

## Internships Demystified: from One Who Knows



by Mark Lawler, chief technology officer, ProSight, Inc.

*"Well... You have attended quite a prestigious institution, you have done very well in your classes, and you seem very ready to enter the workforce. Here's my problem: you don't have any real-world experience. I'm sorry, but I can't justify bringing on somebody without any experience at this time. I wish you the best of luck in your search..."*

Those are terrifying words to hear as a first-time job applicant with a college diploma fresh in hand. I was lucky. Back in my freshman year of high school I had a feeling as to what I wanted to do with my life and was able to start my first internship in the area of computer science. By the time I had graduated from the university, I had eight years of internships under my belt. I never had to hear these words, although most of my friends did. Today as I look back on my career and what I have been able to accomplish, I know that it was that head start that got me to where I am today. Even after all of these years I still remember the person who gave me that first internship and have been trying to return that favor by hiring interns myself ever since.

### **What can interns help with?**

At ProSight we have leveraged interns in a number of roles. We have had them help with web content mining, web publishing, e-news letters, event planning, data entry, system configuration, as well as quality assurance. With the success of our intern program over the last seven years our marketing and professional services department has shown great interest in expanding the program this summer. At previous companies I have had interns fill in gaps in our research and development staff, writing and testing code. One intangible benefit is that interns energize the office as their fresh perspectives and eagerness to succeed shows through in everything they do.

### **Interns can help you grow your business**

At ProSight we had one particular intern that had worked with us over a couple of years during several summer and holiday breaks. A few years ago we landed a pilot for a major contract with a government agency, but needed to hire a temporary staff of six individuals to help move their data into our system in less than a week. On top of that it was Christmas break; between employee vacation plans and a severe ice storm it looked like we were not going to make it. One of our prior interns was a lifesaver. Kyle was home on Christmas break and responded immediately. Because he knew our system, he started the first day by helping to train the temporary data entry staff we had hired. Kyle then spent the rest of the week validating data loads, helping to answer questions that the temps had, and played a key supervisory role with the temps. Kyle's efforts in driving the team of temps freed up our own technical staff to focus on configuring the system in parallel with the data load, while readying it for the pilot with the customer.

The pilot was a huge success, and as a result ProSight won over a \$1M deal. This also helped lead to even more substantial deals. Without Kyle's prior experience and skills, the success of this pilot would have been put in serious risk. Years later this story has become folklore and has been woven in to the fabric of our corporate culture.

### **Interns make great full-time hires**

In today's world it is often difficult to source employees for your business. First you have to find a qualified individual, then you have to spin them up, and lastly you have to see if they work out. With an intern that is graduating you have a fully qualified candidate that knows your business, knows your employees, and is eager to please. You know about their performance, attendance, and how well they work with others in your group. The companies in which I have implemented intern programs have had great success in converting some of those talented individuals in to very loyal full-time employees.

### **But how do I manage an intern?**

In the twelve years that I've brought interns in to my organizations I have heard all of the common complaints by those who have not had the advantage of working with interns before or who have had a single bad experience: "They are too hard to manage;" "I don't have the time to do my job and babysit at the same time;" "I'll just have to redo their work anyways so why bother?"

Yes, having an intern does require some work on your part, but probably the same amount of work that you'd dedicate to any employee you want to grow. First of all you must set clear goals and communicate what it is you want them to accomplish. You also have to establish joint metrics that you will use to measure their progress and accomplishments.

The one area that does require a little extra time is checking in with them a little more frequently than you would a regular employee. But what is an extra 10 to 15 minutes out of your daily schedule when you look at the rewards back to the business as well as what you are doing for the community? I would contend that having an intern program helps make you a better manager.

### **What do I pay an intern?**

An intern isn't a free resource, nor should they be as is assumed in some industries. These are skilled workers who do need to earn money for tuition, books, and living expenses. For technical resources I've often looked at the highest-paying on-campus job such as a grader, teaching assistant, or similar and then have bumped that up by a couple of dollars an hour. Over the years the BEC (Business Education Compact) has been a big help in assisting in setting competitive pay scales for our interns as well.

### **How the Business Education Compact has helped**

The BEC provides several key services to businesses that are looking to help serve the community by hiring interns. They source individuals, provide workplace training, track interns' time, and manage their payroll.

The BEC is very good at finding qualified candidates. Working with our company, the BEC has explored what internships are available and has helped to locate qualified students who match our needs. The BEC prescreens the applicants and helps schedule interviews with our company. Once an intern has been hired, the BEC walks them through a detailed training program to educate them on what to expect in the workplace, how to track and report their time, as well as how to conduct themselves in a professional manner and how to interact with other employees.

Lastly, the BEC has covered every aspect of managing the payroll for our interns. ProSight hasn't had to worry about 1099 forms and such as the interns work for the BEC, which is contracting its services to us. This saves our company a lot of time and paperwork, making it very easy to pay for our interns as part of our normal accounts payables process. BEC has made this so easy that in the case where we have sourced our own interns, ProSight has worked through the BEC for their services.

### **A call to action—what you can do**

Now is the time to discuss with your employees the benefits of an intern program at your location. As students get ready to plan for the summer, there are only a couple of months left before they are able to work full-time. This is a good opportunity to identify where interns can help, work up job descriptions with the BEC, and let the BEC source the appropriate candidates. This will provide enough time in May for interviews, selection, and training so that they can start that first day of summer bringing value to your company.

### **About the author**

Mark Lawler is the Chief Technology Officer for ProSight, Inc. – a Portland software company that he helped found in 1998 to provide portfolio management and governance solutions to some of our nation's top CIOs and federal agencies. Mark provides both external and internal technology leadership, focusing on corporate strategy and technology futures that align the company's technologies and services with the business requirements of ProSight's customers.

Prior to joining ProSight, Mark was the Director of Research and Development for INTERSOLV's PVCS Business Unit where he built a world-class development team, shipping one of the first commercial servers written in Java. Prior to INTERSOLV (now Serena), Lawler held various management and engineering positions at Symantec's Peter Norton Computing Group where he was key to the planning and development of many Norton products including Norton AntiVirus and Norton Desktop for Windows.

Mark holds a B.S. in Computer Science from the University of California, Riverside and has helped start intern programs at both INTERSOLV and ProSight.