

Need help? Consider interns



JIM RATHBUN
For InBusiness

One of the outgrowths from our anemic economy has been an expanded consideration of internships, a long-standing way for businesses to help students capture real-life experience in a professional discipline. Employers are coming to realize that internships are not only important for students, but also good for business.

At the start of this year, a national Digital Insight survey showed that 61 percent of small business owners believed their financial prospects will improve in 2010. We are now past the year's halfway point which begs the question: How is your business doing today, and are there ways to make it stronger?

To be strong, businesses must maintain a competitive edge in products and services. However, many managers have been in a prolonged survival mode that has inhibited their ability to seek innovative ways to stimulate business. Fresh thinking and new ideas — capturing and applying perspective from outside your immediate universe — are essential to stimulating business. But if you're not in a position to hire,

how do you get this infusion of fresh, internal, thinking?

An intern can help.

An intern wants to make a positive contribution and learn something along the way. They hope to enrich themselves by identifying ways to advance the business of their employers. They can see the forest because they're outside of the trees. You help them, they help you — it's a working partnership.

Case in point: We have a summer marketing intern at Cowlitz Bank, a student at Seattle Pacific University. His name is Cam, and he's earning credit hours required for graduation next spring. Cam's academic training calls for taking initiative to learn our business, and he has leveraged his acquired knowledge to make meaningful contributions. This internship has worked because he has been included in what we're doing, not kept in the background. Participatory engagement is essential to yielding productive results from any internship.

Of course, there are rules employers need to know. In April, the state Department of Labor established criteria expressly for unpaid internships in the private, for-profit sector:

■ The internship is for the benefit of the intern.

■ The intern does not displace regular employees but works under staff supervision.

■ The internship is similar to training, as in an educational environment.

Heeding these rules, and additional labor department criteria, is important to avoid having your unpaid intern being legally classified as an employee. Conversely, an internship may be a very good way to check out a prospective employee.

According to a June report from the National Federation of Independent Businesses, only about 10 percent of small businesses plan to hire in the next six months. Hiring is what will drive our economy forward and that will come from what we do to stimulate business demand, the outgrowth of good thinking and fresh input. Hiring an intern can contribute on both these fronts. The investment is small but the payoff may be big.

And that can be good for business.

Jim Rathbun is Vice President Marketing for Cowlitz Bank. Send your comments to: jrathbun@cowlitzbank.com