

How To Promote Diversity With Your Internship Program

4/01/2013 @ 4:14PM |240 views

Let's be honest, you already know the importance of hiring a diverse workforce. Diversity leads to better work environments, fresh ideas, and new ways of looking at old problems. In 2012, the [Center For American Progress](#) found people of color made up nearly one-third of the workforce and women made up nearly half.

Diversity quilt (Photo credit: OregonDOT)

So you know it's important to focus on diversity when hiring great employees. But what about when hiring great interns? Too many companies ignore intern diversity in their inclusion efforts and miss the boat on future talent.

Why focus on intern diversity?

So why is diversity so important in your internship programs? If you think interns are just fetching coffee and getting copies, you couldn't be more wrong. Your internship program is actually a training ground for top talent. Look at your interns and you'll be looking at the future of your company. The intern hire you make today has a [60 percent probability](#) of being the entry-level superstar of tomorrow.

By focusing on inclusion directly in your internship program, you can be sure to cultivate a diverse workforce. Even better, you can establish a company culture where differences are acknowledged and valued.

"This is the kind of place where you can bring your whole self to work," Suzanne Rosenthal, senior director of human resources for [Viacom](#), said in a [Google Hangout on internship diversity](#). "I think everybody subscribes to the idea that you're going to work best when you're bringing your whole self to work and who you are."

Diversity helps productivity, it helps creativity, and it builds an inclusive company culture many smart candidates will find attractive. A more diverse internship pool will also translate into greater entry level diversity.

"Remember, organizational diversity doesn't happen overnight," said Ashley Mosley, community engagement manager of [InternMatch](#). "If you stress diversity when hiring interns, it's giving your company a good foundation to build a more diverse workforce."

How do you promote diversity?

Promoting diversity in your internship program means thinking strategically about the issues facing your industry and how to address them. You can't just decide "we're going to be more diverse" and then pat yourself on the back for a job well done. Look at your industry from a micro and macro perspective to pinpoint the problem areas when it comes to diverse hiring practices.

While every industry has a different set of challenges, here are some general tips on how to cultivate a more diverse intern workforce:

Start at the high school level

While this is true for many subjects, when it comes to science, technology, engineering, and math (or STEM) subjects, early intervention is a smart policy for fostering greater diversity. STEM students today are the innovators of tomorrow, but soon we might be a little low on innovation.

The [World Economic Forum](#) ranks the [United States](#) number 52 when it comes to quality of mathematics and science education. And the numbers are even more striking for underrepresented students when you consider African American and Latino students combined made up [only 15 percent](#) of all the AP test takers in physics and calculus.

This is why the Level Playing Field Institute runs a program every summer called SMASH, which stands for [Summer Math and Science Honors Academy](#). SMASH hopes to intervene before minority students drop off from STEM subjects by engaging with these students and offering expanded opportunities.

For companies interested in hiring the best diverse interns and changing the future face of the industry, it's important to really take a step back. Starting at the high school level will not only help the company establish a brand identity with the future workforce, it will also help companies address minority disengagement in STEM subjects.

"If starting your diversity efforts with your internship program is a way to build a better base for your company, then looking to high school diversity is the same concept," said Mosley. "It's all about addressing diversity from the ground up."

Focus your messaging on diversity

One of the keys to diversity hiring is to make it a prominent part of your overall brand identity. A reason minority students feel discouraged from pursuing certain career paths is because they look at the field and see no faces like their own. It's hard to imagine yourself succeeding in a certain industry if professionals with similar backgrounds are entirely missing from the picture.

To attract the right intern candidates, stress how seriously your company takes hiring diversity. If underrepresented interns know your organization sees diversity as important, they'll know applying for your internships isn't a waste of time. Use your career site, internship hub, and social media profiles to tell the story of diversity at your company.

This will help brand the company as an organization which takes inclusion seriously and has taken active steps to address the problem. Your interns, whether they become full-time hires or move on once their internship is complete, can be powerful influencers when it comes to the perceptions others have about your company.

"Our interns are really our brand ambassadors for us out there," Rosenthal said about Viacom's internship program.

If your interns are happy with your company's commitment to cultural diversity, they'll let others know. This, in turn, will lead to more diverse hiring as your company attracts candidates impressed with your positive employer brand and commitment to inclusion.

A diverse workforce is something you'll need to grow and develop by looking critically at your industry and its unique challenges. But if your company is committed to developing a more diverse internship program, this will translate to a more diverse workforce and a better company.

What are some ways you promote diversity with your internship program? Share in the comments!