

Junior Staff: Why You Need Them and How to Recruit and Retain Them

Even though reports point to the job market slowly turning around, employers still hesitate to begin wading through the applicant pool. Even more so, employers are wary of taking on interns and entry-level professionals with little to no experience. Unfortunately, many companies have begun hiring mature workers (age 55 and older) for positions typically reserved for college students and recent graduates—and the mature workers are winning out.

Mature workers accepting entry-level and internship positions is already affecting recent graduates. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), only 22 percent of the Class of 2009 has landed jobs as of July. It is a never-ending battle for college students when they are expected to enter the workforce with previous internship experience, but those opportunities have closed, or are being given to those who are overqualified for them.

As an experienced hiring manager who has been in nearly every employment-related situation possible, I know and understand the needs of today's employers, as well as today's internship and entry-level job candidates. I also know that both sides face unprecedented challenges in this economy. However, it is vital that internship and entry-level positions continue to be given to new professionals and that they are looked upon as an important role in a company's success and long-term growth.

So, why should your company invest in entry-level candidates and internship programs with college students and recent graduates? Employers cite that in order to hire interns and entry-level talent, they must take into account the expense of training and the time of mentoring—neither of which are typically big concerns when hiring mid- to upper-level professionals. Yet, there are many benefits of bringing interns and entry-level professionals to your organization:

- **They will bring fresh ideas:** While interns and entry-level professionals have less experience, they bring fresh ideas and a younger perspective to an organization. If it's important to your company that you continue to evolve with the times, young professionals can help you achieve this goal.
- **They have natural technological expertise:** As “early adopters,” interns and entry-level professionals have their fingers on the pulse of the latest technologies. After all, they were raised with them.
- **Expedited learning of a professional environment:** Interns and entry-level professionals are able and motivated to “hit the ground running” when they join a company and are more likely to invest more overtime hours into a company upon their arrival. Generation Y in general is known for this characteristic.
- **Ability to shape and mold:** Interns and entry-level professionals are much more flexible to change and new ideas because they have just come out of the learning environment. Again, if your organization must continue to change to remain competitive, younger professionals are more adaptable to this type of environment and often bring suggestions that many never thought of because “that's just the way things have always been.”

Exceptional talent is not hard to find among young professionals. I can confidently say that Gen Y has some of the most driven and capable young professionals entering the workforce, and there are many cost-effective avenues to find them.

- **Structured internship program:** Internship programs are fantastic recruiting tools. Consider them three-month interviews! You get first-hand experience working with the candidates and can transition one or more straight into entry-level positions if your budget allows. Notice I said “candidates”—if one of the main goals of your internship program is to recruit entry-level professionals, you might not want to “put all your eggs in one basket.”
- **Referrals:** When a professional colleague or personal friend of yours refers a candidate to you, it says a lot about the candidate and doesn’t cost a thing! Definitely seek out referrals whenever possible.
- **Social networking sites:** Sites like Come Recommended (www.comerecommended.com), LinkedIn and Twitter allow you to gauge a candidate prior to interviewing him or her. Again, this is extremely cost-effective but also one of the best ways to pick and choose candidates right for your organization.
- **YouTube:** This is a creative way to attract young talent and demonstrate to candidates what your company culture is like at the same time.
- **Build relationships with local colleges/universities:** Both campus career centers and department/program chairs can be helpful when you’re trying to locate the right candidate. Like all networking, it’s best to build these relationships before you need them.

Once you have found and hired young talent, there are steps you should take in order to make the experience beneficial for both of you:

- **Thorough orientations:** Orientations that provide a good understanding of the company’s culture, values, communication procedures and decision-making processes are very valuable to new hires.
- **Challenge and engage them:** Gen Y expects to be challenged and engaged from the beginning, so be sure to assign projects that do just that.
- **Mentors:** Develop a mentorship program in which entry-level employees or interns feel comfortable approaching a staff member with questions and concerns.
- **Provide feedback:** Always be committed to providing feedback and letting them know where they are going within the company. A recent study revealed that Gen Y employees want to hear from their managers once a day, which means management has to step up their communication skills.
- **Professional development:** While this is very important at all stages of an individual’s career, it is especially important as you bring on young talent who has an unparalleled drive and determination to continue to learn and grow to better themselves and their companies.

“Millennials” have a lot to offer your organization, and there are many cost-effective, streamlined ways to go about hiring and retaining them. As a leader, it’s up to you to ensure these practices are developed and maintained throughout your organization.

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