

Think Ahead

ACCA

Hiring an intern

ACCA's best practice
guide for employers

Introduction

The accountancy profession plays a crucial role in business, the economy and wider society. Professional accountants are on the front-line of ensuring business practices are fair, transparent and sustainable. They manage and monitor the financial health of a business for the benefit of its owners/ shareholders, its employees, its customers and anyone else with a direct or indirect stake in its success or failure.

Today the accountancy profession is truly global. It is also heavily driven by innovation. As the profession develops it is vital that it can continue to attract the best talent. To do this it must be able to open doors to draw talent from a large and diverse pool. This very much fits with the ethos of ACCA. As a professional body we were formed with the primary aim of opening up access to the accountancy profession by removing barriers and ensuring entry to all who can meet the necessary requirements. This ethos still rings true today and internships play an extremely important role in opening up the profession as a career path and attracting new talent to the industry.

To ensure internships work for both employers and interns it is important that there's a common understanding of what to expect, the benefits and outputs. This guide has been developed to provide guidance and support for those considering taking on an intern for the first time; equally it will help those who already employ interns to get the most out of their programme.

This best practice guide was developed in association with ACCA students and employers, each group were surveyed to examine both the employer and student perspective on selected issues relating to the internship model. The guide also

draws on best practice produced by Intern Aware. The findings referred to in this guide are based on 229 completed student responses and 53 completed employer responses.

ACCA would like to acknowledge the input from employers and students as well as employers who contributed best practice content and advice for the guide. We also acknowledge the contribution and dedication of the researchers Dr Breda Kenny and Laura O'Callaghan at the Hincks Centre for Entrepreneurship Excellence at Cork Institute of Technology.

THE BENEFITS OF INTERNSHIPS FOR EMPLOYERS

Businesses offering internship programmes stand to benefit in a variety of ways. One of the more significant advantages is the opportunity to identify and develop future talent for your business. Interns can bring fresh ideas, new thinking and provide additional capacity to your business.

When surveyed employers highlighted the main benefits in taking on an intern as:

- Opening the recruitment pool to a broader range of talent
- Bringing in additional resource which can help boost the wider team/ business
- Introducing fresh ideas and a different way of thinking
- Providing resource for special projects which might not otherwise happen
- Developing relations with local colleges and universities

Internships can provide employers with an opportunity to identify future talent. Many businesses go on to hire people who have previously worked for them as interns as full time staff. Recruiting an individual who has already demonstrated their abilities and

understands the business removes some of the risk and expense of recruiting new staff. Internships are also a good way of forming links with local colleges and universities which can help raise the profile of a business and help it attract future talent. These links can also help to ensure that colleges and universities have a better understanding of type of skills that employers are looking for.

THE BENEFITS FOR INTERNS

An internship provides 'real world' and practical experience of the workplace. It can provide valuable hands-on experience and provide an insight into the accountancy profession. For some, an internship will be a first taste of working life so it can provide an excellent opportunity to get a feel for the workplace and operating in a business environment.

According to the students we surveyed who have completed an internship, findings show that both exposure to an accountancy role and the general workplace experience are seen as the key benefits for interns.

Internships provide an excellent opportunity to bridge the gap between academic and working life. Being able to include an internship to your CV can really set individuals apart from the competition when applying for jobs, particularly in a field as competitive as accountancy.

Our survey showed that students do value the experience an internship provides and 88% would recommend an internship to friends and family.

Internships – a practical guide

Getting started on hiring an intern

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF YOUR ORGANISATION

The first step is to get a clear understanding of how an intern will fit into your business – what will their role be and how can they contribute to your company's goals.

To help you with this you might want to consider the following questions:

- What does your organisation hope to achieve from the internship?
- Is your organisation looking to fill a need on a specific project or in a specific role?
- Will this internship(s) encompass one major project/role, or entail a variety of small projects/roles?
- At the end of the internship what would you expect the intern to have achieved/delivered?
- If your organisation is searching for new part-qualified and qualified accountants, how will you frame your internship to determine and develop accounting talent?

Some practical tips:

- Decide where your intern will be based. If you work across several sites think about the best base for them. Will it be beneficial to you and the intern if they move around teams/office sites while working for you? Do you need to alter your workspace to accommodate an intern? What IT equipment will they need to be able to carry out their role?
- Who will be responsible for supervising/mentoring the intern?
- What projects or activities will the intern(s) work on? Be as specific as possible and be realistic with your expectations on what can be delivered in the time the intern is working for your company/organisation.

- Talk to others in your company/organisation when working up a plan for your intern and ensure you have the relevant agreement from senior managers/HR before seeking to recruit.

WHAT ARE INTERNS LOOKING FOR?

Interns are seeking opportunities that stimulate their interest in the accounting and finance profession and provide real-world experiences. For those who had completed an internship, our survey reports that the experience had the greatest influence in helping them reach an informed decision on pursuing a professional accountancy qualification.

A meaningful, purposeful internship will:

- Provide challenging projects and tasks
- Give interns focused, purposeful roles to keep them motivated
- Give them a broad exposure to the organisation
- Provide supervision and mentoring
- Set clear goals and objectives for the intern to achieve.

WHAT TYPE OF WORK DOES AN INTERN EXPECT?

An essential part of a successful internship is deciding what kinds of work and projects the intern will do. Interns want to be challenged. The top issue highlighted in unsuccessful internships is not having enough work or appropriate level of work to keep the intern interested and engaged.

In terms of day-to-day work successful internships tend to be structured as follows:

- 1 **Project work:** this can be a special analysis or project that will require the intern to use and develop their accountancy skills. This should form the major part of the intern's work.

- 2 **General work:** this will be ad-hoc work that will give the intern a better understanding of day-to-day operations in your organisation and in the workplace more generally. It may involve assisting colleagues with routine tasks which could help give the intern a better understanding of how the company operates.
- 3 **Reactive work:** this might involve helping out with non-planned work which needs an urgent response. Dealing with urgent issues is an important part of working life so it can be valuable experience.

Technical tasks for interns

Having surveyed a sample of organisations who take on accounting interns Figure 1 overleaf sets out the types of tasks assigned during the internship.

Bank reconciliations, accounts preparation, data entry and general administrative/office duties are the most common routine tasks.

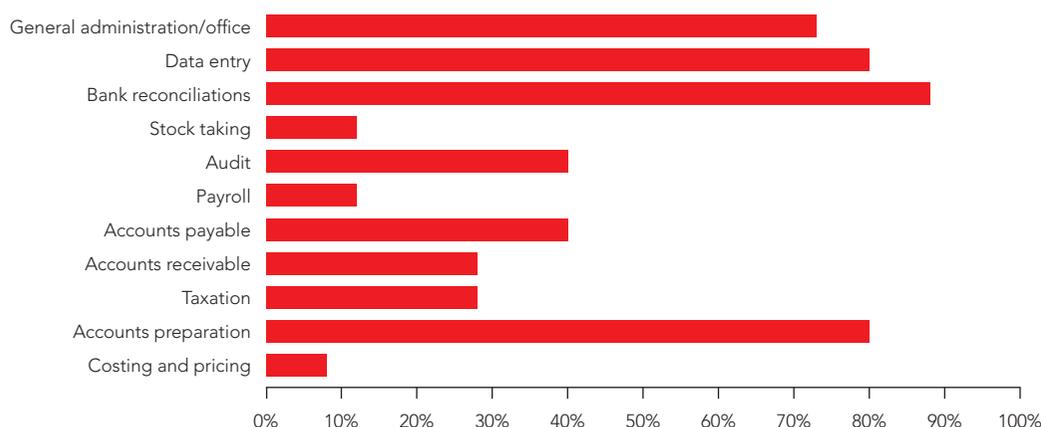
For project based work the following tasks are examples of more in-depth technical assignments:

- Ad hoc accounting projects, this could be a discreet project to meet business needs, or a sub-project which feeds into a larger project.
- Business analysis
- Preparation of tenders
- Gathering market data and running analyses and reporting on findings
- Hedge Fund accounting, including preparation of Net Asset Values for clients.

Internships – a practical guide

FIGURE 1:
TASKS ASSIGNED TO INTERNS

What tasks are the interns normally responsible for?



CHOOSING THE RIGHT LENGTH AND TYPE OF INTERNSHIPS

Internships should fit the needs of the organisation or department and provide the intern with meaningful professional experience. The length of an internship will vary depending on how long you are able to accommodate an intern.

Our survey revealed that there are three main types of internship (each of which dictate the duration of the internship):

- **Project-related internships:** Project-related internships may be brought on to lead or assist with specific short-term projects. When designing a project-related internship, the timeframe, as well as objectives, must be clearly defined. There should be a set end-date, with defined outputs that must be delivered.
- **Summer interns:** Summer internships often last three months or less and are designed to fit with student holidays. Summer interns can provide cover for full-time staff during the summer holiday period and are

therefore often an attractive option for employers. If you are considering taking on a short-term internship it is important that you set tasks and objectives that are achievable in the time the intern is working for you.

- **Multi-year or semester interns:** Multi-year or semester-length internships mean that an intern may work for you for specific periods, during holidays or for specific times of the year. Such arrangements will require flexibility in terms of accommodating an intern and task-setting over a longer and non-continuous period. The advantages, however, are that these longer-term internships provide ample time for the intern and the business to learn from one another, accomplish goals, and create projects.

Internships can run from anything from two weeks to 12 months. For accountancy apprenticeships our survey found that most internships ran for a period of six months, usually between January and June.

SHOULD AN INTERNSHIP BE PAID?

Internships are a cost-effective strategy for hiring young, educated talent.

There is no legal requirement to pay an intern wages, but remuneration is highly recommended. An internship should be as close to a real life work experience as possible and, of course, being paid is a core part of this. A paid internship is more likely to ensure that your organisation is able to attract a high calibre and engaged intern. It will also ensure that your programme is inclusive as it will not deter those who are less able to cover the costs associated with working, such as travel, food etc.

All but one of the employers in our survey paid their accountancy interns. The vast majority paid at least the minimum wage.

Other forms of benefits

You may wish to consider offering benefits in addition to pay to act as an incentive for attracting talented interns.

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Examples of such benefits include:

- Contributions towards study and exam costs
- Study and/or exam leave
- Paid or unpaid holiday entitlement (depending on the length of the internships)

RECRUITING AND HIRING YOUR INTERN

Internships should be advertised openly and transparently to ensure you attract a broad pool of applicants.

As with any recruitment process you should be clear on the type of person you want to recruit and the type of work you want them to do. This will help you attract the right people to the role.

Key tips for advertising an internship:

- Advertising paid internships will likely increase interest in the position
- What aptitudes, academic background and experience do you want in an intern?
- Be clear on the purpose, location and role of the internship (this can form the basis of a job description for the role)
- If you are seeking specific technical skills be clear on what you want
- You might wish to speak to local colleges and universities as they may be able to help identify prospective candidates
- Try to keep the ad interesting. Be clear and avoid any unnecessary jargon
- Provide a little information about your organisation, including its goals and purpose
- Be clear on how to apply and set a deadline for applications
- Provide contact information for any questions

Reviewing applications and interviewing candidates

How do you choose who to interview? Generally, this process will most likely

follow your organisation's guidelines for hiring employees.

When evaluating CVs and applications, students should be evaluated on:

Skills and qualifications

- Relevant coursework or class projects that relate to the internship
- Other internships and/or work experiences
- Relevant extracurricular activities
- Leadership positions
- Honours and achievements

Also consider:

- Numerical skills (to a standard required for the role)
- Writing skills (spelling and grammar)
- Submission of a cover letter (shows an interest in the internship)
- Specific talents indicated in the application/CV as well as observed in the interview process (such as being a self-starter, creative, positive, an achiever, adaptable, etc.)

Keep in mind that your candidates may not have all of the desired qualifications/skills you seek since they may still be studying and have little or no work experience. So you should focus on selecting candidates who have the right talents and attitude for the job and who demonstrate the most potential.

Once you've short listed applications you can move on to the interview stage. Interview interviews will help you evaluate if a person is a good fit for your business. For some candidates this may be their first interview so you should provide an overview of the format of the interview in advance.

Some tips for interview questions for an internship include:

- Why did you apply for this internship?
- Why did you choose your specialisation?

- What attracts you to a career in accountancy?
- What is your experience with (software, programmes, etc.)?
- What relevant personal experience relates to the internship?
- What do you hope to gain from this internship?
- When are you available to start the internship?
- When do you hope to graduate?

Create an evaluation form to rate the candidates and make additional comments. By the end of the interview process, hopefully you have found a top candidate and now you can make an offer!

Now that you've found the right intern, let them know! Send them an offer letter or email. An offer letter should include:

- Dates/duration of the internship
- Specific pay
- Deadline for acceptance
- A contract for the internship setting out the main terms

Wait for a formal acceptance from the chosen candidate before informing others that they have been unsuccessful.

The first few days

It is very important that interns are warmly welcomed and introduced throughout your organisation, just as you would welcome any new full-time employee. Not only are interns new to your organisation, in many cases, they are new to the professional world of work.

The sooner your intern understands your organisation and how it operates, the sooner they can begin to contribute to your organisation. You can help this process by providing the following kinds of information about your site/organisation:

- What's the history of your organisation?

Internships – a practical guide

- Who are your customers/stakeholders?
- What are the organisation's current objectives?
- How may the intern contribute to those objectives?
- How should they process requests?
- How do the email and telephone systems work?
- What health and safety process do they need to know about?
- Are there security or confidentiality issues of which the intern should be aware?
- Introduce them to your organisation's intranet.

MAKING THE MOST OF THE INTERNSHIP

As with most things, what you get out of something is relative to what you put into it. This is certainly the case for internships. An intern should be supported and given regular feedback and coaching, access to a mentor (whether this is their supervisor or someone else within your organisation) and training on technical areas. This will

provide the support that your intern will need to succeed in their role and make a valuable contribution to your business.

One of the biggest causes of unsuccessful internships is inadequate supervision or guidance and/or insufficient workloads. The best way to avoid such issues is to encourage open dialogue with your intern from the outset so you can address any potential concerns early on.

TOP TIP – PROVIDE YOUR INTERN WITH A MENTOR

A mentor can enhance the experience of an internship for both employer and intern. Mentors must have the time necessary to mentor a student. Ideally they should be an accountant so they can share their own experience and journey. Mentors should work in the same department as the intern so they have a good understanding of the work the intern is involved with.

Mentors serve as:

Teachers

- Help the intern learn about the business
- Explain projects and processes

Supporters

- Help make the transition to the workplace as easy as possible
- Answer questions or concerns
- Act as a positive role model

Evaluators

- Provide constructive feedback to the intern on a regular basis.

WORKING WITH STUDENTS

For many who are in higher education an internship can provide valuable hands-on work experience. The internship position should enhance their learning experience through exposure to the working world. At the same time, understand that for most interns this is a new experience and they may need support in balancing their academic work and the internship. While on placement, students usually need to complete assessment activities and learning logs to meet their course requirements. It is important for you to be aware of these requirements.

In summary, take time to understand your intern's obligations outside of the internship, and work together to ensure both business needs and academic needs can be met in tandem.

EVALUATING YOUR INTERN

An internship can only be a true learning experience if constructive feedback is provided. An effective evaluation will focus on the intern's initial learning objectives identified at the start of the internship. Their manager/supervisor/mentor should take time to evaluate both the intern's positive accomplishments and areas for improvement.

EVALUATION THROUGHOUT THE INTERNSHIP

Interns will look to their mentors and/or supervisors to help them transition from the classroom to the workplace. It is recommended that mentors regularly meet with interns to receive and provide feedback concerning their performance. During these meetings the intern may:

“A major benefit of our internship programme relates to brand enhancement. Word of mouth is a great means of advertising. When interns complete their internship and return to college, they act as campus ambassadors talking to other students about their internship programme and what the company was like. This is a really effective way for us to spread our company name and build the HedgeServ graduate brand.”

MARISA FAY – TRAINING MANAGER, HEDGESERV

- Report on a project's/role status
- Ask questions
- Learn how their work is contributing to the organisation
- Participate in evaluating their strengths
- Discuss areas needing growth and development
- Get insight about what work lies ahead.

FINAL EVALUATION

As the internship draws to a close, we recommend that the intern undergo a final evaluation (exit interview/survey) to provide insight and perceptions about the internship programme. Final evaluations are helpful when determining the intern's success within the company for future internships or future employment possibilities. These evaluations should be face-to-face and followed up with a written evaluation.

WHAT IF AN INTERNSHIP IS NOT WORKING OUT?

What can you do if students are dissatisfied with the experience or aren't meeting expectations?

There are various reasons an intern may not be successful or fully engaged in the internship position. The most important advice here is to be open and honest with the intern. Be clear on your expectations (which will align to the initial advertisement and job description). Make sure the intern feels as though they can openly discuss any issues or concerns with you. In most instances open dialogue can be enough to resolve any issues around expectations and/or performance.

If the intern is not responsive to the situation, or doesn't improve within the addressed areas, allow the intern the opportunity to leave on their own terms, but be clear on your reasons and follow this up in writing, either by email or letter.

TRANSITIONING AN INTERN TO A FULL-TIME EMPLOYEE

Internship programmes can help employers identify future talent and

“To get the best out of your intern programme, employers need to see interns as future long term employees rather than individuals who will only be at the firm for a short period of time. In doing so, we try not only to help interns understand what a day to day role is like in audit, tax or advisory, but rather what a career in those areas is about and how it is achieved.

One of the biggest benefits for us relates to recruitment. The internship programme is a time for both employer and intern to get to know each other and at the end of the term we convert many of those interns into trainees who will join us following successful completion of their college or university studies. The intern has the benefit of going back to their studies knowing that a trainee position awaits them and we get a graduate who can hit the ground running when they join.”

FERGUS CONDON – PARTNER, FINANCIAL ACCOUNTING AND ADVISORY SERVICES
GRANT THORNTON

should provide a positive experience for both the intern and the employer. Employers should consider and evaluate each intern as a potential future full-time employee.

Recommendations for evaluating interns and making an offer of employment

- Discuss potential opportunities with your intern and establish whether they are interested in joining your organisation as a full-time employee.
- Use evaluations from managers and/or mentors to establish the business case for hiring the intern
- If feasible, make offers before the end of the internship or before their final semester (if they are still studying)
- Be clear about what any future role within the organisation might involve, will it be a continuation of current work, or will it mean taking on different/additional areas of responsibility?

EVALUATING YOUR INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME

Creating and building an internship programme is just the beginning. Evaluating your internship programme

on a regular basis will help you connect more effectively with future interns and provide you with the best opportunities for discovering future professional accountants for your business. Evaluation and feedback will encourage improvements with your internship programme.

Tips for evaluating your internship:

- Seek feedback from interns on completion of the programme
- Seek feedback from mentors and/or supervisors on how successful the internship was in terms of meeting business needs
- If possible discuss your internship programme with local colleges and universities to see if you are providing the type of work experience desired by students.

FURTHER READING

<http://www.internshipsireland.com>

<http://www.internaware.org>

About ACCA

ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) is the global body for professional accountants. It offers business-relevant, first-choice qualifications to people of application, ability and ambition around the world who seek a rewarding career in accountancy, finance and management.

ACCA supports its **178,000** members and **455,000** students in **181** countries, helping them to develop successful careers in accounting and business, with the skills required by employers. Over **20,000** members and students are located in Ireland. ACCA works through a network of **95** offices and centres and more than **7,110** Approved Employers worldwide, who provide high standards of employee learning and development. Through its public interest remit, ACCA promotes appropriate regulation of accounting and conducts relevant research to ensure accountancy continues to grow in reputation and influence.

Founded in 1904, ACCA has consistently held unique core values: opportunity, diversity, innovation, integrity and accountability. It believes that accountants bring value to economies in all stages of development and seek to develop capacity in the profession and encourage the adoption of global standards. ACCA's core values are aligned to the needs of employers in all sectors and it ensures that through its range of qualifications, it prepares accountants for business. ACCA seeks to open up the profession to people of all backgrounds and remove artificial barriers, innovating its qualifications and delivery to meet the diverse needs of trainee professionals and their employers.

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