



Maximizing the Value of Internships: Advice From Employers

Contents

Executive Summary	4
The Internship Value Chain	6
Enabling Conditions	9
Core Activities	14
Business Value	19
Taking Action	23
Conclusion	27
<i>Employer Spotlight: BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee</i>	28
<i>Employer Spotlight: Daycos</i>	32
<i>Employer Spotlight: Plastic Recycling, Inc.</i>	36
<i>Employer Spotlight: Endress+Hauser</i>	40
Appendix A – Study Information	44
Appendix B – Detailed Metrics	46

Maximizing the Value of Internships: Advice From Employers

Employers have long opened their doors to learners through internships and co-op experiences. The benefits of internship programs for learners are well-documented, and employers often recognize the value of internships as a source of talent. At the same time, much of the existing evidence focuses on individual outcomes or isolated metrics, offering limited guidance on how employers can intentionally design, sustain, and measure internships programs as strategic business investments.

To better understand how internships create value for employers, and how that value can be strengthened and sustained, Strada Education Foundation and UpSkill America at the Aspen Institute conducted interviews with 40 employers representing a range of sizes, industries, and geographies. These interviews explored how employers:

- Leverage internships to address persistent business problems
- Define and measure program effectiveness relative to investments
- Create the organizational conditions necessary for long-term success and sustainability

This report draws on those insights, to provide actionable guidance for talent acquisition, learning and development, human resources, and workforce strategy leaders. It is designed for employers who already see internships as valuable, but who are seeking clearer frameworks, stronger alignment to business priorities, and more consistent ways to articulate and measure program value, even during volatile economic conditions.

Taken together, the insights in this report point to a consistent pattern: when internships are intentionally designed, well-supported, and aligned to business priorities, they can function less as short-term programs and more as systems for generating sustained organizational value.

Executive Summary

This guide is designed for leaders in talent acquisition, learning and development, workforce strategy, and human resources roles, and particularly for program leaders who are responsible for developing and launching internship programs and positioning those programs best for long-term value. Based on interviews with 40 employers representing a variety of industries, organization sizes, geographies, and sectors, we aim to help organizations maximize the impact of their internship programs, creating meaningful business value while bolstering internal support for sustained and expanded internship opportunities.

This guide also has insights for:

- **Senior management and hiring managers**, who set priorities, allocate resources, and have direct impact on internship program success.
- **Business executives**, including chief human resources officers and CEOs who are considering how investments in the talent pipeline can bring value to their organizations, especially in light of disruptions due to artificial intelligence.
- **Colleges and universities**, as they connect their students to work-based learning opportunities.
- **Intermediaries**, as they help employers design and deliver programs that can drive benefits for both learners and businesses.

In summer 2025, [UpSkill America](#) and [Strada Education Foundation](#) conducted structured interviews with 40 internship program leaders, with whom we connected through existing networks and referrals. For more information about the companies we interviewed, as well as the protocol used for the interviews, visit Appendix A. We designed these interviews to learn about the programs themselves, how they operated, and where business leaders looked for program impact

within their organizations. The recommendations presented here are primarily derived from insights gained through those interviews and complemented by existing research. The insights we gained through these interviews align with results from a recent Strada Employer Survey, which found that 64 percent of employers said work-based learning, which includes internships, was “very valuable.”¹

1. Effective internship programs have four key characteristics.

- They have clear learning and performance outcomes.
- They provide consistent supervision and structured evaluation for interns.
- They are operated under clear lines of responsibility and governance.
- They work across organizations, with opportunities for interns and their contributions to see and be seen by leaders.

2. Internships are strategic investments that can solve business problems.

- Employers who were most enthusiastic about their program's effectiveness saw internships as contributing to the bottom line and solving business problems.

3. Measuring program impacts can help uncover true business value.

- Employers who are running effective programs knew how internships were driving metrics they cared about such as retention, promotion, and time to productivity.

4. Beyond program structure, key conditions for success emerged.

- Almost every employer we interviewed named executive sponsorship and advocacy and integration of internships across their organizations as keys to effective programming. In some cases, working closely with intermediary and public partners, including states and local connectors, was vital to maximizing outcomes.



Internships and the impact of AI

None of the employers we spoke with (as of summer 2025) were planning to modify the size of their internship programs in the short term due to AI-driven shifts. Based on recent feedback, however, some are integrating AI into their interns' learning plans. They are also paying close attention to where AI most impacts their organizations, seeing more disruption in human resources and back-office functions than on production lines, for example.

While the impacts of AI on entry-level jobs more broadly are yet to be determined, we can advance with the understanding that general skills (e.g., critical thinking, communication, etc.) and attitudes, which employers often believe are [best developed through work experience](#), may have [outsized importance](#) in an AI-powered economy, underscoring the need for expanded high-quality internship experiences.

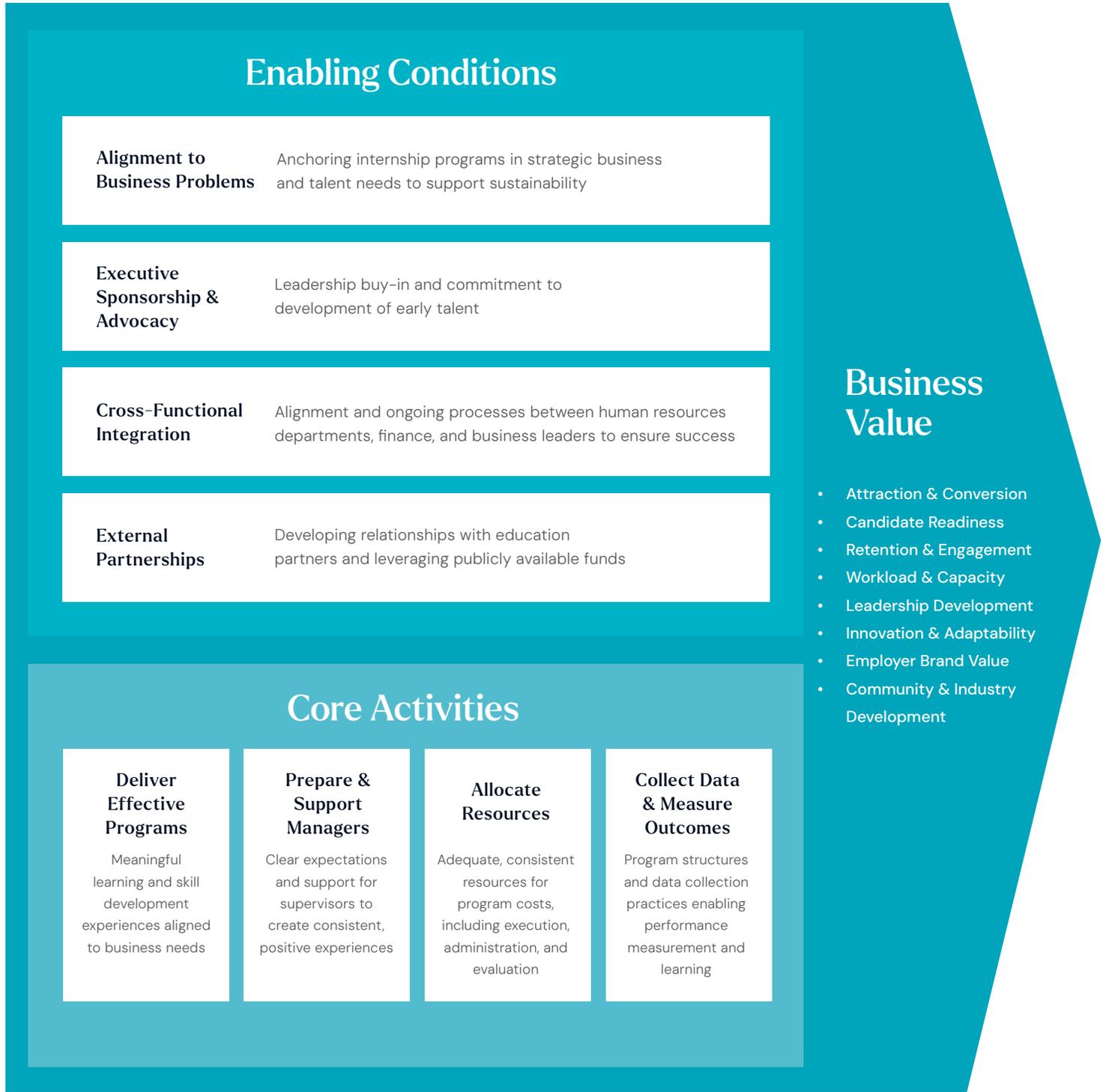


The Internship Value Chain: A Framework for Helping Companies Maximize Program Value

Conceptualized in 1985 by economist Michael Porter², value chains can help business leaders understand how activities and conditions within their organizations can create value. Based on insights from our interviews, we created a variation of a value chain to help employers organize and visualize all of the conditions and activities organizations can influence to move an internship program from idea to reality, understanding where value is added at each point. The value chain includes:

- **Enabling Conditions** that reflect the factors and environments that maximize program effectiveness and impact.
- **Core Activities** that describe processes that create direct value for the business.
- **Business Values**, which are key measures that translate into meaningful benefits to the organization.

Internship Value Chain





The Internship Value Chain

In this report, we use this framework to organize and present themes we heard from employers. The following sections go into detail on common design principles and practices associated with effective internship programs within each part of the framework:

- **Enabling Conditions**
- **Core Activities**
- **Business Values**

Within each section, we identify the primary “owner” or responsible party within the business, recognizing that not every organization will work in precisely the same way. We also include direct insights and quotes from employers, along with recommendations for stakeholders including intermediary organizations, postsecondary institutions, and business executives to support each component of the Internship Value Chain.

“

We have a somewhat transient workforce where it can be challenging to retain people, so the fact that we’re retaining as many entry-level people for as long as we are is a very positive indicator. That means the program is getting people into the right teams where there is a good match.

- NATIONAL CONSULTING ORGANIZATION





Enabling Conditions

Four enabling conditions emerged from our interviews for business leaders looking to position internship programs for success.

- Alignment to Business Problems
- Executive Sponsorship and Advocacy
- Cross-Functional Integration
- External Partnerships

Alignment to Business Problems

Primary Owners:

Senior/Hiring Managers and Program Leaders

Misalignment of business needs to program design and outcomes is often cited as a common cause of program failure. Therefore, it is important for the business problems the program is addressing to be explicitly named up front to ensure alignment and revisited over time as problems are solved and business needs change.

Across industries, geographies, and organization size, employers cite these common problems they are looking to address through internship programs. These problems are often precursors to broader issues that are top of mind for leaders, such as increasing revenue, improving customer satisfaction, and driving product innovation.

- **Insufficient talent pipeline**

Employers are consistently concerned about filling critical roles in the short and long term. They use internships to expose future talent, especially populations that are underrepresented, to their industries, organizations, and operations long before a formal job offer is on the table.

- **Poorly prepared workforce**

Employers struggle with the amount of time and effort it takes to bring new hires, especially early-career talent, to proficiency. Employers we spoke with shared that interns consistently enter their companies' workforces more prepared, more productive, and more aware of the company's tempo and demands.

- **Low retention**

A consistent challenge for many employers is low retention of employees, especially in early-career and entry-level roles. Employers view internships as an "extended interview," enabling the intern to get a deep understanding of the company and the work, and giving the employer much more information to drive their hiring decisions. The result is a workforce that stays with the company at higher levels than non-intern hires.

“

The business is our customer. If talent comes off the line and the skill set and experiences aren't meeting business needs, that's wasted time, money, resources, and energy.

- LARGE INSURANCE COMPANY

- **Limited opportunities for leadership development**

Moving from an individual contributor to management role can be a big leap, especially in environments with limited opportunities for people to gain hands-on management experience. Internships can be a proving ground for talent for both learners and emerging leaders. Many employers use these programs to develop individual contributors into people managers, pairing staff with interns and giving them opportunities to coach, provide feedback, and strengthen their supervisory skills.

Insights for Intermediaries and Education Partners

Build fluency in recognizing and understanding business problems and frame your efforts in solving those problems. Prepare representatives who are interacting with business leaders with specific information about how programs will address business problems.

Executive Sponsorship and Advocacy

Primary Owners: *Executives and Program Leaders*

Executives set the tone, expectations, and priorities for organizations. Their support, and their view of internships as a critical lever for talent and competitiveness, are key ingredients for thriving programs. Executive sponsorship — program approval, protection, and resourcing — that is active, visible, and consistent, anchors an internship program within organizational strategy. Advocacy goes a step beyond. Executives who are advocates will elevate the visibility of programs, shape their agendas, set clear expectations, and shape the narrative of the program within and outside of the organization. Sponsorship keeps a program alive; advocacy makes it matter within the organization.

Without sponsorship and advocacy, even well-designed programs can stall when conditions change. Based on our interviews, executive sponsors play a range of important roles in strengthening internship programs within their companies:

- **Strategic vision**
Executive sponsors help connect internships to long-term talent and growth goals. They ensure the program isn't reactive to immediate hiring gaps but instead supports the company's future workforce needs, positioning internships as a part of succession planning, leadership development, and organizational resilience.
- **Advocacy and visibility**
Sponsorship involves more than approval. It requires advocacy. Effective sponsors ensure internships are represented in boardroom discussions, budget cycles, and strategic planning. They show up to intern showcases, mention the program in staff communications, and use metrics to demonstrate its impact. When executives take visible ownership, it raises the program's credibility, motivating managers and employees to engage meaningfully.

“

We're intentionally preparing folks to be leaders in the company.

- INSURANCE COMPANY

- **Resource allocation and accountability**
Sponsorship ensures funding stability and alignment. Executive sponsors often champion dedicated staffing or budget lines, protecting programs from the volatility of annual budget cycles. They also set expectations for data collection and performance review, demanding evidence that investments produce returns.
- **Model leadership**
When senior leaders mentor interns, attend presentations, or speak at orientation events, they model behaviors that cascade through the company. Their involvement humanizes leadership and demonstrates that growth and learning are part of the corporate culture.

Insights for Program Leaders

While the work of executive sponsorship and advocacy belongs to the executive, the case-making will likely fall to program leaders, who are responsible for keeping executives informed and engaged, and for tracking outcomes that will keep the program positioned as an investment worth advocating for. Consider how your executive wants to be engaged, the level of data and information the executive needs, and the ways that your program leadership can create opportunities for the visibility and impact your executive may seek. Consider building executive advocacy as a core job task and allocate time and resources to it.

Cross-Functional Integration

Primary Owners:

Program Leaders and Senior/Hiring Managers

Internship programs work best when they are embedded across the organization, ensuring that recruitment, onboarding, training, and operational teams are all working toward the same goals. This organization-wide integration appears to help internship programs shift from a project into a talent development system, becoming part of how the company does business.

In large organizations, silos are a common threat. Separation across departments, and even within departments such as human resources which centers such as talent acquisition, talent management, and learning and development can operate as individual units, can create challenges to coordination and alignment. Smaller companies may have more flexibility, but only if roles are clearly defined and authority is shared.

Cross-functional integration also creates resilience: when one department is under strain, the other integrated departments can help to maintain program quality. This capacity is especially critical for organizations with limited dedicated staff supporting internship initiatives.

Cross-functional integration helps companies to:

- **Drive shared accountability**

Integration ensures each function and department is contributing to a successful outcome. Human resources often manages recruitment and compliance. Interns are hosted across business units and functional teams, with program activities typically aligned to both skill building and business needs. Finance ensures resources are available for staffing and program operations. Communications highlights success stories. The list goes on.

“

The intern should never feel the pain of the different departments. If [coordination] is not happening, they won't convert, and the ones who do convert might not be the ones you want.

- LARGE FINANCIAL SERVICES ORGANIZATION

- **Develop collaborative governance**

In several cases, employers we interviewed reported using a cross-functional internship steering committee to keep all departments informed and engaged, and to create a platform for decision-making. These steering committees helped to align policies, track outcomes, and ensure quality.

Insights for Executives

Recognize that your intervention is necessary when silos persist. Consider how to elevate the profile of internship program leaders within the company, raising visibility for the people and teams responsible for managing these programs. Ask questions about how department leads are engaging with the program, working collaboratively, and making progress against key metrics during check-ins and performance discussions.

External Partnerships

Primary Owners: *Program Leaders (if applicable, working in partnership with other departments, including finance/ payroll, government affairs)*

No employer operates in isolation. Effective internship programs often depend on networks of education institutions, workforce intermediaries, and often, public programs that prepare, connect, and support interns before they ever walk through an employer's door. [Effective partnerships](#) begin with shared goals, mutual accountability, and clear roles. When done right, schools can serve as both pipeline partners and learning collaborators, but without alignment, partnerships can be a burden to sustainable programming. Ninety percent of employers who hire entry-level talent engage with at least one external partner to address their workforce needs³, and 96 percent of those employers find those partnerships helpful⁴, according to a recent Strada Employer Survey.

Public and intermediary organizations such as workforce boards and chambers of commerce can play essential roles in connecting employers to talent and funding. Many states provide resources to employers to offset the costs of internships and support the development and launch of those programs with technical assistance and guidance. These resources can make a big difference in employers' ability to launch programs, and to sustain them, especially for smaller businesses. While internal ownership is always essential, these programs can extend the reach of employers who lack the staff or systems to run programs internally. Following are several examples of intermediary models that support employers to develop and carry out internship programs:

- [EARN Indiana](#), administered by the Indiana Chamber's Institute for Workforce Excellence in partnership with the state's Commission for Higher Education, enables employers supporting internships for eligible students with matching funds through the state.

“

It doesn't do us any good to fight over the same skilled people. Anything that doesn't increase the number of people in our field, the overall number of people we're looking for in specific occupations, isn't helpful.

- REGIONAL INSURANCE COMPANY

- [InternshipsVA](#), administered by Virginia Economic Development Partnership, is funded through the Commonwealth Innovative Internship Fund. The program helps Virginia employers launch high-quality internship experiences with startup support, a talent marketplace for employers to find interns, and matching funding.
- [InternNE](#), supported in partnership with the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, enables employers of all sizes to seek reimbursement for a variety of costs associated with hosting interns, including wages, tuition assistance, housing, transportation, and program administration.

Insights for Intermediaries and Education Partners

Regularly test programs and services against current business conditions, ensuring that programs are well-suited for the times. Make sure that program requirements, especially for publicly funded models, balance the need for accountability with the reality of limited business staff capacity.

EMPLOYER SPOTLIGHT

For insights into one company's journey in developing a high-quality internship program that is creating long-term impacts, [visit our Employer Spotlight on BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee](#).



Core Activities

Employers we interviewed identified four important activities in delivering impact through their internship programs.

- Deliver Effective Programs
- Prepare and Support Managers
- Allocate Resources
- Collect Data and Measure Outcomes

Deliver Effective Programs

Primary Owners:

Program Leaders and Senior/Hiring Managers

We define “effective” programs as those deemed by the organization supporting the program as having positive value, support, and long-term sustainability within their organization. While every employer will design an internship program that works best in their unique context, the core activities driving effective programs are:

- **Define interns’ learning and performance outcomes**
Programs should articulate what interns will accomplish and learn and include clear performance expectations.
- **Provide consistent supervision and evaluation**
Managers and interns should have structured check-ins and reviews and stay connected throughout the internship experience to ensure problems are addressed and the intern stays engaged and productive.
- **Define responsibilities**
Whether a program is centralized or decentralized in leadership and operations, or whether it has a single lead or distributed leadership, are company-specific decisions. However, effective programs should have clear lines of authority that are understood and respected across the organization: individuals who are empowered to make decisions and processes that are well-documented and enforced, supported by cross-functional teams assigned to supporting program success.
- **Create visibility with leadership and operations**
Sustained, effective programs build opportunities for interns to see across the organization, and for leaders to see interns’ contributions.

“

People want a vision laid out for what a summer looks like. The most important thing is having a detailed schedule.

- LARGE ENTERTAINMENT COMPANY

Insights for Education Partners

Assist employers in creating learning outcomes that align well with academic program requirements, ensuring that students get credit toward their credential from their work.

Prepare and Support Managers

Primary Owners: Program Leaders

Managers and supervisors are a critical link between program design and intern success. Employers we interviewed were emphatic about the need for managers and supervisors to be well-prepared and ready for the responsibility of managing an intern, and supported while they're doing so, recognizing that a positive intern experience best supports program goals. Indeed, effective managers can impact key business metrics, including conversion, candidate readiness, and retention. Employers who best supports program goals:

- **Provide training**

Managers, especially emerging people leaders and those without solid experience with younger workers, need tools and guidance for setting expectations, managing performance and personal/attitude issues, providing feedback, and fostering inclusion.

- **Develop recognition and incentives**

The supervisors and managers who support interns are playing a critical role in building the company's talent pipeline. Acknowledging their contribution to key business goals reinforces their engagement and underscores the strategic importance of internships to the company's future.

- **Consider mentors**

Some companies complement managers' and supervisors' responsibilities with mentors who are often outside of an intern's reporting line and can serve as a resource for questions about culture and process, and take a primary role in creating belonging for the intern. Mentors can ensure that interns' needs are met, while reducing some of the demand on supervisors' time and workload.

“

Make it as easy as possible for managers who are supporting roles and under high stress. If they're not committed or able to fulfill expectations, that will completely overshadow the student experience.

- LARGE ENTERTAINMENT COMPANY

Allocate Resources

Primary Owners:

Program Leaders and Senior/Hiring Managers

Achieving business objectives and moving metrics in the right direction requires deliberate investments, including time, money, and leadership. When costs are fully scoped, aligned to strategy, and tied to measurable returns, programs become easier to defend and scale. Employers who view internships as an expense struggle to sustain programs. Those who budget realistically and align resources to measurable business goals view internships as a controllable, high-yield investment.

Under-resourcing programs can have negative consequences on program quality and affect the returns and outcomes the program will produce for the employer.

Based on employer interviews, the following is a list of costs employers incur. When establishing a program budget, however, employers should consider what will be applicable to their priorities.

Costs typically fall into three categories:

	INTERN COSTS	SUPERVISION COSTS	PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION COSTS
DIRECT COSTS	Intern Wages	Supervisor Wages/Incentives	Administration Staff Wages
	Tuition Benefits (where applicable)	Training for Supervisors	Vendors (learning platforms, management systems, etc.)
	Lodging and Travel (where applicable)		Background Checks
	Materials and Equipment		
	Events (social, networking, etc.)		
INDIRECT COSTS	Office Space and Facilities	Time Committed to Intern Support	Quality Assurance
	Student Advising		Program Evaluation
			Data Capture and Reporting

Collect Data and Measure Outcomes

Primary Owners: *Program Leaders (if applicable, working in partnership with other departments including human resources/business analytics)*

Effective programs earn their keep by creating benefits for the business and solving real business problems. While many of the business leaders we interviewed admitted they were not comprehensively tracking program outcomes, they were building specific capacities that could enable more effective measurement in the future, such as:

- **Create feedback loops and quality assurance**

Strong programs maintain ongoing communications between interns, managers, and program leaders. Surveys, debriefing sessions, and structured reflections can help identify opportunities for improvement rather than a box-checking activity. Consistency of positive experience is key to maximizing internship program impact. Regularly assessing that interns' experiences are going well, and that the program is working well on the business side, can lead to improved outcomes.

- **Integrate with human resources systems**

Data collection is most effective when it's built into existing human resources and performance systems. Connecting intern data collection to existing human resources information systems, if applicable, or developing an easily updated program dashboard will enable learning from data to become more sustainable and consistent.

- **Learn and act from data**

The employers we interviewed treat results as an invitation to adjust. If the data show weakness or differential experiences, they respond by redesigning roles, changing skills requirements, retraining managers, or adjusting cohort structures. Some, like the large entertainment company quoted on the right, make harder decisions using their data.

“

We wanted to give people a meaningful experience, and we were trying specifically to create a pool of really great people who could fill some frontline manager roles. We ran the program for a few years, but we stopped because our own workload and capacity were getting stretched and it wasn't creating the outcomes we were looking for. The figures weren't telling a good story.

-LARGE ENTERTAINMENT COMPANY

Despite many differences across programs, the business value metrics employers care most about are quite consistent. The metrics that matter are tied to bottom-line business outcomes: conversion, candidate readiness, retention in full-time roles, fit, and productivity. Employers track whether interns convert into full-time roles, how long they stay, and whether they advance. They watch the cost of hire and understand whether bringing an intern into a full-time role costs less than hiring from the outside. They measure whether participants energize teams and strengthen their brands. Many also extend their impacts into the broader community, tracking how internships contribute to local economic opportunities and mobility. While not all companies will have robust systems of measurement, starting somewhere with metrics that are most valuable to even the smallest organizations will help to track value over time.

EMPLOYER SPOTLIGHT

For insights about how one small business has created an effective, sustainable internship program, [visit our Employer Spotlight on Daycos.](#)



Business Value

Employers who track key metrics, intern performance, and qualitative experiences can strengthen their programs by gathering solid information and then acting on it.

“

Interns bring fresh ideas and innovation. They're so fast, especially on the technology front, and that pushes and challenges our staff to keep pace.

REGIONAL NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION

Business Value

Primary Owners:

Program Leaders and Senior/Hiring Managers

Effective internship programs rely on learning from results. Measurement of the factors listed below can illustrate program performance and drive better decisions for future programming. For a comprehensive list of specific metrics companies use, visit Appendix B.

Business value can often be financial and easily monetized. Improvements in retention, for example, are measured frequently and can often create significant cost savings. Business value can also be indirect, though no less valuable over different time frames and for different audiences. Impact on the community, for example, may be difficult to measure, but may be visible through anecdotes and improved opinions of the business in the community.

BUSINESS VALUE	DESCRIPTION
<p>Talent Attraction and Conversion</p>	<p>Internships are first and foremost a talent pipeline strategy. Employers rely on internships to identify and train prospective employees before hiring begins, improving both match quality and conversion efficiency. These programs make hiring more accurate, less costly, and less risky by exposing both candidate and employer to real working conditions before commitment.</p> <p>Larger companies may experience greater value in this category, as they hire more frequently.</p>
<p>Increased Candidate Readiness</p>	<p>Employers emphasized that candidate readiness is one of the most immediate payoffs. Converted interns arrive already trained in systems, tools, and culture. That acceleration reduces the hidden costs of onboarding and speeds contribution to core business functions.</p> <p>Companies of all sizes can benefit from improved readiness. Smaller organizations may see outsized value, given capacity restraints and the need for single employees to fill more than one role.</p>
<p>Retention and Engagement</p>	<p>Retention emerged as a clear indicator of success across employers and industries. Interns who later joined full time stayed longer, performed better, and showed stronger attachment to company culture. Research from the National Association of Colleges and Employers indicates that interns hired into full-time roles retain at nearly 25 percentage points higher than non-intern hires. Some employers went further, connecting retention directly to culture and belonging. The shared experiences built during internships translated into stronger peer networks and workplace satisfaction long after conversion.</p> <p>All companies will benefit from improved retention and engagement, but larger organizations may see greater value, given the costs of turnover in large workforces.</p>
<p>Workload and Capacity</p>	<p>While the primary goals for internships focus on building the pipeline and creating solid work-based learning experiences, interns can generate real value through their work and productivity, contributing to the bottom line and creating capacity for current staff to complete their tasks more quickly, or focus on responsibilities that may have been put on the back burner.</p> <p>Many companies benefit from contributions internships make to workload and capacity, though smaller organizations may experience that value more acutely given time constraints for incumbent staff.</p>

BUSINESS VALUE	DESCRIPTION
<p>Internal Leadership Development</p>	<p>Supervising interns is also an investment in the company’s current workforce. Managers gain structured opportunities to practice leadership, delegation, and feedback. For organizations focused on succession planning, this experience provides a low-risk environment for employees to test and refine leadership capacity.</p> <p>All organizations will benefit from leadership capacity building, regardless of size.</p>
<p>Increased Innovation and Adaptability</p>	<p>Many employers described interns as catalysts for new thinking. Their questions and curiosity often revealed inefficiencies or opportunities that long-time employees had ceased to notice. This infusion of perspective helps organizations evolve, strengthening adaptability in rapidly changing markets. Employers are particularly interested in interns’ strengths in technology, noting that younger generations often have more fluency and adaptability with new technology than current workers.</p> <p>Organizations of all sizes will benefit from improved innovation and adaptability, though smaller organizations, especially those with limited staff capacity in technology, may see significant value from interns’ contributions in those areas.</p>
<p>Improved Employer Brand Value</p>	<p>Employers are using internships to shape how students perceive their brands, their cultures, and their values, and they are very aware that the experience needs to be mutual. One leader commented, “The employer has to impress the intern, too. We tell interns, if you get stuck doing something miserable, talk to me, because that’s not what this is all about.” For some companies, this brand-building extends beyond recruitment. Even if an intern never applies for a full-time role, their positive experience becomes a form of reputational currency.</p> <p>Organizations of all sizes will benefit from improved brand value, especially smaller and regional organizations who are competing for talent with larger, well-known companies.</p>
<p>Enhanced Community and Industry Development</p>	<p>Although individual business outcomes dominate employer thinking, some companies also view internships as an essential contribution to sector health. These motivations reinforce the system-level benefits of internships: a more capable workforce, stronger industry networks, and shared capacity across employers.</p> <p>Both small and large organizations benefit from improvements in the communities and industries in which they work. Smaller organizations may see greater value, given their tendency toward hiring locally.</p>



Moving Toward ROI Measurement

Results from a recent Strada Employer Survey found that clear evidence of return on investment and a reliable pipeline of candidates are the most persuasive incentives for employers considering expanding work-based learning programs such as internships.⁵ Employers we connected with through this research echoed this call, indicating their desire for analyses and improved tools for measuring costs and benefits.

Organizations that collect data points such as the ones listed above can begin to measure the impact of their internship programs, moving toward ROI measurement.

While we do not yet have an ROI analysis focusing specifically on internship programs, there are [analyses of related initiatives](#) that can be illustrative.

In response to employer demand, future research should focus on tools and resources for helping employers measure business impact of their internship programs.

EMPLOYER SPOTLIGHT

For insights into how a family-owned business is creating value for the company and interns, [visit our Employer Spotlight on Plastic Recycling, Inc.](#)

Insights for Executives

Support program leaders with direction on which business values are highest priority for the organization, and which align best with company culture. For example, in many family-owned firms, connection to the community is very important. Supporting program leaders to lean into that value and measure it accordingly will help them understand how to best collect information and make the case over the long term.

Taking Action

Each stakeholder should be aware of the key role they play in helping to maximize internship program value:

- **Program Leaders**

Take the lead on bringing key stakeholders into the development and support of your program, leveraging the Internship Value Chain and accompanying checklists as a guide to ensure core components are addressed.

- **Senior Managers and Hiring Managers**

Identify business problems that a strong early talent pipeline can help to address. Work with program managers and cross-functional teams to identify metrics that will show impact on business value over time. Support program effectiveness by allocating resources appropriately.

- **Executives**

Ensure that your commitment to the program is clear and visible. Your sponsorship and advocacy for the program will help to create the organizational alignment and support that will be necessary for delivering business value over time.

- **Intermediaries and Education Partners**

Understand the business problems that your programs are addressing and help your employer partners to think about the enabling conditions and core program activities that lead to business value. Help employers with designing skill development activities that will support their intended business outcomes. Surface external partnership opportunities that might help employer partners leverage publicly available funds. [Reference this Framework for Effective Intermediaries](#) to identify the functions your organization is best positioned to help employers with.

“

If they leave and feel good about us because of our values, that's success.

- NATIONAL CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

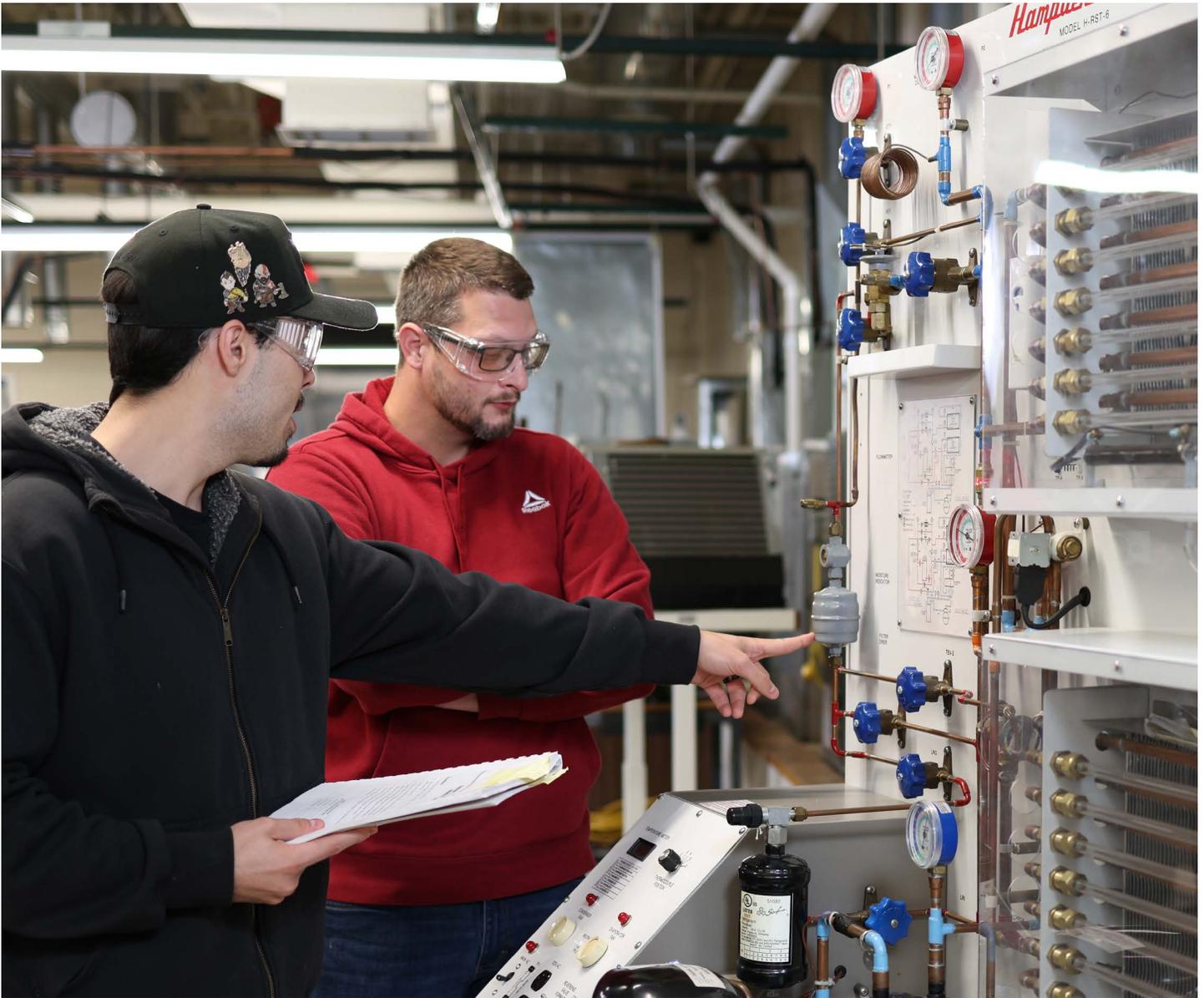
Based on insights from our interviews, there are key next steps that employers can take, based on where they are currently positioned.

The following checklist is designed for **employers who are seeking to develop effective internship programs**, helping them understand where the organization is today and to prioritize next actions. The goal is to ensure the right components are in place, and position programs to provide the greatest value for businesses and learners.

This checklist may also be helpful for the **intermediary and education organization leaders** who support employers in designing and launching effective internship programs.

CHECKLIST FOR DEVELOPING INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS OF VALUE

Status	Task	Internship Value Chain Element
Establish Enabling Conditions		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Define business problems the internship program must address to align with priorities and vision.	Alignment to Business Problems
<input type="checkbox"/>	Determine metrics that are aligned to intended program objectives that are most important to your business.	Alignment to Business Problems
<input type="checkbox"/>	Identify an executive sponsor to champion internships at the enterprise level.	Executive Sponsorship and Advocacy
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ensure sponsorship is formalized and visible through recurring updates and involvement.	Executive Sponsorship and Advocacy
<input type="checkbox"/>	Encourage executives to mentor, visit, and share with interns.	Executive Sponsorship and Advocacy
<input type="checkbox"/>	Work with supervisors and managers to understand what they are looking for in interns' skills and capabilities, and ensure those attributes are accurately reflected in position descriptions and job postings.	Cross-Functional Integration
<input type="checkbox"/>	Determine sources and availability of public resources to offset the costs of providing internships, and whether program eligibility requirements align to company talent needs.	External Partnerships
Set Up Core Program Activities		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Define clear learning and performance objectives with each intern.	Deliver Effective Programs
<input type="checkbox"/>	Implement a standard orientation and feedback process.	Deliver Effective Programs
<input type="checkbox"/>	Assign dedicated staff to oversee the program, especially for consistency and logistics.	Deliver Effective Programs
<input type="checkbox"/>	Gather participant and manager feedback after every cycle.	Deliver Effective Programs
<input type="checkbox"/>	Establish standardized expectations and checklists for interns and managers to ensure consistency across departments.	Deliver Effective Programs
<input type="checkbox"/>	Provide training and resources for all supervising managers.	Prepare and Support Managers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Collect manager feedback for continuous improvement.	Prepare and Support Managers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Establish an internship budget line tied to workforce objectives, regardless of centralized vs. decentralized approach. Account for all work-based learning costs.	Allocate Resources
<input type="checkbox"/>	Assign dedicated coordination staff or FTE fraction.	Allocate Resources
<input type="checkbox"/>	Assess supervisor capacity and project/work availability to set realistic program size.	Allocate Resources
<input type="checkbox"/>	Conduct surveys or structured debriefs with interns, supervisors, and partners during and after each cycle.	Collect Data and Measure Outcomes
<input type="checkbox"/>	Use findings to inform adjustments in program design, supervision, and communication.	Collect Data and Measure Outcomes



For employers with **established internship programs**, who are looking to strengthen the value of the program and embed it as a core element of the business' talent strategy, complete the following checklist. This guide features factors for long-term success and sustainability and will help companies looking to grow and sustain their programs over time.

This checklist may also be helpful for **intermediary and education organizations** that support employers in maintaining and expanding their internship programs.

 **EMPLOYER SPOTLIGHT**

For insights into how a manufacturing company is supporting a robust talent pipeline, [visit our Employer Spotlight featuring Endress+Hauser.](#)

CHECKLIST FOR IMPROVING INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS TO STRENGTHEN VALUE

Status	Task	Internship Value Chain Element
Improve Enabling Conditions for Sustainability		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Identify former interns who hold leadership roles, and share their stories.	Executive Sponsorship and Advocacy
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recognize leadership contributions to internships as part of succession planning and development goals.	Executive Sponsorship and Advocacy
<input type="checkbox"/>	Form a cross-functional steering committee with representation from human resources, operations, finance, communications, and other departments.	Cross-Functional Integration
<input type="checkbox"/>	Refine roles, responsibilities, and governing structures for each function to prevent silos and duplication.	Cross-Functional Integration
<input type="checkbox"/>	Integrate internships into annual business planning and budgeting cycles so each department understands its contribution.	Cross-Functional Integration
<input type="checkbox"/>	Leverage existing relationships with colleges and universities, sharing regular feedback, insights, and program evaluations.	External Partnerships
Enhance the Maturity of Core Program Activities		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Communicate internship results as a part of the company's workforce development strategy.	Deliver Effective Programs
<input type="checkbox"/>	Integrate intern supervision into manager performance goals.	Prepare and Support Managers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Offer recognition or rewards for effective mentors.	Prepare and Support Managers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Frame intern supervision as leadership development for emerging people leaders.	Prepare and Support Managers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Integrate evaluation processes into human resources, learning, and performance systems to maintain continuity.	Collect Data and Measure Outcomes
<input type="checkbox"/>	Revisit outcomes annually to document progress and communicate improvement.	Collect Data and Measure Outcomes

Conclusion

Employers who integrate internships into their talent strategies are making future-facing investments to solve business problems, strengthen talent pipelines, and create competitive advantage. Despite wide variation in program models, the measures that matter to employers are consistent: candidate readiness, retention, fit, productivity, and brand strength are high priorities. Costs range from direct participant support to supervision, program administration, and continuous improvement, to events and activities and travel stipends. Throughout our interviews, we heard employers asking for more robust ways to measure and articulate program value. The Internship Value Chain we provide is a starting point: a way to understand how internships can

create the greatest value within organizations. This is a tool to spark disciplined measurement and honest conversation. Future research should provide tools for employers to help with calculation of costs, benefits, and/or return on investment to help program leaders better articulate tangible value for the harder-to-measure business value elements of their programs. With better data and clearer understanding of exactly where internships are generating benefits, employers can make the business case for sustaining and scaling internships, even in volatile economic times.

¹ Strada Employer Survey, unpublished raw data (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, 2025). Question: "Overall, how valuable is the investment of resources in work-based learning programs (e.g., internship, apprenticeship, co-op) for your organization?" (Weighted; N = 818).

² Michael E. Porter, "Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance," (New York: The Free Press, 1985) (Republished with a new introduction, 1998).

³ Strada Employer Survey, unpublished raw data (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, 2025). Question: "Which, if any, partnerships do you engage with to help address your entry-level workforce needs? Select up to three in order of importance." (Weighted; N = 987).

⁴ Strada Employer Survey, unpublished raw data (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, 2025). Question: "How helpful are these partnerships when addressing your entry-level workforce needs" (Weighted; N = 891).

⁵ Strada Employer Survey, unpublished raw data (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, 2025). Question: "Which, if any, of these reasons are most likely to persuade your organization to offer more work-based learning (e.g., internship, apprenticeship, co-op) opportunities?" (Weighted; N = 1,003). Forty-six percent of employers said, "clear evidence of ROI" and "a reliable pipeline of candidates meeting minimum qualifications" would encourage more work-based learning and rated them as the No. 1 and No. 2 more persuasive reasons, respectively.

BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee



[BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee](#) (BCBST) created an accelerated computing degree program at its Chattanooga headquarters in partnership with East Tennessee State University to address long-term technology workforce needs. [BlueSky Tennessee Institute](#) supports students to complete their Bachelor of Science degrees in just over half the time as is typically required. As BCBST CEO JD Hickey explained, “Our students do in 27 months what others do in four years, and they’re on our campus for the entire experience. By the time they finish the internship, they don’t need additional training or support.”

Acceleration comes not from faster coursework but from eliminating long breaks. “We cut out winter and summer breaks and go full time year-round,” Bradley Leon, Executive Director of BlueSky Tennessee Institute, said. General education courses are completed online, while all computing courses are taken in person with ETSU faculty. After about 15 months of academics, students begin internships in BCBST’s information technology division, rotating across three teams. “They do three rotations over the course of the year so that by the time offers go out, they know what they want to do.”

The model includes intensive advising and mentoring. “We hired a full-time advisor who follows up immediately if a student gets a bad grade or misses class,” Leon explained. Students also receive full financial support. “They pay nothing. Public dollars go directly to the university, and they graduate with no debt. If they finish on time, they earn a job offer with our IT team.”

“

Our students do in 27 months what others do in four years, and they’re on our campus for the entire experience. By the time they finish the internship, they don’t need additional training or support.

- JD HICKEY, BCBST CEO

Recruitment focuses on local high schools with historically low college-going rates. “We prioritized recruiting directly from these schools. We knew there were students who were capable and would thrive if given the right support,” said Hickey.

Enabling Conditions

Leaders describe the program as both a business strategy and a community investment. “We are a not-for-profit, mission-driven company. We don’t have quarterly earnings or shareholders, so we can take multi-year risks,” Hickey said. “The goal is securing and augmenting the talent pipeline we need to run the business.”

BCBST views itself as a technology enterprise. “People think we pay claims, but almost all that work is automated now. Of our 6,800 employees, less than a hundred still do claims processing,” shared Hickey. The organization struggled to find qualified local candidates. “We were frustrated that we couldn’t find the quality or quantity of tech talent we needed, and our efforts to work with local schools on adapting curriculum weren’t going well.”

In building the program, the company looked for a university partner that shared its commitment to pragmatic, team-based learning. “We had to walk away from our first partner,” Hickey said. “We were fortunate to engage with a university willing to collaborate, adjust, and build something that worked for both students and employers.”

Conditions within the company that supported effectiveness and sustainability include:

1. Clear leadership commitment

The program has strong foundations in executive sponsorship and advocacy. JD Hickey is clearly supportive of program leadership. Leon commented, “I’ve heard time and time again from people who try to do this work that it takes enormous will and leadership commitment from the team. The entire organization has to come together to make this work, and that doesn’t happen unless leadership is committed. I’ve never had to worry about getting time and resources – that just doesn’t happen without leadership commitment. There is no substitute for it.”

“

Students who are buying cars, putting a down payment on a condo, who are full-fledged adulting at 20 years old, that is success. We don’t expect they’ll all work for us forever, and we want to keep as many as we can, but if we’re producing talent for all of southeast Tennessee and they go on to be successful elsewhere, that is a huge metric for us.

- JD HICKEY, BCBST CEO

2. Focus on the community

“Community economic vitality is part of our motivation,” commented Hickey. BCBST views the increasing economic mobility of interns, and of the community more broadly, as a win, and a reflection of their mission. “Students who are buying cars, putting a down payment on a condo, who are full-fledged adulting at 20 years old, that is success. We don’t expect they’ll all work for us forever, and we want to keep as many as we can, but if we’re producing talent for all of southeast Tennessee and they go on to be successful elsewhere, that is a huge metric for us.”

3. Public and philanthropic investments in talent

BCBST finances the program creatively, leveraging both corporate dollars and public and philanthropic resources as available. BlueSky Tennessee Institute has support from a variety of local education-focused foundations, as well as the state of Tennessee.

Core Program Activities

When BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee created its work-based learning program, the major considerations that led to the program's effectiveness included:

1. Intensive student support and structured rotations

The program relies on "intrusive advising," which provides immediate outreach for any academic or personal issue, and structured internship rotations. "Each student goes through three rotations," Leon explained. "They get enough exposure to know what they want to do and where they fit best."

2. Centralized management and layered mentoring

Internships are tightly managed by a small, dedicated staff. Each intern has a manager and a mentor or "buddy" who provides day-to-day support. "Managers are busy managing," Leon said. "Mentors guide, listen, and help students navigate challenges. It's often their first leadership experience, and many go on to become team leads."

3. Inclusive selection and expanded opportunity

Recruiting aims to break traditional molds. "We're trying to bust through old paradigms about what makes a successful candidate," Leon explained. "We take chances on students who don't meet traditional profiles, and we've had success."

4. Continuous evolution and future focus

The program adapts to changing technology. "We're incorporating AI into the curriculum," Leon shared. "We have to master it to stay competitive, and this tech talent will help us do that." The company is also focused decades into the future. Leon commented, "The initial thing that impressed me when JD interviewed me was that he said the person who would be in his role [CEO] in 10 to 15 years will have a tech background. This entire program is directed toward ensuring that we have great entry-level people, and toward the future, ensuring future leadership is being prepared through a program like this."

“

People think we pay claims, but almost all that work is automated now. Of our 6,800 employees, less than a hundred still do claims processing.

– JD HICKEY, BCBST CEO

Understanding Business Value

BCBST has a clear vision of where the initiative is producing value:

1. Candidate Readiness and Speed to Productivity

The first cohort achieved an 88 percent on-time graduation rate and a 100 percent job acceptance rate among eligible graduates. The second cohort reached 93 percent retention halfway through their programs.

Leaders see both immediate and long-term business value. "Tech talent can be outsourced and labor can be cheap if short-term labor is all you're after," Hickey said. "But we're convinced this is the next generation of talent." Students complete their program fully prepared for full-time work: "They don't need additional training or support when they start."

2. Retention and Conversion

The company also anticipates compounding gains over time. "Longitudinally, we'll be looking at how many we retain and how many we see move into leadership roles over five to 10 years," a senior leader said. "The payoff will be down the road as these people grow."

3. Community and Industry Development

Recruiting from local schools has created meaningful community impact. "The volume of students we can continue to recruit from our priority schools matters to us," Leon said. "We want to keep providing opportunities to students who might otherwise have been overlooked."

Lessons Learned

Through deliberate design, leadership commitment, and a shared sense of purpose, BCBST has built a program that delivers both business and social value. The partnership between employer and ETSU has created a replicable model for developing high-quality, diverse tech talent in regional markets:

- **Executive sponsorship anchors sustainability**

Long-term programs require consistent advocacy from senior leadership who are willing to champion funding and organizational alignment, going beyond initial enthusiasm.

- **Design for measurement from the start**

While BCBST does not comprehensively track ROI, the team has embedded tracking and outcomes metrics and is able to point to specific program-driven improvements, helping everyone recognize and understand the business value.

- **Structured support improves completion and conversion**

Deep advising, mentoring, and relationship-building with participants has had a dramatic impact on academic progress and post-graduation placement.

- **Community partnerships expand opportunity**

BCBST's approach of recruiting from priority high schools demonstrates that with the right supports, students from underrepresented backgrounds can excel in accelerated technical programs.

- **Long-term thinking outweighs short-term costs**

While the model requires substantial upfront investment by the company, reduced ramp-up time, higher retention, and stronger cultural alignment will generate significant downstream impacts for the business and the community.

This long-term thinking is apparent in leadership's orientation. Leon commented, "From a big-picture, future-vision perspective, we're trying to set a roadmap that is 20 to 30 years long by positioning ourselves differently."

Daycos



[Daycos](#) has built a sustainable and community-centered internship program that reflects both its operational needs and civic values. Founded in the late 1970s, the company provides technology and financial outsourcing services to moving and logistics firms across the country. Headquartered in a rural Nebraska town of about 25,000 residents, it manages billions of dollars in transactions each year and employs about 60 full-time staff.

"We're an outsourcing firm," Brandon Day, CEO and owner of Daycos, explained. "Our customers hire us because we can do something better and less expensive than they can in-house. Having the best employees is key to that."

The company's location, away from major metropolitan centers, has long shaped its workforce approach. Early on, the family who founded Daycos relocated from Washington, D.C., to a small town in Nebraska, where they discovered both cost advantages and a deeply loyal workforce. Over time, the company has come to view its rural setting as a competitive asset.

Today, the firm's internship program plays a strategic role in workforce development and community engagement. Initially reluctant to host interns ("I used to refuse," Day admitted, "because by the time you get them trained, it's time for them to leave."), the company eventually reframed internships through the lens of its B Corporation status and purpose-driven mission. "We started thinking about our stakeholders not just as shareholders, but as employees, customers, and the community," he said. "We revisited this idea of internships, and we really changed our tune, not necessarily because we saw a benefit to our business stakeholder, but because we thought it was good for our community stakeholder."

The company's internship portfolio includes both traditional semester-long placements and year-long

positions through a regional program known as Growing Together, supported by the Aksarben Foundation. The program supports college seniors to match with local employers for full-time internships during their final year of study and facilitates local housing options for interns who need them.

The company typically hosts one or two students through the [Growing Together](#) program each year, alongside several others in shorter-term placements. Most interns work in IT and programming roles, though occasional placements occur in accounting, finance, or operations.

The company's approach to work-based learning is grounded in long-term, purpose-driven goals rather than short-term labor needs.

1. Strengthen the local talent pipeline

The company sees internships as a way to retain young professionals in rural areas. "We felt it was really important to show kids that there are places to work in our town where they can do cool things and work with great people," Day said. "They don't have to move to Omaha or Kansas City or Minneapolis to work someplace that'll treat them well and let them do cool stuff."

2. Enhance company culture

Early experiences revealed an unexpected benefit: interns enriched organizational culture. "Our employees loved having them around," Day recalled. "They brought fresh perspectives, and for some of our long-tenured staff, it was fun. They got to be mentors again."

3. Support community and business growth

Internships reflect the company's broader B Corp mission of creating shared value. "We view success not just by whether they stay with us, but by whether we help them launch their careers," Day said. "Even if they move on, that's still a success."

Enabling Conditions

Conditions within the company that supported effectiveness and sustainability include:

1. Culture first: Creating a positive, inclusive environment

Culture emerged as the single most important factor. “A strong, positive culture is key,” Day emphasized. “If you have a negative or challenging culture, it’s really hard for an intern to be successful in a short timeframe.” The firm’s team-based structure — flat, collaborative, and self-managed — allows interns to integrate quickly and learn alongside peers. “We don’t have team leads,” he explained. “Interns become members of the team from day one.”

2. Clear intent and shared purpose

Before relaunching its internship program, Daycos documented the program’s purpose and shared it internally. “We wrote down why we were doing this,” Day said. “When a new intern starts, the team reviews what we’re trying to accomplish. Otherwise, everyone has different motivations, and that causes confusion.”

This clarity helps maintain alignment across departments and ensures that interns are viewed as learners, not short-term labor. “We hire interns to give them the best experience possible,” he added. “That means you’re not going to stick them on a task that you can’t get anyone else to do.”

3. Partnerships with local institutions

Through Growing Together and advisory councils at nearby colleges, the company provides feedback on curriculum relevance and needed skills. “We tell them what technologies we’re using and what we’re seeing,” Day said. “It takes time, but we’ve seen progress.”

“

We’re an outsourcing firm... our customers hire us because we can do something better and less expensive than they can in-house. Having the best employees is key to that.

– BRANDON DAY, DAYCOS CEO

Daycos is also an enthusiastic partner in the Growing Together initiative with the Aksarben Foundation, and expressed trust in the network of talented students involved in the program. Day commented, “We have hired a number of Growing Together participants who never interned with us.”

These partnerships not only align education with employer needs but also strengthen community ties, critical for small towns competing for talent.

Core Program Activities

When Daycos created its work-based learning program, the major considerations that lead to the program's effectiveness included:

1. Flexibility and fit

For small and mid-sized firms, flexibility is crucial. The company avoids rigid quotas or cycles for hiring interns, instead evaluating team capacity and project alignment each year. "There are a lot of factors we consider. What are the needs? What teams would this intern benefit from being on? And is that team in a spot where it has the capacity to properly onboard an intern and give them the right support? And other times, we weren't able to find anybody we thought would be a good fit, so we decided not to bring them on. We don't want to set anybody up for failure. So, you have to be flexible, knowing what's going on in your business and what the situation is," commented Day.

2. Long term thinking

Day urges other small business peers to resist short-term thinking. "Early on, I refused to do internships," he admitted. "I thought they took too much time away from our busy season. But if you think long term, you realize interns are a tremendous benefit to your culture and your people."

He now sees internships as essential to sustainable hiring. "Don't complain that you can't find people when you won't do the things that build your pipeline," he said. "That's a problem you should have addressed 18 months ago."

3. Continuous feedback and reflection

While the company doesn't use formal metrics, it conducts exit interviews with interns to gather feedback. Leaders review those responses and adjust program elements each year. "It's not data-driven," Day admitted, "but we always want to know if they had a good experience."

“

Don't complain that you can't find people when you won't do the things that build your pipeline ... That's a problem you should have addressed 18 months ago.

- BRANDON DAY, DAYCOS CEO

Understanding Business Value

The company assesses business value in both tangible and intangible ways.

1. Conversion and Retention

Each year, the company usually hires at least one intern into a full-time position. “Most of our interns are in IT,” Day noted. “Several have become full-time employees and are now some of our rising stars.”

2. Innovation and Adaptability

Interns provide valuable feedback on processes and technology. “We’ve had some fabulous interns who have come in and say, ‘Why are you guys doing this? Why don’t you do this?’ And we say, ‘I don’t know. That’s a great question.’ That candid feedback is really helpful.”

Interns help maintain a dynamic, innovative culture. “For a company with long-term employees, bringing in new talent is key to future success,” Day reflected. “Even if it’s temporary, it keeps us learning.”

3. Community and Industry Development

Internships also reinforce the company’s B Corp mission and civic purpose. “It’s good for our business stakeholder and our employee stakeholder,” Day said. “But it’s also good for our community stakeholder. That’s why we do it.”

Lessons Learned

The firm’s experience offers clear takeaways and actionable steps for other small and mid-sized businesses seeking to implement or strengthen work-based learning programs:

- **Start with purpose**
Define why the program exists, whether for community engagement, pipeline development, or skill building, and communicate that purpose internally and intentionally.
- **Prioritize culture over capacity**
Interns thrive in positive environments; even strong processes can fail if culture is weak.
- **Think long term**
View internships as investments in the workforce ecosystem, not short-term productivity boosts.
- **Be flexible and selective**
Only host interns when you have meaningful work and adequate support available.

“

The volume of students we can continue to recruit from our priority schools matters to us ... We want to keep providing opportunities to students who might otherwise have been overlooked.

– BRANDON DAY, DAYCOS CEO

- **Leverage partnerships**
Collaborate with local colleges, chambers, and regional initiatives to find, prepare, and retain talent.

Day commented, “If the Growing Together program went away tomorrow, that would be a hit to our strategic efforts. For us, internships aren’t just nice to have. They’re critical to our future success.”

Plastic Recycling, Inc.



[Plastic Recycling, Inc.](#) is based in Indianapolis. With about 200 employees spread across several states, the company turns postindustrial and postconsumer plastics into products for industries such as automotive, packaging, and consumer goods.

The company operates multiple levels of work-based learning, from high school apprenticeships to college internships and co-ops, each tailored to develop skills relevant to its production and engineering processes. “We’ve had apprenticeship programs for several years,” Chad Smith, chief personnel officer at Plastic Recycling, Inc., commented, “and our high school program is now in its fourth year. We also run summer internships and college co-ops.”

High school apprentices work part time during the school year and full time in the summer, gaining exposure to manufacturing, quality control, engineering, and operations. “They’re usually 16 or 17 when they start,” Smith said. “They work about 10 to 20 hours a week during the school year, and then they’re here full time in the summer.” Apprentices earn wages, gain credentials, and often continue with the company after graduation.

At the college level, interns work over the summer and are deeply integrated with production, engineering, and research projects, contributing to current workload and working on specialized projects. College interns work directly with department heads and project managers, and earn wages for their work.

The company’s work-based learning programs aim to solve real business problems while investing in people.

“

These new machines run on apps. Who better to help us start training and learning than the youth coming in through our internships and apprenticeships?

—CHAD SMITH, CHIEF PERSONNEL OFFICER,
PLASTIC RECYCLING

“Our goal is innovation, product, and process,” commented Smith. “We have ideas on projects, but they’re learning things in college that we often don’t know about. They’re getting fresh perspectives on cutting-edge theories and techniques.”

Smith also credits the internship program for strengthening partnerships with local colleges and building Plastic Recycling, Inc.’s brand. “Partnerships, whether with academia or other community organizations, are a high priority. We’re very public and open to working with the community. Partnership opens doors we sometimes forget about. It’s also helped from a branding perspective. Now when we go to our big flagship campus, people know who we are.”

Plastic Recycling, Inc., is also looking ahead, anticipating increasing technological shifts in the industry and accompanying shifts in the talent needed. “These new machines run on apps. Who better to help us start training and learning than the youth coming in through our internships and apprenticeships? Often times, they are more prepared and adapted to running a machine with an app than our employees who have been here for 25 years.”

Enabling Conditions

Conditions within the company that supported effectiveness and sustainability include:

1. Early education and leadership buy-in

“Education upfront across the leadership team, including owners, is key,” Smith said, describing how important it is to set expectations before launching a new work-based learning program. He added that having “positive role models” among supervisors and mentors made a difference.

2. A clear ‘win-win’ philosophy

Plastic Recycling, Inc., frames the program as a clear example of doing well while doing good. “The goal is a win-win,” Smith said. “A win for the apprentices and interns, and if they stay, it’s a win for the company because we completed a project and saved money. There are so many ways you can win if you do it right.”

Core Program Activities

When Plastic Recycling created its work-based learning program, the major considerations that lead to the program’s effectiveness included:

1. Department-level engagement and readiness

Building awareness and ownership of the program among staff is important, as well. Smith credits visibility and buy-in among managers and staff as a lynchpin for the program. “Talk about it with each department. Figure out a way to carve out work for interns,” Smith said. “There has to be willingness around teaching, as long as interns are willing to learn.”

2. The right learner mindset

Smith acknowledges that for an internship program to work, interns themselves have to approach the program with a learning mindset. “The ones who come in and act like they know everything don’t work out so well, because

“

There are so many ways you can win if you do it right.

– **CHAD SMITH**, CHIEF PERSONNEL OFFICER,
PLASTIC RECYCLING

3. Public investments in talent

Plastic Recycling, Inc., leverages a public program in Indiana that supports businesses in providing high-quality work-based learning experiences. “We have worked with [EARN Indiana](#). When I can go back to our ownership team and say we have saved \$38,000 on internships because of this program, that is a win,” Smith commented.

the veterans here will not share any info with someone like that,” Smith explained. “We had one student who was like a kid in a candy store, learning everything we could give him. After a period of time, he became disengaged because he wasn’t learning anymore. I thought we may lose him, but we shifted him into a new role with plenty of learning opportunities, and he has been engaged ever since.”

3. Deliberate human resources support and practical design

In Plastic Recycling, Inc.’s model, interns do real work, and can lighten the load for existing staff, while gaining valuable skills, especially when teams are short-staffed and worn down. Interns and apprentices are able to perform basic preventative maintenance, providing that team with more capacity. “Certainly, on the maintenance side, HR has been pretty deliberate about taking things off the plates of veterans,” Smith said. “That’s another way to get them on board.”

Understanding Business Value

For a small manufacturer, the perceived return on investment has been substantial, both financially and culturally. Despite lacking a systemic measuring system, as Smith put it, “It’s not even close. The ROI is definitely positive.”

1. Innovation and Adaptability

Apprentices and interns contribute directly to productivity. “They’re not just observers. They’re doing work that makes a difference,” Smith said. Student projects have generated measurable efficiencies. Smith described an intern working on a method to match customers’ color needs efficiently. Another built an automated system that generates reports for salespeople describing product specifications. “In the past, we had to find that data and build a presentation. She just built a spreadsheet that automatically generates the data requested. She has graduated, but we’re still using the program, and it’s saving us time. And our materials scientist can focus on his work of research and development instead of building a report,” Smith shared.

Focusing efforts to build the talent pipeline toward emerging talent has brought new ideas and perspectives to the company. “This is a chance to shape and mold, which is another reason why I love the internship model. Most of our interns live in a school environment every day, and they’re used to learning. They’re not coming in with bad habits. They’re shapable. The more questions they ask here the better,” commented Smith.

2. Leadership Development

The mentoring structure built into the company’s programs has had lasting cultural effects. “This has been a huge win. The interns and apprentices are getting paired with a mentor, who is an aspiring leader. We’re now able to give young leaders the opportunity to lead. It’s a really great opportunity.”

“

In the past, we had to find that data and build a presentation. She just built a spreadsheet that automatically generates the data requested. She has graduated, but we’re still using the program, and it’s saving us time. And our materials scientist can focus on his work of research and development instead of building a report.

– CHAD SMITH, CHIEF PERSONNEL OFFICER,
PLASTIC RECYCLING

Smith shared, “We had a high school apprentice in HR who had no idea what HR was when she started,” he said. “By the end of the program, she was helping onboard new employees and leading orientation for Spanish-speaking staff. She figured out what HR is, and now she’s teaching others.”

Lessons Learned

Plastic Recycling, Inc.'s experience illustrates how small and medium-sized employers can use work-based learning to address workforce challenges, cultivate internal leadership, and strengthen community ties, all while adapting a veteran workforce toward new technology.

- Maintain a “win-win” philosophy**
 Sustaining enthusiasm depends on keeping the focus on the benefits for students, employees, and the business simultaneously.
- Keep scale manageable and relationships personal**
 Starting small and maintaining close relationships allowed for individual support, enabling everyone to advance with trust.
- Engage departments directly in design**
 Discussing work-based learning opportunities with each department helped identify real tasks and meaningful projects that fit business priorities.
- Support mentors and veteran employees**
 Adjusting workloads and “taking things off the plates of veterans” helped experienced staff invest time in teaching and mentoring without added strain.

Smith commented, “Some of our early skeptical veterans have become some of the biggest advocates for the program. That has been one of the most rewarding things, seeing the doubters who didn’t want any part of it become champions and recognize that this generation is coming up and will do this work after they’re gone. I can tell our team has gotten a lot of enjoyment from teaching young people.”

“

Some of our early skeptical veterans have become some of the biggest advocates for the program. That has been one of the most rewarding things, seeing the doubters who didn’t want any part of it become champions and recognize that this generation is coming up and will do this work after they’re gone. I can tell our team has gotten a lot of enjoyment from teaching young people.

– CHAD SMITH, CHIEF PERSONNEL OFFICER,
 PLASTIC RECYCLING

Endress+Hauser

Endress+Hauser 

[Endress+Hauser](#) has developed a comprehensive, tiered work-based learning strategy to attract and develop early-career talent. With about 1,400 employees across multiple U.S. locations, the company manufactures process instrumentation used in industrial operations such as oil and gas, pharmaceuticals, and food and beverage production.

Over the past two decades, the organization's internship and apprenticeship efforts have evolved from ad hoc placements into a coordinated workforce development function housed within human resources. The offerings now include:

- **Pre-apprenticeships for high school juniors and seniors** (10–12 participants per year)
- **Early-career apprenticeships** (two to three-year program for business and technical high school graduates, supporting eight apprentices per year to earn an associate's degree)
- **High school internships** (seniors working about 10 hours per week throughout the school year)
- **College internships** (a 12-week summer program)
- **College co-op** (a 16-week immersive experience)

The 12-week summer internship serves as the centerpiece to Endress+Hauser's work-based learning programs suite. Each intern is assigned multiple projects, often related to process optimization, design, automation, or business systems improvement, which is developed before the program begins. "Interns do real design work," Devina Fernandez, workforce development

partner and internship program leader, said. "They help us improve manufacturing processes, develop training tools, and even develop and test new product features." One intern built a set of Excel tools that reduced a key business process from a week to a single day; another used AI to streamline documentation workflows.

While earlier iterations of the program were primarily designed to give students exposure to the workplace, the focus has shifted to conversion and long-term talent development. "Our goal now is to find students earlier, prepare them for working with us, and identify those who we think will be the best fit," Fernandez explained.

Each intern is paired with a mentor who provides daily guidance, while the program lead facilitates professional development and coaching sessions throughout the summer. "Mentors shouldn't be in managerial roles," Fernandez noted. "A manager will choose someone on their team who is developing their leadership skills to be a mentor." Many mentors later move into team lead or managerial roles, a sign that the program benefits not just students, but emerging leaders across the organization.

The company's work-based learning efforts are built around three primary objectives:

1. Talent pipeline development and conversion

"Filling our talent pipeline is number one," said Fernandez. "This year was the first time we sent out full-time job offers before the interns left for the summer." The company now recruits early and makes offers before traditional career fair seasons begin, securing top candidates in advance.



2. Accelerated candidate readiness

Interns are encouraged to explore different parts of the business. Each participant is expected to reach out to several employees in other departments, learn about their work, and report back to the group. “We want them to be exposed to different areas and challenge what they think they’re interested in,” Fernandez explained. The company also emphasizes professional development. Each summer includes coaching sessions, an executive speaker series, and a leadership development intensive. “We want them to see what’s possible here and to understand what opportunities could be down the line,” Fernandez said.

3. Community development

In addition to technical projects, summer interns complete a group community-impact project. One cohort organized a goods drive and fundraising event to support a local domestic violence shelter. Others have coordinated STEM outreach for children’s programs. These experiences strengthen teamwork, communication, and civic engagement while connecting the company to its community.

Enabling Conditions

Conditions within the company that supported effectiveness and sustainability include:

1. Clear processes and cross-functional buy-in

The company's human resources and workforce development teams have established consistent documentation, onboarding processes, and communication plans to ensure continuity. "Our teams know what to expect," Fernandez explained. "Every team has had an intern, managers are familiar with how the program works, and the culture has shifted in how we welcome a new class each year."

2. A culture that welcomes learning

The company intentionally fosters a culture in which interns feel empowered to contribute ideas and ask questions. "They want to make an impact," said Fernandez. "Giving them ownership of something real, and supporting them when they make mistakes, helps them learn faster and builds trust and loyalty."

Core Program Activities

When Endress+Hauser created its summer internship program, the major considerations that led to the program's effectiveness included:

1. Structured mentorship and support

The program's impact depends on a strong mentorship model. "Having someone with the bandwidth to support interns is key," Fernandez said. "If they don't have anyone to ask questions to day to day, it's not a good experience." Mentors are selected for their technical knowledge and interpersonal skills, and they receive training before the summer begins. This structure not only benefits interns but also helps mentors build supervisory experience and confidence.

“

Interns do real design work ... they help us improve manufacturing processes, develop training tools, and even develop and test new product features.

– **DEVINA FERNANDEZ,**
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PARTNER AND
INTERNSHIP PROGRAM LEADER, ENDRESS+HAUSER

2. Real projects, real impact

Each project must have a defined purpose, business justification, and measurable outcome. Interns track their work through project management software, allowing program leaders to see progress and outcomes in real time. "Every project has to answer why it matters and what the outcome is," Fernandez said. "That makes the work meaningful for both the intern and the company."

3. Consistent recruitment and year-round planning

The company maintains a year-round recruitment and onboarding timeline, with most offers extended before the end of the calendar year for the following summer. "If you want to secure top talent, you're making offers by December," Fernandez noted. "We fill 80 to 90 percent of our spots before the new year."

Understanding Business Value

The program has delivered measurable and intangible returns for both the business and its employees.

1. Pipeline and Conversion

The clearest return to the company is in conversion: multiple interns have transitioned to full-time hires, particularly in engineering and business operations. By cultivating relationships early and hiring directly from the intern pool, the company reduces recruitment costs and shortens time-to-competence for new hires.

2. Innovation and Adaptability

Individual projects regularly yield operational gains: shorter production times, streamlined processes, and new tools that increase efficiency. While the company has not yet aggregated all project metrics, most include data on time or cost savings. "Each project has its own measure of impact," Fernandez explained. "If we added them up, the total would be significant."

3. Leadership Development

The mentorship structure doubles as a leadership development tool. Employees who serve as mentors gain valuable experience managing, coaching, and communicating across generations. "We've seen mentors go on to become team leads and managers," said Fernandez. "They often point back to their first intern as the moment they realized they could lead."

4. Community and Industry Development

By engaging in service projects and cross-departmental collaboration, interns contribute to a culture of teamwork and innovation. They also strengthen the company's reputation as a desirable employer and community partner.

Lessons Learned

Endress+Hauser's internship program demonstrates how thoughtful structure, meaningful work, and intentional mentorship can transform early-career experiences into sustainable talent pipelines. The program delivers results: improved efficiency, stronger leadership capacity, and a steady stream of future-ready employees, and other organizations can learn from their experiences:

- **Dedicated coordination makes the difference**

Having a centralized point of contact responsible for communicating with schools, managing schedules, and tracking student progress ensured consistency and kept supervisors and students engaged.

- **Supervisor preparation is essential**

Coaching mentors on how to work with students, especially those new to the workforce, improved productivity and student confidence.

- **Feedback loops strengthen the model**

Regular check-ins among students, mentors, and partners surfaced issues early on and led to quick adjustments and improvements.

- **Visible business benefits sustain commitment**

The program has resulted in real improvements to productivity, morale, and team culture. This is real evidence that work-based learning programs can pay off.

Fernandez summarized, "It's about giving interns something they can own, something real that benefits the company, and creating an environment where they can learn, contribute, and thrive."

Appendix A – Study Information

UpSkill America and Strada Education Foundation spoke with 40 employers over eight to 10 weeks in summer 2025. We sourced connections with these employers through multiple channels, including existing partnerships and relationships, referrals from partner organizations and intermediaries, and individual reach-outs and solicitations.

Employers were not compensated for their participation. We appreciate the generosity of participating employers in sharing their time and insights toward this project.

Using a structured interview protocol, we asked employers questions about their work-based learning program objectives and structures, the conditions they believed were necessary for success and sustainability, and program metrics and costs. Where relevant, employers also addressed how they utilized existing public programs that subsidize wages and costs of providing work-based learning. Participants represented an array of organization sizes, sectors, regions, and industries. The following describes the array of participating companies:

Employee Count

- 250 or fewer employees: 31%
- 250–20,000 employees: 46%
- 20,000 or more employees: 23%

Annual Revenue

- Less than \$50M: 33%
- \$50 million to \$1 billion: 18%
- More than \$1 billion: 46%

Ownership

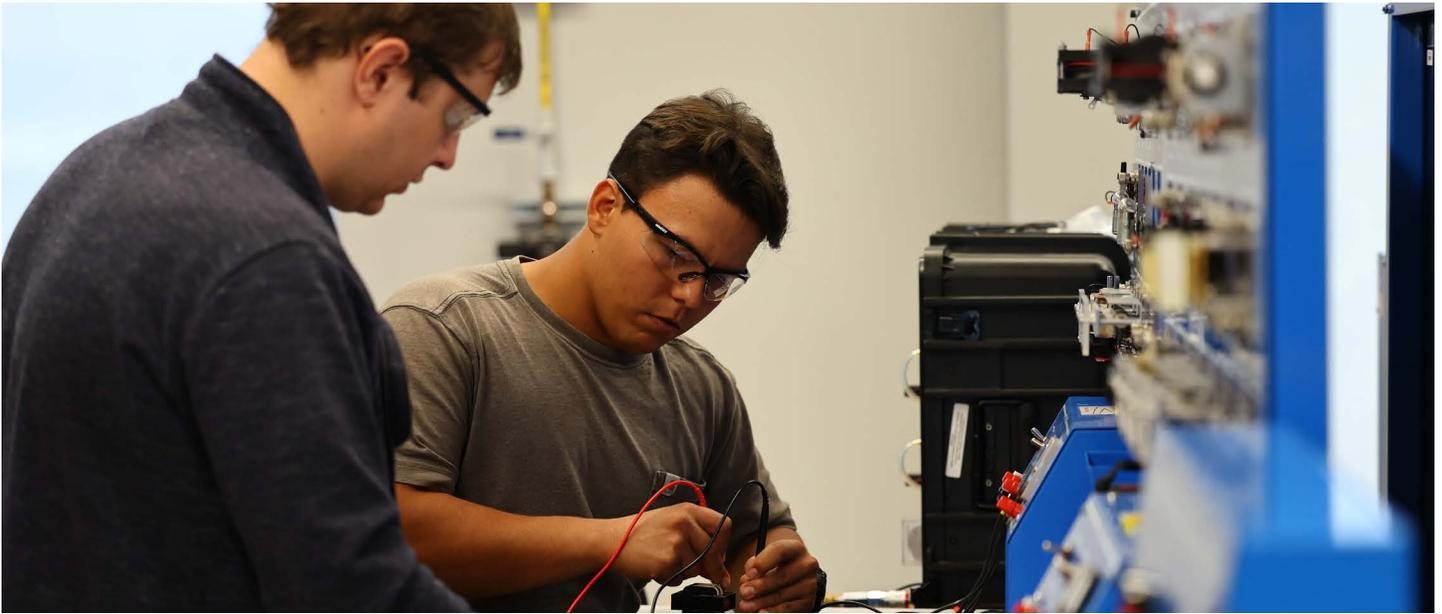
- Privately owned: 44%
- Publicly traded: 28%
- Non profit: 26%

Geographic region (headquarters)

- Midwest: 44%
- East Coast: 28%
- South: 21%
- West: 5%

Industry

- Education and health services: 21%
- Trade, transportation, and utilities: 15%
- Financial activities: 13%
- Manufacturing: 13%
- Professional and business services: 13%
- Information technology: 10%
- Leisure and hospitality: 10%
- Construction: 5%



Interview Protocol

- 1. Can you share some basic information about your organization:**
 - a. Location
 - b. Size (number of employees)
 - c. Industry
- 2. Can you share some information about your primary work-based learning program?**
 - a. Where in the organization is your WBL program housed?
 - i. How centralized/dispersed is program leadership?
 - ii. How are decisions about hires for the program made?
 - b. Who does your WBL program target?
 - c. What kinds of WBL experiences do participants get?
 - d. How long has the program been around?
 - e. In your estimation, is the program successful in meeting its objectives?
- 3. What are the primary objectives of your WBL program? What are you trying to accomplish for the business?**
- 4. Do you have a system for measuring the impact of your WBL programs?**
 - a. If not – how do you gauge whether the program is successful?
 - b. If so – what metrics and outcomes are measuring?
- 5. What are the primary costs of your WBL program?**
 - a. How are costs accounted – by unit/department, centrally?
 - b. How detailed do you get in understanding program costs?
- 6. Does your company participate in or use any public programs or services that subsidize or streamline WBL?**
- 7. Does your company use an external vendor to find and manage WBL participation?**
- 8. What do you think are the necessary conditions inside of an organization that is looking to maximize the impact and success of their WBL program? What is required?**
- 9. Are there any conditions or factors that you believe drive WBL program sustainability?**
 - a. What are the key factors or conditions that make your program sustainable year over year?
 - b. Alternatively, are there any factors or conditions that contribute to program instability?
- 10. Even if you have not conducted a formal analysis of the return on investment of your program, do you sense that the return is positive or negative?**

Appendix B – Detailed Metrics

BUSINESS VALUE	RELATED METRIC/OUTCOME	LIKELY DATA SOURCE(S)
Attraction and Conversion	Intern to FTE conversion rate	NACE Benchmark ; internal company metric
	Pipeline volume/vacancy in critical role(s)	Occupational vacancy rate
	FTE offer and acceptance rates	NACE Benchmark ; internal company metric
	Cost per hire (intern vs. external)	SHRM Benchmark ; internal company metric
	Demographic distribution of program participants	internal metric
Candidate Readiness and Speed to Productivity	Time to productivity (first sale/output)	Internal metric (intern hire vs. external)
	Pipeline volume/vacancy in critical role(s)	Internal metric (intern hire vs. external)
	FTE offer and acceptance rates	Internal metric (intern hire vs. external)
Retention and Engagement	Retention rates at 6, 12-plus months	Internal metric (intern hire vs. external)
	Reduction in early attrition	Internal metric (intern hire vs. external)
	New hire satisfaction scores	Internal metric (survey data, intern hire vs. external)
	Internal mobility/advancement post-hire	Internal metric (HRIS, program records)
	Employee/intern engagement scores	Internal metric (survey data)

Appendix B – Detailed Metrics

BUSINESS VALUE	RELATED METRIC/OUTCOME	LIKELY DATA SOURCE(S)
Workload and Capacity	Intern contributions to product quotas, production goals, deliverables, etc.	Internal metric
	Reduction in delays, backlogs	Internal metric
Leadership Development	Growth in internal manager/supervisor skills	Internal metric (observed skills, assessments)
	Advancement among intern supervisors	Internal metric (HRIS, program records)
	Intern feedback/satisfaction with supervisors	Internal metric (# adopted, value of innovation)
Innovation and Adaptability	Intern-driven innovations adopted	Internal metric (# adopted, value of innovation)
	Manager-reported contribution of intern ideas	Internal metric (# adopted, value of innovation)
Brand Value	Candidate/Intern Net Promoter Score (NPS)	Internal metric (survey data)
	Customer satisfaction ratings	Internal metric (survey, feedback, reviews)
	External recognition/awards	Internal metric (impacts application numbers, NPS, etc.)
Community and Industry Development	Reduction in regional talent shortages	Industry/regional metric (LMI, workforce board)
	Public perception/goodwill	Internal metric (survey data, feedback, reviews)

