

Managing Interns & Risk: Let's Dive In



By Christine Smith

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices

Now that summer is officially in full swing, you may be spending part of the summer at the pool, beach, or a waterpark. I've opted to spend my summer interning with the NRMCC! In the past month, I have started to realize why employers often prefer prospective candidates with internship experience. Thus far, my internship has taught me a great deal about the nonprofit sector and I feel much more at ease working in a business setting.

Many employers recruit summer interns without giving much thought to the risks related to hiring and managing interns. Read on to learn how to wrangle risks related to managing interns, while amping up reward for your existing summer interns and future interns.

Teach your interns how to swim on the first day: Most students, including myself, will feel both nerves and excitement on their first days as interns. Interns are less experienced in a business setting, so it is crucial to teach them the ropes when they first start interning at your organization. To avoid having your interns feeling overwhelmed, plan a structured orientation for the day. Provide an overview of the organization's mission and give your new recruits a clear idea of what they will be doing throughout their internships. Include instructions for need-to-know business processes and workplace norms that will come in handy on day one of an internship (e.g., tips about workplace culture, phone etiquette, office/facility safety, appropriate use of equipment/Internet, etc.). Be kind and patient; don't expect your interns to jump off the diving board right away.

Find a balance between swimming in the kiddie pool and the deep end: While your interns surely do not want to be micromanaged, it is equally important to not leave them doggy paddling in the middle of the ocean. Give them a few tasks to accomplish each day and check in occasionally. Once they feel more comfortable, allow the interns to suggest possible projects or take more of the reins on an existing project. If you do want your interns to jump right into the deep end, then clearly communicate that they have a specific amount of autonomy and you are comfortable with them taking initiative. When they do take initiative, provide generous but gentle feedback, and let them try again—even if the interns fail or stumble.

Serve as a lifeguard: Make sure that one or more supervisors are available to your interns. Interns seek to learn and develop skills so it is crucial that an experienced employee is there to guide, nurture, and mentor them. Whatever the project or task may be, make sure that your interns can count on you and your team members for help. If an intern is struggling with a task, give him or her a starting point or a path, as opposed to watching him or her drown on your watch. Remember that lifeguards are not just rescuers—many are excellent swimming teachers as well. A great way to elicit ideas and initiative from your interns is to coach them or to

brainstorm together. As the experienced employee, you can ask probing questions that guide your interns to find the answers and ideas within them. Don't give all the answers away yourself; instead, coax solutions and eureka moments out of your interns as they take their first swim strokes without your assistance.

Provide a floatation device: Even though your intern is only at your organization for a short period of time, it is important to give frequent encouragement. You want your intern to feel as though s/he is contributing to the mission of the organization and making a positive impact. Don't let your intern get caught up in menial tasks that, over time, will cause his or her motivation to slowly sink. Keep morale afloat by assigning projects clearly related to your nonprofit's mission and programs, or offer time-bound projects that an intern can complete and thus gain a sense of accomplishment. During staff meetings or other group events, showcase your intern's completed work just as you would any other employee.

Let your intern dip his or her toes into different areas of the pool: An article from *Associations Now* titled, "A Case for the Association Summer Internship," details the importance of an internship that "exposes the intern to the wide array of work...from conferences and symposia to government affairs." This style of internship will be most beneficial for an intern as it offers firsthand experience of a wide variety of processes, practices, and situations in the professional world. Allowing your intern to participate in conference calls, write articles, speak to clients—and any other tasks that your regular employees fulfill—will allow your intern to develop diverse practical skills while learning more about his or her strengths and weaknesses.

I have learned that internships are not always glamorous and exciting, but they are definitely essential and worthwhile. My main encouragement as an intern at the NRMC is the fact that the other members of the team treat me as a colleague and are sincere in their desire to further my education and skills. Nonetheless, there are always risks in the process of hiring and managing interns. In addition to risks related to supervising and orienting your new intern, legal risks might be present as well. NRMC offers a webinar discussing the [legal risks of managing interns](#). Become an [Affiliate Member](#) today to access to this webinar and many more!

Related Resources:

- [How to Honor and Respect Your Volunteers](#)
- [Employee or Volunteer: What's the Difference?](#)
- [Motivate Me](#)
- [Supersize It: Don't Skimp on Supporting Your New Hire](#)

Christine Smith is a Summer Intern at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She supports ongoing consulting projects and the development of a new web app. For questions or comments about managing interns and related risks, you can reach Christine at Christine@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.