



# Maximizing potential



For companies that are looking for a way to reduce their hiring risk, access low cost or seasonal staffing, and complete long-drawn-out projects, a co-operative education student (co-op) or internship candidate (intern) might be the right choice for your organization.

# employees

By Frank Neil Potter, CMA



Although definitions vary, a co-op is a registered member of a post-secondary academic program in which work experience is integrated into academic learning. An intern is an individual who has completed his/her post-secondary studies (diploma, degree, advance degree) and is enrolled in a six to 24 month employer sponsored program that focuses on developing professional skills such as accounting. The choice of which one to use is a function of organizational preference, academic institution relationships and the nature of the work. In either case, a nine-step model can help your company develop and deliver an optimal co-op or intern program.

## 1. Infrastructure

Infrastructure is the base to support a co-op/intern program and it should focus on four critical elements: organization support, over-lapping placement, process documentation and community liaison. The most critical infrastructure requirement is strong and ongoing senior management and organizational support for the program. Develop and constantly review the co-op/intern's job description and a learning plan. Ensure senior management supports the principle of over-lapping placement. This is the key to an efficient co-op/intern program. This is accomplished by having at least two co-op/interns who will start and leave on an over-lapping interval. For example, if you are hiring co-op students, only hire them for two consecutive semesters (e.g. each co-op will work for an eight month engagement composed of two, four-month semesters) and then plan to hire a new co-op every four months. This will give your organization a senior and a junior individual co-op/intern at all times. Develop process documentation so that the senior co-op/intern has content to train the junior. Assign accountability for this documentation to the co-op/interns.

Maintain a college/university and community recruitment presence and relationship. Ask department heads of schools in fields applicable to your organization to encourage students/graduates to apply for your program. Be sure to maintain an ongoing link on your organization's website to your program. These strategies will attract the best candidates to apply to your program.



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## 2. Selection

When hiring permanent employees, the focus is on how to retain the individual. With co-op/interns, the focus is on how to migrate the individual to future positions within your organization. Given the level of mentorship investment by your organization, it is critical that you attract and hire top candidates. Plan to pay your co-op/intern 60 to 90 per cent of an entry level position depending on the level of academic completion, the individual and local labour conditions or union agreements.

## 3. On-boarding (or initiation)

The first month of a program is the period of lowest productivity and this is when the tone for the experience is set. This is also when your previously hired intern transitions from the junior role to the senior role. The senior should be able to complete about 80 to 90 per cent of the junior's on-boarding activities. Because your permanent staff is not completing these activities, consider developing a certification process. For example, use a combination of documentation and an intern-question database to test their knowledge and absorption of the material. This database and materials can be used to orientate new full-time employees.

## 4. Work

What assignments are given to your co-op/interns is a function of their education level and abilities. Begin with well documented transactional activities; a handy rule is that a task cannot be assigned without pre-existing documentation for the activity – although documenting that activity is a legitimate assignment. Documentation of business processes is a good activity for the first few months assuming the co-op/intern has sufficient language and education skills. Ensure that you have writing guides, a place for the documentation and a permanent staff member to review the end product.

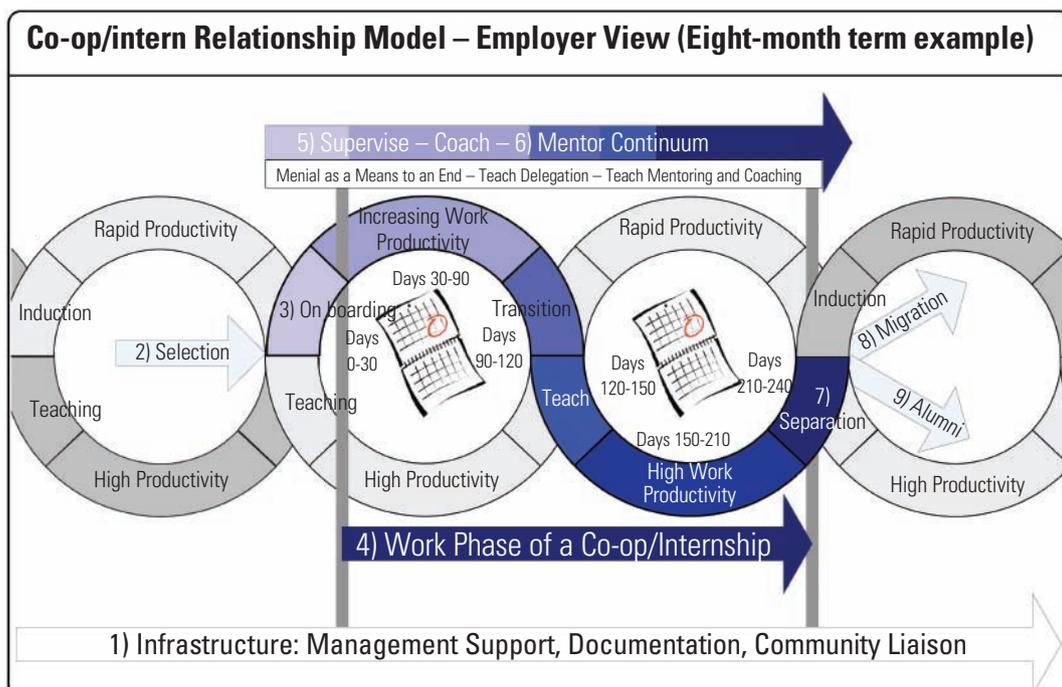
As a rule, keep administrative/menial work to about 20 per cent of the entire experience. As the co-op/intern gains confidence, the complexity of the work can increase to include analytical, ad hoc or special projects. Ad hoc projects should be run using good project management principles and work assigned to an individual should be discrete enough that they can be accomplished within their tenure. Have enough auxiliary tasks assigned to the co-op/interns so that they do not have downtime. Work with your local university or college co-operative education offices to tailor work term reports to focus on your organization issues or problems.

## 5. Supervising-coaching

It's often suggested that organizations select the best and most passionate supervisors to work with co-op/interns. The problem with this suggestion is that good, passionate supervisors tend to be in high demand. Help your supervisor manage their co-op/interns with the following techniques.

- Menial as a means to an end. Use well documented initial administrative or transactional tasks as a way to ease co-op/interns into organizations. Initially, 80 to 90 per cent of their time may be “menial” tapering off to 0 per cent at the end of the experience for an average of 20 per cent discussed above.
- Teach delegation. The senior/junior model is an ideal way to teach delegation and supervision to your co-op/interns who are most likely future managers. Monitor these relationships carefully and step in as required.
- Teach mentoring and coaching. Give your permanent staff the opportunity to practice mentorship and coaching. Remember that co-op/interns are a supplement and not a replacement for permanent staff. As well, task accountability can be delegated to the co-op/intern, but responsibility remains with the permanent employee.

As the supervisor, stay constantly in touch with the co-



op/interns to see how they are beyond the immediate tasks at hand. This can be done informally or via more formal weekly sessions.

## 6. Mentoring

The relationship between yourself and an individual co-op/intern should evolve from a supervisor to a coach and finally to a mentor. As work is completed, be sure to consistently debrief and refocus the co-op/intern on how the experience fits with their career plans and where on their resume they can reference it. To paraphrase the proverb, "It Takes an Organization to Mentor an Intern," encourage the individual to network through social and work-related committees and interview senior staff about their work experiences and career history. You can also establish a buddy system where your co-op/intern is matched with a mentor — a permanent employee similar in age and work position.

## 7. Separation

The separation phase will lead directly to one of two next steps, either migration to a position within the organization or an alumni association for the graduate. (See section nine below.) Just like with permanent employees, conduct an exit interview to understand what went well with the program and where to improve. Have the departing senior intern critique and recommend changes and improvements to the program. For co-operative education students, consider whether the individual can migrate to a part-time or seasonal role until graduation.

## 8. Migration

Migration is when a co-op or intern program adds its greatest organizational value. Companies that move well trained and vetted individuals into positions that require more responsibility within the organization experience recruitment savings, immediate productivity in the new position and a reduction in hiring risk. During the selection process, you should be upfront and honest about job prospects post separation – make good on any promises about job offers. For example, in the current program at Alberta Finance and Enterprise, it's the department's goal to migrate at least 50 per cent of its interns to somewhere within the Alberta government.

## 9. Alumni

If you cannot find a permanent position for your co-op/intern after their tenure, try to at least stay in touch as he/she may become an employee in the future. Not-for-profit organizations should view their alumni as future members of boards, foundation donors or community advocates with a special connection to your organization. If you are a supervisor working for a for-profit company, you should remember that your current co-op/intern might someday be a customer making buying decisions about your products.

### Co-ops, interns, the looming talent wars and suggested reading

For a modest investment of direct costs, management time and goodwill, organizations can develop a direct pipeline of quality recruits. Starting a best practice co-op/intern program may be difficult in a period of downsizing and staff layoffs. Such a program can help organizations win the talent war by developing future leaders and improving the retention of staff. If this is of interest to your organization, the following free resources are suggested reading:

1. International City/County Management Association, Internship Toolkit, available: [www.icma.org](http://www.icma.org).
2. Alberta Public Service Internship Program, Intern Supervisors Handbook (May 2008), available: <http://www.chr.alberta.ca/Employees/?file=corporate/gain/overview>. ■

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