

Taking Them Seriously

Internships are playing an increasingly important role in the careers of HR professionals, as many human resource organizations have come to view internships as a means of filling the HR pipeline. No longer merely a public-relations ploy or a means of providing executives' kids something to do over the summer, internships have taken on new meaning, particularly for the HR function.

By Julie Cook Ramirez

Semhar Amde is the sort of young adult who doesn't make decisions lightly. Having already earned an undergraduate degree in psychology from the University of Illinois-Chicago in 2001, she had been working in the Windy City as an assistant manager for a clothing store for three-and-a-half years when she became intrigued by the prospect of a career in human resources.

She'd already had a taste of the HR life, as her primary responsibilities entailed recruiting, developing and training store employees. But it was only after conducting "exploratory interviews" with a couple of HR professionals that she made up her mind to apply to Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., and study human resources.

Immersed in her studies there, she found herself constantly hearing good things about the General Electric Co. in Fairfield, Conn. An active participant in the school's business consortium, GE professionals were frequently on campus, talking with students and discussing the kinds of business challenges faced by the organization and its industry as a whole.

In addition, Amde says, her coursework often highlighted GE's best practices, particularly with regard to developing employees and future leaders. She was impressed with the company's dedication to providing its workers with experiences designed to help them grow in their careers. So when GE came looking for HR students to spend the summer of 2006 working as interns in its Human Resources Leadership Program, Amde was immediately interested.

Amde spent 10 weeks in GE's Corporate Financial Services business, updating job descriptions to ensure they complied with the Department of Labor's Office of Federal

Contract Compliance Program – i.e., that GE, as an employer doing business with the federal government, was complying with its laws and regulations concerning nondiscrimination.

She also partnered with GE's information-technology department to create a new staffing portal that was not only more user-friendly for hiring managers, but would also provide external candidates with an overview of what to expect during an interview and a timeline of when they could expect to hear back.

In addition, she served as an HR generalist for GE's Financial Management Program interns, organizing four lunch-and-learn sessions with senior leaders to give the interns an overview of the organization and its Corporate Financial Services business.

As her internship neared its close, Amde was presented with a full-time job offer, which she immediately accepted. In March 2007, shortly after receiving her master's degree in industrial and labor relations, she returned to GE, this time as an HRLP, a term used at the company for those working in the HR leadership program.

The position requires Amde to rotate through a series of three assignments – two in HR and one cross-functional – before segueing into an HR career in one of GE's business units later this year.

While her accomplishments are impressive, Amde is far from the only graduate student to make the transition from HR intern to HR professional at GE. Last year, GE converted 60 percent of its 20 to 25 HR interns to HRLPs, according to Jennifer Maslar, manager of HR development programs.

That kind of news is exactly what John Lynch, senior vice president of corporate human resources, likes to hear. Lynch has a vested interest in the leadership program's development of HR interns because it serves as a significant feeder pool for the HR function.

Currently, 60 percent to 65 percent of Lynch's direct reports are former HRLPs, and most of the company's employees working in the leadership program completed HR internships with the organization. As he explains it, the lifeblood of HR, the future of the function, is increasingly entering the organization as interns.

"It's a massive pipeline from which most of the senior human resource leaders in GE will come from," says Lynch. "It's very important to the organization and to me."

GE is certainly not alone, as many human resource organizations have come to view internships as a means of filling the HR pipeline, thus ensuring a continuous flow of quality, pre-vetted, pre-auditioned candidates. No longer merely a public-relations ploy or a means of providing executives' kids something to do over the summer, internships have taken on new meaning, particularly for the HR function.

While internships in all fields are intended to provide the student with valuable, real-world experiences, HR internships take on a heightened importance because there's a greater disconnect between what the students learn in the world of academia and what they are

going to be expected to do in the world of work, according to David Lewis, president of OperationsInc, a Stamford, Conn.-based human resource outsourcing and consulting firm.

"If you are going to school for accounting, what you learn in class is probably 80 percent to 90 percent consistent -- maybe even closer to 100 percent -- with what your job is going to be," says Lewis. "With HR, it's a different story. You learn the laws, you learn some best practices, but you don't learn how to deal with those little facts of life and the politics that come along with the workplace."

Making the Connection

That disconnect exists because HR is often not a stand-alone academic discipline, particularly in the undergraduate realm, says Richard Bottner, president and CEO of Intern Bridge Inc., an Acton, Mass.-based internship-consulting firm, and author of *Total Internship Management: The Employer's Guide to Building the Ultimate Internship Program*.

Many business programs offer a basic HR management class, but beyond that, students interested in a career in human resources have to rely on internships to fill in the gaps and give them the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the field.

"HR internships are important because they give interns the ability to put some of their academic learnings into play," says Jennifer Frame, director of human capital planning for The Dow Chemical Co. in Midland, Mich. "In an academic setting, there's just no way to learn how to handle situations where you have to interact with somebody in Shanghai, where there's a 12-hour time-zone difference and English isn't their first language. Those are very real things that could come into play."

Amde agrees: "While school teaches you the core skills and fundamentals -- what's the proper way of conducting workforce planning? for example -- an internship," she says, "is all about project management, influencing skills, time management, prioritization and understanding the business so you can utilize your learnings to help the business grow from an HR perspective."

Lora Tabor, general manager of corporate and services HR for Chevron Corp., bristles at the suggestion that academic programs fall short in preparing students for a career in HR.

Each summer, the company brings on roughly five MBA or master's candidates to work as HR interns at or near Chevron's San Ramon, Calif., headquarters. For the most part, intern candidates are recruited from the same schools -- University of Minnesota, Texas A&M, and Cornell, for example -- as the bulk of HR's campus hires.

For the most part, Tabor has been pleased with the knowledge base of Chevron's incoming HR interns. Through case studies and other examples, she says, colleges and universities do a great job preparing students for the strategic role they will be expected to play in today's complex HR environment. However, she says, "it's the real-life experience of working on the job that no university program can prepare anyone for."

Chevron's HR interns are given the opportunity to complete the learning process begun on campus with a series of project-based assignments, which Tabor describes as "real work ... that we would assign to a regular employee" if the intern wasn't there to do it.

Last year, for example, an intern in the learning and development area helped create an HR competency framework. She did the job-analysis documentation, wrote the proficiency levels for the competencies and then assisted in their deployment, which included engaging with the senior-leadership team and delivering part of the presentation.

Meaningful Assignments

The ability to take on such important assignments separates truly meaningful HR internships from those in which students end up doing the grunt work that no one else wants to do, says Lewis.

"There's a certain level of responsibility that a company has to the student and that includes bringing them in and giving them specific roles versus just pointing them in the direction of the dusty terminated files that no one has had a chance to organize," he says. "If you just stick someone in the back room and have them make employee files and orientation packets, that's a disservice to them. You need to look at it from the student's perspective and ask, 'What can this person do? What can they contribute?'"

At Dow, HR ensures there's no shortage of meaningful work for its interns by soliciting "project opportunities," then creating specific "project charters" -- complete with details on key goals, deliverables, stakeholders and how the project in question aligns to the overall HR strategy -- before the latest crop of two to five summer interns even sets foot inside the door.

Within the first two weeks, Dow's HR interns are required to set goals that are aligned with the project charters they've been assigned. Throughout the summer, they are assessed against those goals. Wise move, according to Matthew Zinman, executive director and founder of The Internship Institute in Newtown, Pa., and author of Intern Toolkit.

"One of the biggest mistakes companies and managers make is waiting until the interns come on board to figure out what to have them do," says Zinman. "One of the pillars of best practices is to develop a well-defined project pipeline in advance of even writing the job description. That sets expectations for everybody involved."

One particular project recently completed by Dow HR interns entailed updating the organization's screening capabilities. In particular, the interns focused on the manufacturing and engineering function, performing job analyses and talking to leaders and incumbent engineers to understand and document the roles and responsibilities of key positions within the organization.

They then worked through the process of aligning screening capabilities -- from online pre-screens to interview questions -- with the specific success factors they identified.

Similarly, Chevron takes great strides to determine, ahead of time, where their HR interns will be working and what projects they will be assigned – at least initially. At the same time, they deliberately build a certain amount of flexibility into the program. Not only does this enable HR to react to specific needs as they arise, it also allows them to take advantage of interns' special skills and interests that may become evident as the summer wears on.

Last summer, for example, one particular intern had a background in the medical field, which led to her being given an assignment working on Chevron's Rapid Response safety initiative. Although her primary assignment was centered around getting employees focused on ergonomics, along the way she happened to notice a gap in another area of Chevron's employee offerings.

As a result, she was given the task of developing a parenting resource Web site for the company – and was offered the opportunity to return to Chevron as a full-time employee once she completes her degree. She accepted.

"That kind of flexibility allows them to demonstrate their initiative and their ability to roll with the punches and seek out opportunities," says Tabor. "[Those are] the kinds of people we are looking for – people who embrace what they see and look for areas where they can add value and make recommendations."

Thoughtful Leadership

Chevron's HR interns are each assigned a peer mentor, typically a recent graduate of the company's HR development program. They are charged with helping the interns navigate their way through Chevron's culture and facilities.

They are also assigned to a specific supervisor who provides additional coaching, mentoring and feedback, including a formal intern evaluation that plays a role in helping determine which interns will receive full-time job offers.

GE's HRLP interns are managed by assignment leaders, who set goals and objectives for the interns and keep tabs on their progress to make sure they accomplish what is set out for them. They also provide daily guidance, as well as a formal assessment at the end of the summer. Meanwhile, HRLP coordinators serve as the interns' main points of contact. They are responsible for making sure the interns are properly oriented and given assignments that provide actual "real-world experiences," according to Maslar.

It's also their duty to ensure the interns get "the right kinds of visibility, whether it's a roundtable with the senior HR leader or a job-shadowing [opportunity] or whatever we can do to enrich the experience," she says.

Such visibility to key leaders in the function is a valuable component of the program, according to Lynch, because it serves as a system of checks and balances, ensuring that GE's HR interns are working on meaningful, strategically critical projects rather than busy work or basic administrative tasks.

"Visibility to big leaders keeps the program honest because when they meet these kids, they can ask, 'What have you been working on?' " says Lynch.

"If it's less than challenging," he says, "the business leader can come back [to the manager of those interns] quite rightly and say, 'You had this great talent and you gave them nothing meaningful to work on.' " (All managers at GE, he adds, are evaluated on their ability to develop talent.)

Lynch is quick to point out that the interaction with senior leaders is just one of many checks and balances in place for the HRLP internship program. The corporate HR team, the business-unit HR team and the mentors are in regular contact with the interns to discuss and monitor progress with their assignments and make any necessary adjustments along the way.

While Lynch doesn't have time to personally interface with every one of GE's HRLP interns on a regular basis, he does endeavor to interact with them as much as possible. Each summer, for example, he strives to be in attendance at the company's annual Intern Forum, where all the interns are given the opportunity to present highlights of the projects they worked on during their time at GE.

Lynch maintains a vested interest in the program, continually keeping tabs on the data and, specifically, how many interns convert into full-time HRLPs. He takes great pride in the program and feels confident it is filling GE's pipeline with the organization's HR leaders of the future, he says.

"We provide the opportunity to come in as an intern and potentially finish off leading the company," says Lynch. "My one regret is that I wasn't able to come in on the Human Resource Leadership Program or to have come in initially as an intern, but I can bet you one thing -- my successor will, in all probability, be a graduate of that program."

July 1, 2010

Copyright 2010© LRP Publications

© Copyright 2010 LRP Publications. All rights reserved.