



People Skills

by Eileen D. Soisson

Structured hospitality internships

*Another great article from The Rooms Chronicle, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! ***Important notice: This article is copyrighted by The Rooms Chronicle and may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher.*** College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com*

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While nearly every hospitality industry professional will admit to the value a college student can derive from a cooperative education experience (e.g., internship), many hotel managers overlook the benefits a structured internship program can add to the property. An internship is a short-term on-the-job experience in which student interns receive training and gain experience in a specific field or career area such as hospitality.

While a college degree, good interview, solid résumé, and persistent effort are still necessary for most successful applicants for hotel management positions, having an internship and real world experience are more important than ever for both the student and hospitality property. The recession and slow economic recovery of the past few years have had an imminent impact on the openings for recent college graduates hoping to start a promising career in the hospitality industry. Many industry representatives believe that applicants who have completed an internship are more attractive as prospective employees and competitive in the job market.

Internship structure

Creating a structured and effective internship program is vital to the success and level of impact of the internship experience for the property. Those responsible for overseeing the intern must be willing to set a consistent structure that complements and enhances the department. If a property is looking for someone to simply file paperwork, make copies or run for coffee, then that is all the intern is going to learn how to do. In addition, that limits the benefits an intern will derive from the internship experience as well as the benefits that a property will obtain from an intern.

The integration of classroom instruction and on-the-job training through a structured internship experience frequently provides students the opportunity to apply their higher education knowledge before they graduate and enter the workplace full-time into their chosen careers. This practical experience is an introduction to what a career in the hospitality industry entails; a realistic job preview of sorts. While the intern is able to gain practical first-hand experience, the property that agrees to sponsor the intern benefits from the arrangement by employing a student who is eager to learn, and who is currently engaged in a course of study at the college level in the discipline of hospitality management. In general, interns acquire the technical proficiency and assimilate into the service-minded role of a hotelier more rapidly than those without previous industry training.

Training agreement

The intern and internship provider should sign a written training agreement prior to the intern's arrival that outlines the confirmed internship dates, terms and conditions of employment, as well as an intern job description or tentative training schedule, and any other expectations that either party may have.

Training plans

A training plan is beneficial for the internship provider as it outlines the components needed for the intern and property to follow despite time constraints, labor shortages, or other unexpected obstacles that could potentially interfere with the delivery of the internship experience. Such a training plan should include needed documentation, objective of training, internship on-the-job training justification, skills to be imparted, training syllabus, and supervision and evaluations methods.

The American Hospitality Academy has programmed internship training throughout the United States for over seventeen years and credits structure and experience for their success. AHA recommends a structured training plan that outlines what an intern will be expected to follow during his or her internship. AHA has created a competency-based internship program

that allows the motivated student the opportunity to complete their training program at his or her own pace. The AHA program also allows the resorts more flexibility with their training for the individual students, thus making the internship less labor intensive for management while still providing a valuable experience for the student.

Property training

Interns should be exposed to the various operations within their chosen discipline of training. The objective is to gain learned hospitality knowledge and competencies through a structured internship program of combined aptitude and attitude skills. Rotations and exposure are property specific. The on-the-job training within an AHA Rooms Division Internship usually includes rotations through or exposure to the following departments: Housekeeping, Telecommunications, Uniform Services, Reservations, Front Desk, and Engineering. This setup allows the intern to attain greater breadth of operational experiences and realize the complementary roles that each department plays in the delivery of seamless guest service.

With a competency-based internship program, interns are exposed to various hotel operations at a pace that is beneficial to both the student and the host property. Rotations and exposure are property specific. Interns are given the responsibility to complete monthly competency projects, case studies and supplemental resource projects to broaden their aptitude and attitude skills. Program participants must submit the competencies with the necessary management signatures at the bottom of the form for them to be considered complete. Competencies are self-paced; so if there is a more difficult competency that may require additional research or time (on the part of the intern or the property), then the intern can work on that competency longer to accomplish the activities or skills needed to achieve expertise.

Supervision and evaluation

Interns should be assigned a designated internship supervisor and all lines of command and communication regarding the internship should go through that supervisor. Supervision is conducted through individual meetings, task and daily observations, peer reviews, mentoring and coaching. Both positive performance and points of improvement behavior should be documented and filed in a professional and fair manner.

A mid-term and final performance review completed by the internship host supervisor should be completed to evaluate the intern's progress with training, attendance, internship projects, attitude and dedication. Interns should have the opportunity at mid-term and at the conclusion of the internship to complete an evaluation of the training program to address and respond to any concerns and feedback. Receiving and acting upon honest and candid feedback about the program from interns is vital to ensuring future internship successes at the host property.

Success through structure

A student intern is at an impressionable time in his or her life and the internship manager must show leadership, knowledge and compassion. Structure must be threaded throughout the internship and enforced through a fair and consistent manner for a property's internship program to be successful. Once there is an established rapport developed between the intern, university and property, word-of-mouth will spread about the value and benefits of the property's internship program and the property itself.

"Intern participants will most likely realize sooner, rather than later, whether the hospitality industry is the proper career path for them because of the internship experience" says Cindi Reiman, president of the American Hospitality Academy. "With our labor shortage so severe and turnover so high within the hospitality fields, a structured internship program should be of the utmost importance to both universities and the worldwide lodging industry."

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