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Are You Ready to Cultivate Interns?

Internships are a popular way to attract new hires into your firm and integrate young professionals into the staff your firm will want and need in the future.

Whether your firm will soon have interns joining the firm for the summer months, or if you want to get a jump on planning for fall internships, the ideas here, which AOMAR has gleaned from firms that have succeeded with internships programs, will be helpful.

Making the connection. While the partners may be supportive of internship programs, there can be a gap between this feeling and the understanding of how to deal with interns so the interns can make a contribution, learn about the firm, and “bond” with staff and partners.

Some of the disconnect, admittedly, may be related to generation gap issues. It’s true that the Generation Y interns who will soon be coming through your doors tend to think and act very differently from newcomers from a generation or two ago.

Despite the challenges, it is essential that partners and staff work closely with interns, so that interns can become familiar with the firm—and vice versa. This will lead to smarter hiring decisions and building up your firm’s base of staff talent.

Who’s using interns? CPA firms of all sizes are using interns now. The latest research conducted by

AOMAR for the *CPA Firm Statistical Analysis Reference Handbook 2008* (for more information, visit www.ioma.com/cpa) found that 63.8 percent of respondents are using internships as a hiring tactic at their firms. Though the largest firms are more likely to use interns (see the accompanying table), interns are working at even the smallest CPA firms.

Not only are internships a way to attract staff and try them before “buying,” but they are also a valuable way to provide assistance to your staff CPAs who may well be struggling under heavy workloads. Interns are also a part of firms’ efforts to expand relationships with colleges and universities, and hiring them will build the alumni network too.

Making it work for everyone. The following suggestions for making an internship program successful can also help your firm to “punch up” feedback, staff management, and overall satisfaction initiatives that are so popular right now for your retention efforts with existing CPA and administration staff.

1. Choose wisely. There is certainly competition for interns, but you want to make sure that you offer internships to students who are likely to be a good fit with your firm’s culture.

In addition, potential hires who show a real interest in the firm are usually more motivated than others. Eagerness to learn is definitely an attractive trait in an intern. Those who understand

the job requirements and are enthusiastic about it will have a better chance to contribute.

2. Start all interns with immediate hands-on work and responsibility. The willingness to learn should be high for all prospects, so this is the time to assign responsibilities and reward successes.

3. Communicate clear expectations of results for all delegated tasks. The most successful interns will inevitably be results-oriented rather than task-oriented. Remember too that measuring success against established goals raises interns' professional self-esteem. This is also true for regular staff.

4. Recognize, reinforce, and reward. And do so regularly so that interns understand that the firm and the partners value their contributions.

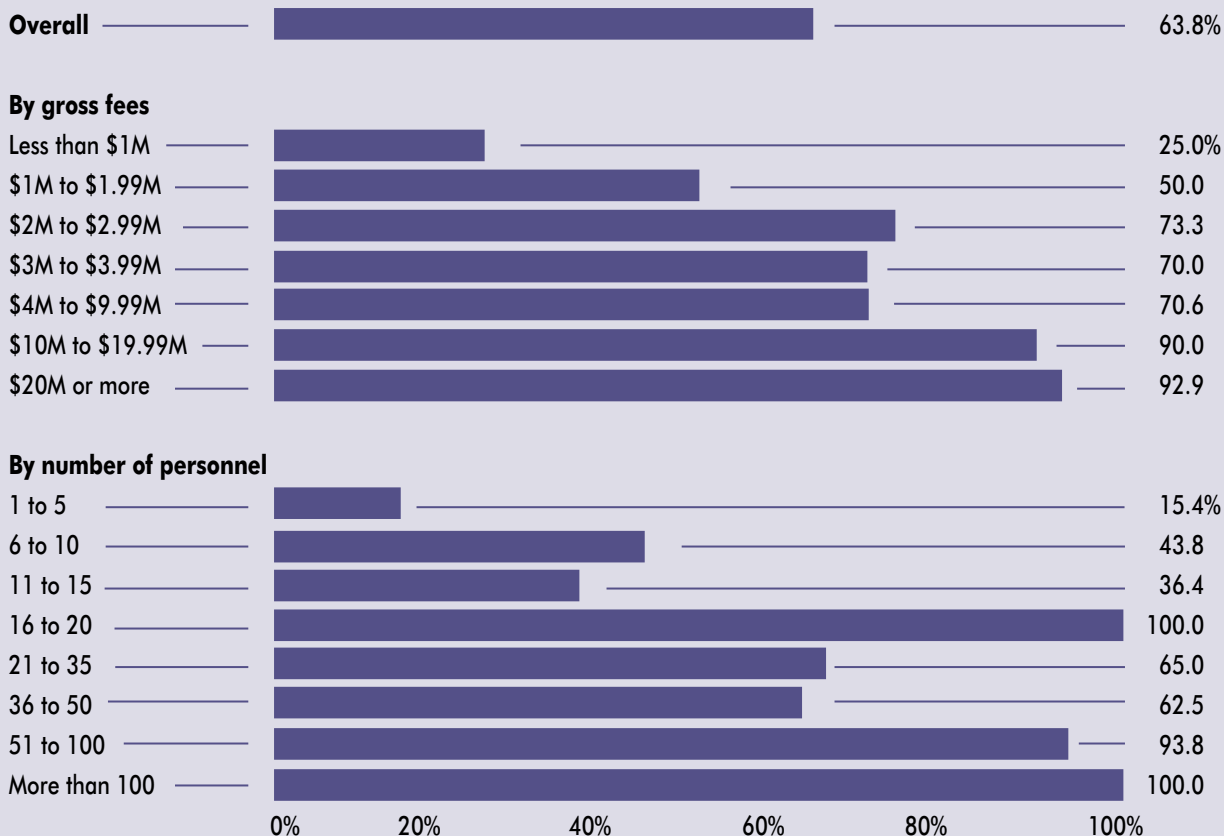
5. Manage according to clear values. Partners and others who supervise interns must be

seen as paragons of workplace values, particularly fairness. When you ask an intern to go the extra mile, explain why the work is important. This allows the intern to learn more about the realities of the workplace, as well as the importance of the work they are doing to help service clients.

6. Use management by objective whenever possible. Identify tasks and deadlines when dealing with interns and allow them to have some say on priorities. In most instances, people don't abandon the task, but supervisors must establish thorough reporting procedures to encourage some oversight.

7. Save time and communicate confidence by managing by exception. In some instances, work can be managed with the approach: "Unless I hear otherwise, I'll assume that you're on schedule and not in need of assistance." Again, it's all about

CPA Firms Using Internships as a Hiring Tactic, Overall, by Gross Fees, & by Number of Personnel



(Source: CPA Firm Statistical Analysis Reference Handbook 2008)

building self-esteem and instilling the notion that trust is inherent in the relationship.

8. Continually analyze the work being done and who does it. *Remember:* If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well. Interns are there to make a contribution, and to learn.

9. Help interns build a stronger sense of self. Studies show that this is best accomplished by offering challenges, freedom, control, and respect.

10. Stress a "zero-defects" approach to work. Communicate to your interns a desire to achieve perfection, and stress that their work will be compared to that performed by the firm's best staff, not the average ones.

11. Establish a small ad hoc intern committee to address any problems. The goal is to create the perception of empowerment.

12. Allow and reinforce brainstorming on the part of your interns to help them develop problem-solving skills.

13. Develop a winning edge concept. Remind interns that their goals should be similar to those

espoused by the firm. They should aim to be the best in a geographical region or in service quality, for instance.

14. Emphasize training and education. Part of this involves encouraging the start of mentoring relationships. Mentors don't have to be partners and staff CPAs—ask administration staff and para-professionals such as bookkeepers to lend a hand too. Encourage attendance at seminars offered by your state CPA society.

15. Encourage innovation. A consistent goal should be how to do more with fewer resources. All staff—including interns—would do well to master this skill.

16. Voice appreciation. Many partners believe "thank you" to be unnecessary when dealing with staff. They are wrong, and interns as well as other staff will appreciate hearing it.

17. Practice the three C's: consideration, caring, and courtesy. All relate directly to the big C: Culture. Communicate these behaviors to all staff, and they'll eventually carry them back to clients and to others in the firm. □

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