

SMALL BUSINESS

Use care when taking on an intern

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NEW YORK — With the arrival of summer, many small businesses take on interns. These young people are looking for experience and, in some cases, school credits. Companies appreciate the extra help, particularly when they're not able to hire.

But many owners find that hiring an intern isn't like hiring a temporary employee. Interns often have little or no work history, and some need guidance on how to behave in the working world. An owner who's busy running a company might be surprised to find he or she

also needs to become a boss/parent/teacher to an intern. It can be time consuming, but also rewarding.

Here are some of the issues owners need to consider when taking on an intern:

■ The training of interns.

Many small-business owners eager to get some extra help can make the mistake of assuming that an intern is like any other worker. It's not quite that simple. Interns are supposed to be having a learning experience, not giving a company another warm body.

These days, some interns are people who have lost jobs or who graduated from college a few years ago. They're like-

ly looking to build a résumé and get a chance at a future hire. But many others are college or even high school students who are using internships as a way to get course credit.

Because they are supposed to be learning, interns may need more supervision than an owner expects.

"They need a lot of hand-holding, and that hand-holding actually takes you away from the work that a small business requires you to do," said Agnes Huff, CEO of Los Angeles-based Agnes Huff Communications Group LLC.

Some companies assign staffers to help mentor interns and work closely

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with them.

Leslie Saunders found out years ago how important it is to supervise interns. One intern hired at her Tampa, Fla., employee benefits brokerage was asked to do filing. She started filing everything under clients' first names.

"We have many Johns, many Thomases, many Christophers. She was doing it for several weeks before anybody really noticed," recalled Saunders, president of Leslie Saunders Insurance Agency Inc.

"She was an honors student, but it never occurred to her" that filing was done by last name, Saunders said.

The investment in an intern can pay off well for a company. Rothman and many other owners have hired some of their interns as full-time staffers.

"You can feel the rewards fairly quickly if you're doing it right," said Anna Jerden, an account supervisor at Agnes Huff Communications.

But Jerden also counsels owners to be a patient teacher, and give an intern time to adjust to working.

"When you're bringing in someone who doesn't know the

business, the first thing that happens to them is they get totally overwhelmed," she said.

■ Being a boss/parent to an intern

Some interns may never have worked before, or they had retail jobs or waited tables. They may have no idea how to behave or dress for an office setting. So owners may find themselves giving interns a few life lessons.

Katherine Rothman, CEO of KMR Communications Inc. in New York, recalled an intern who worked in the public relations firm's reception area. Rothman said the young woman "was slouching down in her seat, looking like she was watching TV at home."

Rothman took the intern aside and told her, "that's not the alert look you want your boss to see. I don't want clients or prospective clients to come in here and that's the first impression they have of the company."

Rothman has also dealt with similar issues, such as poor phone manners and female interns wearing clothes that are too revealing.

"You have to anticipate and assume they know nothing," she said.

Like employees, interns have a range of work ethics. Some are go-getters, while some spend more time texting and on Facebook than they do working. In the latter case, it's time for an owner-intern talk.

Some interns just don't work out. They don't seem to learn. Owners who have dealt with the problem usually let these interns go.

Jerden recalled an intern who couldn't spell and had grammar issues. Worse, she didn't seem to grasp the fact that this was a problem. "It became quite a handicap," said Jerden. The young woman didn't last.

■ Learn from your intern

Owners are finding that young people who have social media savvy can help companies learn how to use services like Facebook and Twitter. These owners put their interns to work helping the business get a better presence online.

"I'm not the best for posting to Facebook" said Julie Talenfeld, president of Boardroom Communications Inc., based in Plantation, Fla. "It's easy for them. They know how to do it."

■ **The government's take on interns**

Owners need to be careful if they have unpaid interns that they're not violating the federal Fair Labor Standards Act. The law spells out the criteria that an internship must meet in order for the intern to be unpaid.

The government considers an internship to be a training program that is for the benefit of the intern, not the company. The intern should not do the work that a regular employee would do.

The Department of Labor's website has information about the criteria that must be met for an intern to be unpaid. It can be accessed at dol.gov/elaws/esa/flsa/scope/er15.asp.

Interns who get college credit but not pay are covered by the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994. The Labor Department's website also has information on the regulations governing these interns. As with the FLSA, an intern under the School-to-Work act cannot do the work of a regular employee.

The fact is, many companies do use interns to do work that employees might do. Owners might want to consider giving their interns a small salary. Your best move may be to check with a human resources consultant or labor lawyer.