



## **Why Internships?**

**March 5, 2015**

How many times do we hear our employers express concern and dismay over the lack of skills possessed by the young people in their workforce? Not only may Johnny not be able to read, he may not be able to navigate the essential skills required in the workforce: show up on time, play well with others, and don't use your cell phone on company time.

The national statistics on youth employment might hold a first clue to the genesis of this dilemma. Not only are there an alarming number of high school students graduating without a single day on the job, but many of our post-secondary graduates are also missing out on the experience of being in the world of work. We teach many things in the classroom, but the workplace is something that must be experienced first-hand.

Additionally for Nebraska, the opportunity for a young person to experience the workplace of a Nebraska business will increase the awareness among our youth that they can have a "good life" in our state. All across Nebraska, we have very successful and vibrant companies to work for; and so it is frustrating to hear our young people say they must leave Nebraska to find a great job. The quality of life and the opportunity to succeed and be part of the community where you live are the great attributes of Nebraska. We truly are a great place to live, to work and to raise a family.

So what can be done to help our youth find their successful future in Nebraska? I would point to one program that provides the first steps to reach the goals of supporting the opportunity for young people to find a great job in Nebraska, and for Nebraska businesses to work with talented young people. That program is InternNE.

The program began as an idea in the *State of Nebraska, Growing Jobs, Industries, and Talent: A Competitive Advantage Assessment and Strategy for Nebraska*, by Battelle Technology Partnership Practice, in September 2010. In the portion of the report related to the Nebraska Talent Advantage Initiative, Battelle specifically argues that Nebraska needs to improve the connections between students and companies, specifically to "promote on-site and distance-related postsecondary student internships across the state with businesses in economic base industries." From this recommendation was born the InternNE program managed by the Nebraska Department Economic Development.

The InternNE program began in June of 2011 after the legislation and appropriation was approved to fund the internships created by Nebraska businesses across the state. In the first year of its implementation the response to the program was very robust. In fact, the dollars pledged for internships actually exceeded the first year appropriation of funds. Over the next two years, the program reached a balance between funds available and internships awarded. However, at no time in the program's 3 plus fiscal years of operation have the number of funded internships met the number of internships awarded.

***Connecting Talent + Careers + Communities***

---

7101 Mercy Road, Suite 150  
Omaha, NE 68106

The Department of Economic Development has aggressively marketed the program across Nebraska, attending business and economic development events. It has also marketed the program at job fairs hosted by most, if not all, of the postsecondary education institutions across our state. In addition to the efforts of the Department and the postsecondary institutions, our Chamber and economic development organizations have been strong advocates for the program, sharing the news of this program with Nebraska businesses. Barry Kennedy, President of the Nebraska State Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in a recent article in the November/December 2014 issue of *The Executive*, and in an editorial in the Omaha World Herald on November 5, 2014, stated that the most recent statewide survey of Nebraska businesses “found that more than half – 52% - said they had experienced difficulty in hiring qualified employees over a 12-month period.” Kennedy stated, “One of the most obvious answers [to this issue] is to keep our young and educated people here in Nebraska.” Kennedy cited the InternNE program as one of the successful programs to engage youth in our Nebraska businesses through valuable internship experiences. Additionally, the Lincoln Journal Star and Omaha World Herald have published feature stories or editorials supporting the program.

So why has a program that has the support of the business community and an easy application process created fewer internships than planned?

One, creating a quality internship is not easy. An internship can and should be more than a part-time job. An internship should provide value to both the company and the student. It should be an opportunity to test the skills and knowledge of the intern with an eye toward future engagement with the company. Particularly, related to internships funded through InternNE, the internship must provide keen insight into the business so that the student can gain valuable experience in a field that may be the future career for the student. This takes considerable effort on the part of the Nebraska business. Conducting workshops or providing guidance on how to create a valuable internship may assist Nebraska businesses not only to create an internship but also to create an internship program in their company that can be sustained into the future. Networking among our businesses and finding mentors among businesses who have created internships may also be helpful.

Two, creating internships in non-metropolitan areas of Nebraska has its own set of challenges. Business across Nebraska have participated in the program and provided valuable opportunities for students to experience the great opportunities in our state. Of the total number of internships hired since the inception of the program, 27% are not in Lincoln or Omaha. The program is most successful when a Nebraska business has recruited the intern and then applies to the program. Sometime rural job opportunities present issues such as finding housing for the student during the internship and providing community opportunities that help the student see their future in the rural community.

Three, there is no consistent requirement to have an internship among our post secondary institutions or the hundreds of academic programs. Advocating for internships in each and every major in postsecondary education would be too sweeping and broad, and may create insurmountable hurdles for some students and programs. However, our postsecondary institutions and programs should consider encouraging the development of internships, particularly in programs where gaining first-hand workplace experience would benefit the student. These strategically developed internships would prevent the unnecessary increase in credit hours to graduate but would add valuable experience for the student upon graduation.