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# Summer Interns Are Settling In. How to Make Them Winners.

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Summer internship programs are under way at many offices, with interns getting their feet wet with tasks such as answering phones, prepping presentations, and performing other client management, financial analysis, and marketing tasks.



Internship programs give firms the opportunity to shape young talent and potentially build up a hiring pipeline amid a known shortfall.

Dreamstime

new advisors entering the industry is scarcely enough to offset retirements and trainee failures, according to new data from Cerulli Associates. What's more, given the trend of advisors setting up their own firms, the RIA industry will need to hire more than 70,000 new staff over the next five years to keep up with current growth rate, according to the 2022 Schwab Benchmarking Study.

Making use of cheap labor shouldn't be the goal of an internship program. Rather, it's about cultivating young talent and giving them a good impression of the industry. At the same time, these programs give firms the ability to shape young talent and potentially build up a hiring pipeline amid a known shortfall.

This is particularly important for wealth management professionals. The number of

Here are nine ways to get the most out of your internship program this summer and reshape the current effort if you're not getting the results (or enthusiasm) you hoped:

**Make it formal.** Does your program match the industry standard? Many firms offer six-to-10-week programs, often paying in the \$17 to \$20 per hour range. Firms typically target college juniors and seniors for these positions, though some accept younger and older students as well. Experiences offered and program size vary, as does the host firm's ability to hire for full-time positions. What's important across the board, however, is that interns gain some combination of added knowledge, skills, and connections.

"Interns should be walking away with a better understanding of what they are looking for and a skill set to go do it," says Jigi Dahagam, vice president of people and culture at Denver-based Mercer Advisors, which has about 15 summer interns.

While the firm has had interns in the past, this summer it formalized its program to help ensure consistency across the organization, Dahagam says. That includes offering workshops on resume-review and writing, business communication, and interviewing dos and don'ts, as well as meetings with senior management.

**Offer more than busywork.** Firms should strive to offer real work to interns that exposes them to the industry and various jobs they might do. Mariner Wealth Advisors, for example, has about 60 summer interns. They might work on helping to prepare new client paperwork, or they may help with tasks related to day-to-day service for an existing client, says Tracy Hutton, senior talent manager. With permission, they may also sit in on client meetings.

**Cast a wide net.** If you didn't quite get the applicant pool you were hoping for this summer, consider what you can do differently for next year. One mistake many firms make in hiring interns is limiting the talent pool, says Leslie Tabor, director of business consulting and education for Schwab Advisor Services. For instance, rather than list a specific major like financial planning in job descriptions, it's advisable to highlight skills the firm is seeking. This may broaden the list of prospective applicants to those majoring in entrepreneurship, business management and more, says Tabor who once had a Spanish major as an intern.

It also helps when firms partner with a cross-section of colleges and universities. Kestra Holdings, for example, uses the Handshake online recruiting platform, which is used by more than 1,400 colleges and universities to perform functions such as managing virtual and in-person events and fairs.

**Provide broad experience.** At Hightower Advisors, a few dozen interns work in marketing, operations, finance, investment solutions, business consulting, and in individual advisor offices, says Meghan McCartan, the company's chief marketing officer. The goal is to give them exposure to the industry and different career tracks within it, she says.

Kestra tries to match its 30-some-odd interns with areas they are interested in, says Ann Manal, the company's chief human resources officer. "A lot of interns are trying to make decisions about where they want to take their career and what area they want to focus on for their first job out of school."

**Encourage growth.** Kestra encourages interns to attend various learning sessions where they can gain important entry-level skills such as creating presentations and using Excel. They are also encouraged to attend sessions where executives from the firm's primary business units discuss their roles.

At Homrich Berg in Atlanta, interns present a project to executives at the end of the program. They can choose the topic, which should be related to something the firm should consider adding or doing differently, says Thomas Carroll, the firm's president. "You get their creativity, their critical thinking, their presentation skills, and communication skills all wrapped into one project," he says. This year, the firm has eight summer interns in its 10-week program, its biggest group to date.

**Provide mentoring.** Fostering cohesiveness is especially important for firms such as Homrich Berg that use summer interns as a springboard for full-time hiring. The firm assigns each intern a mentor in a similar career track the student is interested in pursuing. The company also hosts breakfasts where interns visit with company executives in an open forum to ask questions and learn about different career trajectories, Carroll says.

Proper mentoring is critical for interns. Each Mariner intern, for example, works with a peer sponsor, often an associate wealth advisor who is close in age and can relate to the intern and is willing to answer questions, Hutton says. The firm also tries to ensure that managers are approachable and that interns feel part of the larger team. "It's all about the relationships you develop during the internship that tells people, 'Yes, this is the place for me,'" Hutton says.

**Give plentiful feedback.** Firms need to ensure there's a process for frequent, separate check-ins with interns and managers in order to identify gaps so that tweaks, if necessary, can be made quickly, Hutton says. For example, maybe the intern hasn't had the opportunity to sit in on a client meeting and would like one. Or maybe the intern is struggling with how to fill downtime.

Interns appreciate feedback and may feel frustrated when they don't have anyone helping them build connections, Dahagam says. "If we're not the ones reaching out to them, they're not the ones reaching out to us."

**Don't fret over size.** Firms don't need to host dozens of interns to run a successful program. They also don't need to be able to hire the interns they host—though many do—as long as they're offering meaningful career-building experiences.

One of the challenges in a smaller organization is the ability to guarantee a position nine months out, Manal says. "We don't make a direct promise that an intern will receive a full-time offer, but we are always looking for opportunities to hire our interns into full-time roles," she says.

Even if full-time employment isn't an option, many college students—especially younger ones—are willing to intern for the experience. As long as you have at least one individual at the firm who has time and bandwidth to pay attention to the intern, it's worth doing, Dahagam says. "Any size organization can do this, but they have to be open and capable of connecting with that intern."

**Think even younger.** While many firms target college students, one way to get more people interested in the industry is to start even younger, Tabor says. She offers the example of Luma Wealth Advisors in Cleveland which offers an internship program to local high school girls. One pair of interns, for example, hosted one podcast on ESG and another that discussed taxes and financial literacy among teens and young adults. “That’s meaningful for the interns and the firm and the firm’s clients.”

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