connections, you can play an important role in your mentee's growth by introducing them to other professionals. If your mentee has a disability, they could benefit from meeting professionals both with and without disabilities. Meeting a diverse network of individuals will help your mentee start to develop contacts and gain multiple perspectives on the world of work and profession of interest.

You can help your mentee make connections through both formal and informal events and methods, such as asking your mentee to join you at a conference or offsite meeting, or at an informal after-work networking event. You may also choose to connect your mentee via email to a colleague who works in your mentee's area of interest.

CELEBRATE YOUR MENTEE'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

As a mentor, it's important to acknowledge your mentee's growth and achievements. Highlighting accomplishments, even those that may seem insignificant to others, can be significant confidence boosters for mentees. For example, if your mentee attended an event and you know they were apprehensive about networking with new people, acknowledge this. If they delivered a presentation or followed through on a challenging task, make sure you recognize them.

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