

Finding the Perfect Co-op Student

By Karen Olander

One often overlooked hiring strategy to help companies address short-term staffing needs, or to test out potential staff for long-term positions, is co-op hiring.

Summer is an ideal time to consider hiring a co-op student, as thousands of brilliant young minds flood the job landscape in search of opportunities to gain experience. Many students offer much more than general office skills. Engineering, Biotech, Commerce, and Business Administration are just a few of the fields students are looking for work in. This article takes a brief look at the advantages and disadvantages of this and how to get started.

Hiring a co-op student enables companies to sample talent without a long-term commitment. In most cases the cost of co-op student labour is nominal, if not free. But beware! Free is not always a great deal. Anyone who has ever hired the wrong person knows the cost associated with hiring mistakes. Co-op hires are no exception. You may still be stuck with the wrong person for the duration of their term if you are not careful.

Here are some of the steps to keep in mind:

1. Check the community colleges and universities to see if they offer co-op programs. (see a list at end of this article) For best results, employers should structure their requirements to match the co-op program's guidelines.
2. Keep in mind most co-op terms last four months that coincide with a specific academic term.
3. Define and detail the scope of work that your company needs to accomplish within a specific work term. Keep a back up list of tasks just in case your student ends up being a high performer.
4. Submit your work placement offer to the co-op placement centre.
5. Interview and select your co-op. If you are lucky, your first choice employee will accept your work offer.
6. Establish ways to minimize co-op errors and put methods in place to correct them as soon as possible.
7. Limit co-op's access to mission critical information. Carefully gauge your employee's understanding of your business and their ability to be trusted with confidential information. Remember they will be gone in a short time and you don't want them to take all of your business secrets with them.
8. Set the student up for success - check their performance against your own clearly defined and explained expectations. The more specific you can be, the better. You want the co-op experience to be rewarding for both the student and your business.

Several universities and community colleges have developed a reputation for their superior co-op programs. Seasoned staff cultivate relationships with employers so that their students have work placement choices. You might try to develop a relationship with placement officers if you think co-ops are for you. A few of the most notable are:

Simon Fraser: <http://www.sfu.ca/coop/bus-coop/>
University of Victoria: <http://mycoop.coop.uvic.ca/>
University of British Columbia: <http://www.coop.ubc.ca/>

Some college students are required to work for free, and most university co-op programs pay the students a set rate depending on the school and the year the student is in. The pay range varies, so make sure you get the correct information up front before you bring in your student.

Employers should look for someone with maturity combined with fresh ideas gained from the student's academic program. It is very competitive amongst employers vying for the same pool of top students. Often there are more companies offering placements than choice co-ops students available. Interviewing on campus and ranking your selection makes sense. Remember students do the same with their employer choices. If you are lucky your number one pick will chose you.

In the ideal world, your co-op will contribute creative ideas and bring new energy to your business. A co-op student can also help you to test a newly created position and to determine if your business really needs this staff function filled on a full time basis. In this way, co-ops may help you to test and establish your business and human resources priorities.

Chances are students with good classroom experience can add to your business, but they may also be a little too idealistic about the way things could or should work in the real world. A little idealism can be great for your organization, but always remember you are in no way committed long-term to your co-op.

Another added benefit is that some employers in BC can benefit from a government tax credit for co-op students salaries. Information on this is available at: http://www.hrtoolkit.gov.bc.ca/staffing/staffing_options/coop.htm

Of course, there is no such thing as a free employee. Any business that brings in a co-op worker must be willing to give a little back to the student. For some employers this means offering serious on-the-job training to their new hires. For others it means just opening the door to give a co-op a chance to break the catch 22 of needing a job to get a job. Whatever the case, it may be a viable option to consider as part of your hiring plans in the coming months.

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