

Eager workers can be free and easy

Taking on an intern can be a win-win for them and your company, writes **Valerie Khoo**.

Imagine running your business with an endless supply of free labour – people who turn up at your office keen to learn, who are excited to contribute and enthusiastic about getting experience in your industry. They work in your business and when pay day rolls around ... they don't expect a cheque.

Sound like small-business utopia or an impossible fantasy? Not so.

In fact, savvy business owners are tapping into a skilled and eager workforce – interns.

Typically, interns are still studying at university or have recently graduated. Some are required to undertake work experience in a field related to their studies as part of their degree. Others embark on internships of their own volition in order to add professional experience to their resumé, which would be bare otherwise.

In most cases, internships are unpaid. However, according to the co-founder of GradConnection, Dan Purchas, some major organisations offer paid internships. GradConnection is an online platform that helps students connect with employers who offer graduate jobs and internships.

While Purchas says the popularity of internships is increasing, he says



Happy employer ... Lara Solomon has embraced an intern culture. Photo: Fiona Morris

Australian employers and students have yet to embrace the intern culture. "In the US, it's common practice to do internships during the summer for free," he says. "So people will try to get the coolest-sounding one to put on their resumé and make it more interesting."

However, you don't have to be a major organisation to have interns.

Small-business owner Lara Solomon has a regular stream of interns in both her businesses, averaging between five to seven interns each year.

It started in 2009 when, out of the blue, a Brisbane university student contacted Solomon asking to be an intern at her business Mocks, which distributes and sells protective mobile-phone socks.

"She was a big Mocks fan and wanted to get experience working in a real business, rather than in a McDonald's type of job," Solomon says. "She got to meet everyone in the business and spend an hour with each of them to find out what they do. Then we gave her projects to work on."

As Solomon's business was based in Sydney, the intern paid for her own flights and accommodation during her two-week stay. It was a punt that paid off because Solomon then employed her part-time for the next six months, allowing her to work from Brisbane.

Since then, Solomon has refined a three-month internship program and she sometimes has two interns working at the same time.

"We've also developed a booklet, which is given to interns on their first day," she says. "It contains everything they need to know about how to do things on a day-to-day basis."

She also works with interns in her other business, Social Rabbit, a social media consulting business.

"Interns are great as they bring in new skills and can approach a problem from different angles," Solomon says. "We had one intern who was studying a multimedia degree and she loved creating videos, so we did a lot of Social Rabbit videos when she was around."

Solomon says her regular interns have made a difference to her business. "I have also ended up employing interns who have started off working for free but have then proved their value and passion for the business," she says.

Purchas says this has become a key driver for employers developing internship programs.

"An internship program helps employers avoid battling it out when it comes to graduate recruitment," he says. "It's a try-before-you-buy arrangement."

What both parties get out of it

If the thought of free labour sounds enticing, it's important to remember that a successful internship is one where both parties win. You don't want to exploit the situation and should ensure that your interns are:

- ▶ Gaining experience that will build their skills.
- ▶ Being given opportunities they would otherwise not have encountered.
- ▶ Becoming more employable as a result.

If you are considering offering internships, you need to:

- ▶ Ensure you have interesting work available for potential interns to take on.
- ▶ Have the patience to train interns who typically have had little work experience.
- ▶ Have a clear induction program and structured work processes so they aren't simply picking up the laundry or doing ad hoc tasks.
- ▶ Give (in the form of opportunities, training and mentoring) as much as you take (free labour).

The reality is that if you offer interns a great opportunity to learn and grow, your internships will be sought.