Getting the Most Out of Internship Programs: A Practical Guide for Government Agencies

Learn what three government agencies are doing to unify, clarify, and strengthen efforts to attract younger and more diverse employees to the federal workplace.

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It is estimated that 60,000 young, ambitious, diverse individuals descend upon the nation’s capital each summer, eager to put in long hours for little or no pay to get some experience under their belts. A good percentage of such students are interested in working in government agencies. At the same time, government agencies across the board are experiencing hiring freezes, budget cuts, and significant downsizing mandates. Many agencies look to internship programs as a crucial tool in their struggle to continue to perform mission-critical tasks with a significantly reduced amount of resources. Despite the growing reliance on internship programs by government agencies and the growing supply of students interested in interning with the government, the median age of the full-time federal civilian employee is still 46 years. Something is seriously wrong with this picture.

What Human Capital Crisis?

With the current economic environment causing a flood of applications to pour into government agencies, the possibility that the federal government is experiencing a “human capital crisis” seems implausible. Armando Rodriguez, deputy assistant secretary of the Office of Diversity Management and Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), summed up succinctly the current state of affairs and stated:

We need to redefine what many are calling the ‘human capital crisis.’ The crisis has nothing to do with the fact that 50 percent of the current senior managers will be eligible to retire in five years. By definition, senior managers hold senior management positions because of their decades of experience. Of course they will be eligible to retire soon. The real crisis may be the lack of a centralized, concerted effort to attract young, more diverse people to the federal workplace. What we need is a better distribution of the bell curve.

The US Office of Personnel Management (OPM) that serves as the guidepost to human capital officers in federal agencies working to implement the President’s Management Agenda recommends (through its Human Capital Standards Web site http://apps.opm.gov/humancapital/standards) that “HR information system data are analyzed regarding use of options such as superior qualification appointments, Presidential Management Interns, Career Interns, and other internships....” OPM falls short however, in providing any specific recommendations to agencies on how to best utilize internship programs. Consequently, there is a serious problem of fragmentation, confusion, and ineffectiveness across the federal government when it comes to internship programs. Some agencies are running great programs that produce stellar results. Others are fledgling programs at best with very little long-term vision and little to no internal infrastructure to support them.

This article profiles three different federal agencies—the US General Accounting Office (GAO), and the Departments of Veterans Affairs and the Interior (DOI)—that vary in size, scope, mission, and philosophy in how they use internship programs. Through a close examination of the different internship programs, I hope to spark a much-needed discussion among government agencies on how to execute internship programs in a more strategic way.

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The General Accounting Office

GAO’s internship program is primarily a summer program. It is managed out of the Human Capital Office with a significant amount of cooperation with staff members throughout the agency. GAO typically receives over 1,000 applications each year for about 140 paid positions. The majority of positions are in Washington, DC. Of the 140 positions, 40 to 50 are located in GAO’s eight field offices across the country. Ninety percent of the summer interns work as analysts. The other 10 percent typically work as either financial auditors or information technology specialists. GAO targets masters degree candidates who are between their first and second years of an MPA or MBA program.

At the end of the summer program, GAO managers across the agency participate in a feedback session to determine which candidates will be offered full-time positions. Once the managers reach a consensus, GAO contacts their top picks to make an official offer in early October of the same year. The true testament to the success of the internship program is the fact that two-thirds of the student interns typically accept full-time positions with the agency. Last year, GAO had 300 entry-level position openings. The internship program alone filled 90 of those positions.

According to Sally Jaggar, Managing Director of Special Projects and Recruitment, there are a number of factors that contribute to the success of the internship program. First has to do with the size and scope of the GAO. With only 3,200 full-time employees, the Human Capital Office is able to administer the program efficiently and effectively. Because GAO’s skill-set needs are fairly homogenous, the agency is able to conduct targeted recruitment. Finally, it is the agency-wide vertical and horizontal collaboration that really helps this program excel. Below are a number of GAO’s secrets to success.

Recruitment Strategy

OPM’s USA Jobs Web site is just one of a number of tools that GAO employs to attract quality intern applicants. According to Ms. Jaggar, GAO does not rely on it very heavily. Instead, the agency prides itself on partnerships it has cultivated with nearly 50 universities across the country that have strong MPA and MBA programs. Each school is assigned a team of recruiters made up of a diverse group of GAO staff members (the majority of whom are not in the Human Capital department). Each team is headed by a Senior Executive Service representative, and includes an entry-level professional, and a mixture of other individuals who are eager to share their experiences working at GAO. Each recruitment team devises its own recruitment strategy with guidance from Ms. Jaggar. The team is required to report on its progress several times throughout the year. Ms. Jaggar made it clear that the recruitment teams “don’t just show up for career fairs and then disappear the rest of the year.” They cultivate the relationships throughout the course of the year.

Screening and Selection of Candidates

With over 1,000 young people applying for 140 positions each summer, one would think GAO had a staff of 10 tasked solely with screening, interviewing, and selecting interns. This is hardly the case. GAO is divided into 19 different teams that focus on areas from education, workforce, and income security, to defense capabilities and management. In the intern application package, students are encouraged to select a specific team with which they are interested in working. The applications are then distributed to a designated team leader who shares the applications with his/her team members. Each team meets once a week for several months to discuss the candidates and conduct interviews.

GAO has implemented a decentralized hiring process, but maintains a centralized funding policy. This allows each team a significant amount of autonomy with its hiring decisions yet ensures that each team has equitable access to new hires through the centralized funding program.

Once the interns report to work, GAO works hard to ensure each student has a quality experience. Each intern is assigned a mentor or a “buddy,” typically someone who is fairly new to the GAO and close in age to the intern. In addition, GAO organizes “brown bag lunch speaker series” throughout the semester to expose students to the broad range of issues with which GAO staff members are involved.

US Department of Veterans Affairs

The Office of Diversity Management and EEO advocates the use of nontraditional student internship programs including the Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP), the Student Career Employment Program (SCEP), or the Student Volunteer Internship Program, for example. The Office functions independently, but in close coordination with the Office of Human Resources. The Office of Diversity Management and EEO partners with seven nonprofit organizations that specialize in the recruitment and supervision of young professionals to attract candidates. The Office has contractual relationships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the American Indian Science and Engineering Society, National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, Washington Internships for Native Students, the Workforce Recruitment Program for College Students with Disabilities, the Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars, and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities. These organizations provide college interns on a contract basis. They do not represent all of the internship programs.

The advantage to working with these groups, according to Mr. Rodriguez, is that “they have the ability to target and recruit with precision particular skill sets as well as specific under-represented groups in order to help the agency meet its workforce needs.” Ultimately partnerships with these organizations alleviate the administrative burden of recruiting,
posting positions, reviewing, and screening student applications. "With seven organizations out there, odds are, we'll find the right student to accurately match a particular manager's specialized needs." Due to the contractual relationship between the VA and its partners, students are not employees of the VA and the time spent on the job is not recorded or credited towards a full-time position, making conversion to a permanent position impossible. Over the past three years, the Office of Diversity Management has facilitated over 350 well-paid internship opportunities for young people both in the Washington, DC area and in VA facilities across the country.

Variety of Challenges

Despite its successes, the program still faces a number of challenges. For example, it is not always easy informing managers throughout an agency of 220,000 employees about the program. In addition to information dissemination, another impediment according to many managers is the cost of the program. The partner organizations charge $8,000 to $10,000 per student for each of three sessions that run during the year. Mr. Rodriguez believes strongly that interns should be compensated because it gives students from disadvantaged backgrounds an opportunity to participate. He also believes these internships are wise investments and that they deliver talent and diversity to the VA workforce. It is difficult to fight a long-standing culture in Washington, DC that internships should and can work for free. In addition, he would like to follow GAO’s lead in its commitment to providing centralized funding for the program, as it would represent “a corporate solution to a corporate problem.”

When asked for more specifics on the actual return on investment, he noted that the Office of Diversity Management and EEO needs to put a tracking system in place that reports the hiring of program participants. The lack of a paper trail due to the nature of the contractual arrangements with the nonprofit partners makes it very difficult to record such figures.

Student Career Experience Program

Mr. Rodriguez would like to see more support from OPM. “OPM should expand the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) to allow the hours these students work at federal facilities to count toward noncompetitive conversions to career-conditional positions. This would go a long way toward addressing under-representation in the federal government.” In addition, collaboration with other federal agencies to provide recommendations or models upon which agencies can base their programs to increase effectiveness would be of great help.

US Department of the Interior

The goal of the DOI’s primary (not exclusive) internship program according to Mark Oliver, director, Office of Educational Partnerships, is “to facilitate a way for entry-level individuals to enter the workforce.” The Diversity Internship Program (DIP) began in 1994, and according to Mr. Oliver, reached its peak in 1998. Between 1994 and 2003 DOI hired 755 interns through the DIP program, 60 to 70 percent of which worked outside of the Washington, DC area. Since 1998, the number of interns hired has been steadily decreasing from 146 to an average of about 51 students each year.

One of the biggest challenges facing the program is lack of support and interest from managers across the agency. DOI has over 70,000 employees in 2,400 operating locations across the country. The sheer size and decentralized nature of the agency makes it extremely difficult to educate managers about the program and implement the program in a uniform manner. In addition, budget constraints are an impediment to the program as there is a fee to departments of between $8,500 and $11,000 associated with participation. Finally, Mr. Oliver noted that the agency has not been very successful in tracking the results of the program, i.e., determining how many full-time hires resulted from it. By recognizing the problem areas, DOI has taken an important step in the direction to improve the program.

Five-Step Educational Partnership Model

Mr. Oliver has developed a strategy for getting the program to deliver the results necessary to meet the workforce needs of the 21st century. Below is a five-step program model that outlines his proposed strategy.

- Full-time Employment.
- Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) (year three or four in university).
- Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) (year two in university).
- Diversity Internship Program (year one in university).
- K-12 Program (grade school and high school environment education curriculum through partnerships between schools and DOI).

Mr. Oliver’s approach is unique in that it is multi-tiered and engages students at a young age to become familiar with and interested in DOI’s work. Full-time employment is the end-goal that drives the program. The Office of Educational Partnerships has made significant progress in the first of the five steps shown above. Through partnerships with over 200 K-12 schools across the country, DOI provides classroom presentations, tutors, mentors, science fair judges, coaches, equipment donations, and more. By having an actual person in the schools from time to time, DOI is able to provide role models to students, which in turn helps DOI share information about future jobs for them.

Diversity Internship Program

Mr. Oliver highlighted the importance of marrying the K-12 program with the internship program, as it is the natural (Continued on p. 51)
positive in their evaluations of government, particularly executive and judicial branches, than were the newspapers. There were also some unexpected differences between the samples of national and local newspapers. Although the number of stories about government declined in both, the drop was much more precipitous in the local papers. And unlike the trend in the national newspapers, it continued from the Reagan administration to that of George W. Bush.

The national and local press were almost identical in their tendency toward negativity, but the local papers were less balanced in their treatment of the three presidencies.

**What Does It All Mean?**

*Government: In and Out of the News* presents a very interesting and sometimes surprising set of snapshots of how our federal government fared in news media coverage over the past 20 years.

Following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, interest in government, patriotism, and trust rose dramatically. Nearly two years later, the levels of trust and engagement are now back to where they were before September 11, 2001. The news media plays an important role here. Television and newspapers are the modern civics teachers for most us. American news media are by far the most effective and influential voices in bringing ordinary citizens information—and shaping their opinions—about government. As much as the study provides data and trends, it also raises many questions:

*To journalists:* In light of news and financial budgets, what are the tools and resources you need to present a more textured and informative picture of government to readers and viewers? With tighter deadlines and increased competition, how can you both get the story right, and incorporate voices and opinions from a variety of perspectives as sources in your reporting? What internal processes and systems must be in place to ensure quality and accuracy, and to strike the right balance among facts, analysis, and opinions?

*To government leaders:* In light of the emerging trends detailed in this report, what is your role—and responsibility—in better telling government’s story? How can you work more effectively with journalists to foster excellent and understandable reporting of complex government issues? How can you use your expertise and credibility as a government news source to achieve better results for your agency, the people you serve, and for reporters? These are not questions just for an agency press secretary or the staff in the public affairs shop.

*To “news consumers:”* What do you want, need, and expect from both government leaders and the news media to get a more accurate view of government? And what do you need to become a more active citizen and hold government accountable?

These questions can only be answered if government, the news media, and citizens talk—and more important, listen—to each other.

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**INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS**

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The next step in this graduated approach. Once students complete their first year of college, they are prime candidates for the Diversity Internship Program. Similar to the VA, DOI relies on partner organizations to recruit, screen, supervise, and pay students through contractual agreements between the DOI and such organizations. Once the student successfully completes the Diversity Internship Program, Mr. Oliver would like DOI to invite the student back during his or her second year in college through STEP. Finally, as the student reaches his or her junior and/or senior year in college, he or she would participate in SCEP. Once that student graduates, he or she would have accumulated well above the required 640 hours for a non-competitive conversion to full-time employment with DOI. DOI would give incentives to students with tuition reimbursement and other opportunities for training.

Mr. Oliver believes that the success of the proposed program relies on two main things. First is senior management’s ability and willingness to effect change. Second, success will depend on the commitment by managers across the agency to take seriously the role of mentoring our nation’s youth to solidify the legacy of the organization.

**Conclusion**

It is evident that all three federal departments recognize the importance of internship programs and are committed to using them as a tool to bring new talent to the government workplace. However, in order to improve performance and ensure these programs deliver the desired results, it is crucial that agencies conduct in-depth analyses, welcome creativity, and collaborate with other agencies to seek guidance on what works and what does not work.

It is interesting that out of the three agencies profiled above, the smallest agency, the GAO with only 3,200 employees, hires the largest number of interns and has the best results with two-thirds of its interns returning to full-time employment within a year. This suggests that there is not a “one-size-fits-all solution.” Size, geographic location of offices, and skill-set needs should all be taken into account as agencies develop models upon which they can build or rebuild their internship programs.

Interagency collaboration and a unifying voice on the issue are crucial to the success of internship programs. It will also help solve the problems of fragmentation, confusion among students and managers, and most importantly, increase effectiveness across the board to ultimately decrease the median age of the full-time federal civilian employee.