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inspiring commercial design solutions

This article originally appeared in Contract Magazine, January 2005  
[www.contractmagazine.com](http://www.contractmagazine.com)

January 25, 2005

## **The Value of Internship**

Only a few years ago, the newest, fastest most powerful computers were assigned to our senior-most staff working on the largest projects. Now, we give them to the interns. The intern, then, teaches us.

This observation obviously applies to exciting new applications and proficiencies of technology that interns may possess to advance design decisions and aid the visualization of our solutions. It is also a metaphor for the respectful acceptance of new ideas, from fresh faces, fresh eyes, open minds and contagious enthusiasm we hope for in welcoming young people to our ranks.

The Environments Group routinely employs interns in our staff mix. Our internship accommodation is informal and unstructured (though we do satisfy many NCARB Intern Development Program (IDP) training unit requirements) and it is driven largely by the demands on the studio from our mix of mostly corporate interior design clients, and in fulfilling a self-imposed obligation to our profession and belief that our industry, architects and designers of all disciplines, and society are best served when we reduce the contrast between the academy and the profession.

The qualities we look for in our interns are not surprising. We look for people who are intensely curious; they exhibit a love of doing good work, they have skills to contribute in many meaningful and immediate ways, and they are not intimidated by the size nor complexity of the problem placed in front of them. Our intern recruiting efforts vary from direct campus recruiting, to identifying candidates through service to academic institutions (advisory boards and juries), to requiring an exceptional, out-bound intern to select their replacement from their school ranks. When asked, they have taken the task very seriously, considering both the weight and the risk carried by their recommendation. The out-bound intern often considers factors that most employers do not or cannot, such as social/cultural fit with the firm, unique skills offered or required, their dependability, and they may assist in resolving possible logistical details such as short-term housing and transportation needs. We do not draw distinctions between interns, co-op students or part-or full-time student positions. Upon graduation, we consider all staff as "professional" even as they complete IDP requirements, generally over three years, or pursue examinations by NCARB or NCIDQ.

## **The Value of Internship,** Continued

How does internship add value? What are the conditions necessary for an internship experience to be considered valuable? The answers to these questions are subjective and non-reciprocal. Thankfully, formal and in-formal internships are beginning to be studied more thoroughly, with deserved recognition to the AIA for its continued willingness to explore education and early-career issues.

Internship can create value several ways: for the education of the intern herself; for the shared benefit of her instructors and classmates upon return to the academic studio; for the firm, her project team and thereby, the firm's client. She is exposed to sound professional judgment, debates over best solutions to user's needs; she hones time-management skills, develops lasting professional and social relationships and builds an ethical foundation for life-long learning and contribution to community. This is the best possible outcome.

What is the worst? Unfortunately, this answer is obvious: the intern learns little and contributes less; creates error-ridden work the firm must pay others to undo; time is lost, and so is the credibility between the firm and the intern's academic institution; necessary social and professional networks fail develop. Interns may underpaid, overworked, pigeon-holed CAD-jockey experiences that we regret receiving or some in our industry still provide. Ouch.

Clearly the greatest value of internship is not just exposure to the behaviors of, but the active participation in the vibrancy and challenges of a professional design studio culture. They must see that design is an iterative, interdisciplinary and social process. They must know that a design studio is also competitive free-market system for talented people seeking new, challenging opportunities and recognition by peers and that friendly competition can focus minds and efforts and need not bring selfishness, arrogance, exclusion or disrespect. They must see that in a healthy studio it is essential to possess the learned ability of individuals to deliver and to accept criticism of work product without criticizing one another. Our office and our project teams are necessarily collaborative, dependant on a respectful exchange of perspectives, agendas and skills.

Internship experiences must provide what an academic setting cannot. Interns have to learn how to be engaged in a studio environment, to see that designers must be empathetic; they must be confident and persuasive without being defensive, they must demonstrate advocacy for the users and clients they are working for and an understanding for all dimensions of the problem. They must abandon fictional clients for real problems, real needs of real people with real constraints and real consequences.

When they reach the professional design studio, they must know that participation is not an option, and that learning, teaching and collaboration is what defines studio life.