



Avoiding an HR Catastrophe in 2011

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By John Culbertson, SIOR

There is a lot of pressure that goes into running a small business. When hiring, businesses place so much trust and commitment in the interview process, and sometimes, hires just don't turn out as initially expected.

Prior to starting Cardinal Real Estate Partners, the one thing I feared the most was the hiring process. I went through my share of trials and errors, and then one day I had an idea... if only there was a way to "test drive" future employees... WAIT...Interns! However, everyone has had a bad internship experience, either being one or managing one. If the internship is the best way to truly test a potential employee, then I need to make sure I am testing the intern properly.

This is my experience and the process I now use to effectively manage interns, expectations, and make the experience equally rewarding for both them and myself. This also allows me to get an idea of the value someone would bring to my company before formally committing long-term and in the meantime, I get some projects completed that I had been procrastinating on.

Trial and Error

Before striking out on my own, I worked for one of the world's largest real estate development companies. As big as it was, the company had no formal process for hiring and training interns. It was a great company and naturally, I had people calling me every week inquiring about an internship or a job, but typically the interns that ended up being assigned to me were younger relatives of big clients and so forth that ended up being a huge burden. I didn't know what to have them do and was afraid they would report having a

bad experience back to the client, so this ended up causing more stress than assistance for either party.

One day my nephew came to me looking for an internship. He had just finished the first phase of the Strategic Coach™ program, which I had already been through and knew to be reputable, so we decided to implement some of the program's philosophies to structure his internship, which ended up working out really well. This got me thinking about what else could be done to make internships more exciting for the interns as well as what else could be done to make the program much more valuable to the company. The following process is what I have been successfully using for the last three years.

A Little Preparation = A Great Internship Experience

Before I even begin looking for an intern I first sit down with my team and come up with a list of ten things that we could have the intern do. All the items on this list have a limited scope, are not incredibly technical, and can be completed in three months.

How I Find the Perfect Intern

I first establish a relationship with a director in a local university's master's program and then start reaching out to the director whenever I am looking to take on an intern or have questions. So far this has been a great experience for us, plus we have created a positive image for the company through this relationship with the phenomenal university. Local university's MBA programs are a great place to start looking or to ask for advice, just contact the director of the program in your field and establish a friendly relationship.



The “One-Two” Interview Solution

Interview One

I start off the interview telling the applicant a little about the company and how we operate. I then ask them questions that turn the attention onto them and help me understand what moves them, what makes them excited, and what keeps them up worrying at night, such as what they want to accomplish professionally and personally in their life over the next few years. Next we go over the list of ten items that my team and I came up with, and describe what each one entails. After describing them, we ask the applicant to rank each one on a scale of 1 to 5, ‘5’ meaning they would love it and would pay us to do it (not literally), and ‘1’ being they would hate it and we couldn’t pay them enough to do it.


Interview Two: Intern Management Solution

This second meeting is not so much an interview, but more so to establish expectations. We bring the candidate back in for a couple hours and sit down and work on defining goals and results, and then discuss a collaborative approach to resolve any obstacles. This helps us all make sure we are on the same page, sets out a plan for the Intern, and we work through what all the obstacles might be to achieving success. Commitments by full-time staff members are made up front to aid the intern on certain tasks. This spreads out the responsibility of mentoring over everyone lessening the burden on any one staff member and gives the intern access to the most knowledgeable person for each task. This way, when they come in to work the first day, they have a plan physically laid out that they can refer back to at any time. They are autonomous and know the game plan and solutions to provide the results and achieve the goals.

The Extraordinary Internship Experience

I try to make sure the intern stays engaged and excited about what they are doing and give them some ownership of the projects. I have to stay excited about what they are doing for them to stay excited and driven. I also try to make sure to do small things outside of normal compensation to make sure they feel appreciated, like take them to lunch, or give them my football tickets to some games, etc. I was surprised to find out over the years that monetary compensation was not the primary drive for interns; respect, intellectual knowledge gain, field experience, and network expansion are the reasons students take on internships.

Interns have been a great way for me to get ideas I’ve had into motion quickly and effectively. In this down economy I have had to prospect for clients more and had an idea for a process to efficiently do this, but it was kind of a mess. I hired an intern to get this, among other things, rolling and it has been amazing and has transformed my business. We now have an effective and efficient machine for prospecting and that intern is now full time. I also have another intern turned full-time hire, who started off getting multiple jobs done quickly and is now a project manager of our most important accounts, which allows me to focus on the aspect of the business that I love.

A lot of people see interns as free help for their business, but we discovered in the end you get what you pay for. Taking the initial time to set up a great internship program can provide your company with new energy and ideas, aid in your company’s positive image, and provide new job opportunities to those who are eager to gain more experience and make a difference. It is my prediction that you will find your next greatest employee this way. 

For more information on our interview procedures, visit <http://www.cardinal-partners.com/resources.asp>