

## How to Attract Quality Interns and Run a Quality Internship Program at Your Firm

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In the work that I do, I frequently speak to small and medium-sized AEC business owners and leaders. In the last year, a sentiment I've often heard is along the lines of, "We have an internship program, but we mostly use them as laborers."

In order to help summer interns have more purposeful engagements, and for you to structure a worthwhile internship program, I recently interviewed the heads of the three programs. The three span the country from east-coast to west-coast, and represent small, medium, and large-sized firms.

The best practices I share in this article are based on interviews with:

- » **Peter Parizo, Sargent**, an employee-owned company based in Bangor, Maine, with a regional presence in North Carolina. The company specializes in earthwork. Sargent has 10 – 12 interns per year.
- » **Kaitlyn Heard, Milhouse Engineering and Construction**, based in Chicago and with offices in the mid-Atlantic region. Milhouse offers civil, mechanical, electrical, structural, and environmental engineering. Milhouse's largest cohort of interns was 25.
- » **Melissa Ambrose, McKinstry**, based in Seattle with offices throughout the U.S. McKinstry offers a variety of services including installing specialized metals, building commissioning, engineering and design, and more. McKinstry brings on 45 – 60 interns per year.

As Ambrose, the Talent Acquisition Manager at McKinstry stated to me, "Top talent goes really quickly!" So, let's take a



look at how to attract quality interns and run an internship program that benefits everyone.

*Note: Because each company uses different titles, for purposes of simplicity when speaking of the manager overseeing the work for the intern, this article will refer to them as the "supervisor."*

### How to Attract Quality Interns

This was my favorite question and response because each company does things so differently, but each places emphasis on young people who want to do the work and learn.

Peter Parizo, of Sargent, is in charge of his company internship program and serves as recruiter, hiring manager, guidance

counselor, and more throughout the internship. He utilizes an intensive vetting process that includes four to five interviews with the potential intern, one of which is in person. The company offers a four-year internship program and recruits young people directly from high school, utilizing them in the summers throughout their college career. Parizo's choosiness at the start and his on-going relationship with the interns ensures that they "don't bring somebody into an internship that I couldn't see working here permanently."

Milhouse tried a new recruiting approach in 2023. In addition to the traditional booth at college career fairs, they started in the fall by tailgating/recruiting at football games! The colleges were strategically chosen in areas where the company is expanding. They barbecued, took resumes, educated the students about the company, and planted an important early "seed" in potential intern's minds.

Milhouse has a rigorous interview process as well. After passing an initial interview, the intern's potential supervisor and one other senior engineer or business operations professional will also interview them. The intention is to ensure the intern truly wants to do an internship. They are asked "What do you want to get out of the experience?" and "What do you expect Milhouse to be able to provide to you?" Heard says they are looking for someone who is already engaged (e.g. they have researched the company) and has passion.

Ambrose wanted McKinstry's internship offering to be a "best of" experience for the interns, so she interviewed interns at other organizations before building their offering. She asked them what they did, how the process was structured, and what they enjoyed about their internship experiences.

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## How to Structure the Experience

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The most notable commonalities among all three companies was the (1) constant presence of the internship leader and (2) regular check-ins with the interns and their supervisor. Every company had a check-in, via survey, midway through their 10 or 12-week offerings; one survey for the interns and one for their supervisor, to gauge performance and the quality of work-related learning.

All of the experts emphasized that the point of the internship was to provide a quality learning opportunity that built on the intern's formal education. To ensure that happens, each company utilizes weekly or bi-weekly "connects" with the interns and their supervisors. These check-ins not only ensure the intern is staying engaged but they allow the company to adjust as needed, rather than waiting for end-of-summer evaluations.

Milhouse includes weekly "enrichment" activities for the interns, which are planned for and scheduled at the start of the summer. These activities can include lunch-and-learns, client visits, guest speakers, and projects or tasks. The interns are prepped for each activity by being given questions they must find the answers to. This ensure they aren't simply showing up, but rather that they are showing up with intention. It doesn't matter if the answers are right or wrong, but rather, was the intern engaged in the activity enough to be able to answer the questions.

At Sargent, Parizo is the point person from recruitment through the whole internship program (which, remember, could be as long as four years). Unique to Sargent is a weekly "homework" assignment which consists of five questions in a Google doc, that each intern must answer weekly. The questions prompt the interns to recognize what they are learning in the key areas of planning, safety, and roles, and responsibilities. Additionally, the interns send along pictures of the work they are doing.

McKinstry's B.L.U.E (Build, Learn, Understand, Enrich) brings all the interns together at an office, once per week, during the internship period. Because many interns are working individually at far-flung jobsites B.L.U.E. benefits them by bringing them together to learn "professional" topics such as teambuilding or personal branding while also networking and building relationships. Because McKinstry operates nationwide, they have cohort experiences in the home office of Seattle as well as regional offices in Florida, Chicago, and more.

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## How to Evaluate the Success of Your Internship Program

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Each company representative emphasized that the true evaluation of the effectiveness of their internship program is based on how the intern him/herself evaluates it. At Sargent,

each intern gives a presentation (PowerPoint, video, etc.) to the executive team describing their experience and what they learned. Their homework assignments help them to build to this final presentation.

Milhouse celebrates the final week of internships with a “science fair” type final project which is presented to the whole Milhouse family, as well as an end of experience survey that seeks to improve the internship offering by asking, “Did you get value? What could we have done better?”

McKinstry evaluates the program not only from the perspective of the intern but also from the supervisor’s perspective and the additional metric of “how many (eligible) interns converted to employees?” Eligible refers to those who are ready for employment vs. someone who still must complete their formal schooling.

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## Final Words

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I asked each expert for their “one piece of advice” for anyone starting an internship program:

Parizo/Sargent: **Be as authentic as possible.** In other words, the internship should align with how the company operates. If they want to be a full-time employee, they should see the business from all angles: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Heard/Milhouse: **Make sure you are helping them turn what they’ve learned into practice.** Give them a real-world look at opportunities.

Ambrose/McKinstry: **Have open communication and feedback.** Listen to the interns and what they are looking for, to get the most out of the opportunity. Then tweak and adjust the program to meet those needs. 



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## About the Author

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Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for Chief Learning Office magazine, Forbes, and MBA World and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as Inc. Radio and America's Workforce Radio.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is Future-Proofing Your Organization.

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