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Interns - they punch above their weight

More companies are finally realising that interns are an important source of fresh ideas and renewal

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ONCE seen as a convenient and cost-efficient way to overcome employment shortages or address a company's seasonal labour needs, interns are now considered to be an important source of fresh ideas and renewal for companies, according to industry watchers.

As a growing number of companies begin to understand these benefits, they become more receptive to opening their doors to interns - most of whom are undergraduates - and this is reflected in the dramatic increase in internships available over the past few years.

According to the National University of Singapore (NUS) Career Centre, there was a 40 per cent spike in the number of internship opportunities publicised through its career portal this year from 2009.

NUS also tied up with the Singapore Business Federation (SBF) early last year to jointly launch a global internship and mentorship programme - to help undergraduates enhance their business exposure in the global environment.

'Companies view internships as a way to assess potential talent hires and are willing to invest in the resources to train and provide meaningful projects and internship scopes for our students,' says Corrine Ong, director of the NUS Career Centre.

However, during the economic downturn last year, statistics showed that some companies employed interns with the intention of cutting costs and trimming their permanent workforce.

Recruitment agency GMP Group's assistant director of corporate services Josh Goh says that while some companies have comprehensive internship programmes in place, others engage interns 'to clear a backlog of work as they are inexpensive hires'.

However, industry observers believe that this trend is tapering as companies discover the importance of engaging interns to stay ahead of the curve - as they bring fresh ideas and useful outsider perspective to the table.

Dhirendra Shantilal, senior vice-president of Asia-Pacific at Kelly Services, says the younger generation now serves as a significant 'driving force for change' and 'would help organisations grow in the new economy'.

Kelly Services, an employment consulting firm, has a career centre at Temasek Polytechnic which works closely with tertiary institutions to help place students in its internal positions, as well as with other companies.

'Businesses welcome interns as they often provide new ideas that might have slipped through the grasp of full-time employees,' Mr Shantilal adds.

For other companies, providing rigorous internships programmes gives impetus for company growth, especially when vying with competitors for top talent. As such, some companies have taken to 'branding' - which entails building a compelling employer brand in the minds of their potential hires, says Peter Haglund, country manager of Manpower Staffing Services in Singapore.

'As these young talents will eventually step into the working society, it is vital to create brand awareness when they are young so that the brand name will be at the top of their minds when they start their careers,' says Mr Haglund.

He adds that companies should provide a structured internship programme and pleasant experience for their interns, 'so that they will remember the company on a positive side'.

For interns, the benefits from a well-structured internship are clear - they not only gain exposure to the working environment, but they are also given the opportunity to ascertain various career options.

Mr Shantilal says that while some reaffirm their decision to pursue a particular career path after the internship, 'some others would reassess their career choices after realising that the industry in which they interned in was not in line with their expectations'.

Besides providing a useful testing ground for students, internships can also serve as a channel towards attaining permanent recruitment at the company.

Tay Kok Choon, head of strategic sales development at JobStreet.com in Singapore, says that about 30 per cent of interns receive permanent job offers from the same company that they had pursued in their internship programme, according to survey results.

'Such a recruitment is normally more successful because both parties are given sufficient time to ascertain each other's strengths and weaknesses,' Mr Tay adds.

As such, interns are increasingly becoming an integral part of a company's operations, as both parties start to understand that a win-win situation is possible when interns are effectively engaged.

Mr Haglund says that for interns to really benefit from internship, an investment in time and effort is necessary.

Ideally, interns should have a mentor to guide them along and 'in this way, interns will be able to learn better and hence to fulfil the goals of the internship', says Mr Haglund.