

Creating a Youth-Friendly Workplace: Quick Tips for Employers

Sacramento Works for Youth, a program of the Sacramento Employment and Training Agency (SETA), incorporates youth-development principles to help young people make a successful transition to adulthood and economic independence. Sacramento Works for Youth programs are delivered through the one stop career centers in collaboration with community-based organizations and school districts. Sacramento Works for Youth offers: summer youth employment, pre-employment skills/academic enrichment, internships, work experience, community service and service learning. SETA – Sacramento Works for Youth is providing this Quick Tips guide to help employers create an “youth-friendly workplace” that produces positive results for both you and your intern. For the complete publication, *Creating a Youth-Friendly Workplace: An Employer’s Guide to Building a Quality Internship*, visit SETA – Sacramento Works for Youth at www.seta.net and YDN at www.ydnetwork.org.

What is an internship?

As an employer, you have the opportunity to teach vital skills to young people through an internship experience. Hiring a youth intern is different than hiring an employee. An internship* is defined as “a carefully monitored work or volunteer experience in which an individual has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what he or she is learning throughout the experience.”

*SETA – Sacramento Works for Youth uses the term “trainee” to be synonymous with “intern,” specifically as referenced on worksite agreements with the employer.



Tips for a quality internship

Tip #1: Establish goals for the internship

The intern and employer should work together to establish goals that support the intern’s development and career interests. Whether your company develops computer systems or provides catering services, it is essential the intern learns how work relates to his or her life, interests and others’ work.

Tip #2: Provide workplace mentoring

Providing a supervisor/workplace mentor who can foster learning and competent workplace behavior is critical for the intern’s success. This mentoring might include advising the intern about appropriate work attire, teaching phone etiquette and helping the intern understand the demands of the workplace, being a “safe” adult they can confide in on workplace matters and his or her career aspirations. The intern will benefit most when the supervisor/workplace mentor blends youth development principles with mentoring.

Tip #3: Implement youth development principles
Employers can play a critical role in helping youth develop skills and create relationships that youth may not experience at school or at home. More than 50 years of youth development research has identified the “building blocks” or conditions—called “supports and opportunities”—that contribute to youth being able to develop into self-sufficient, caring, and contributing adults. The following overview provides some ideas to help you implement youth development practices in the workplace.

Emotional and Physical Safety

- Orient the intern to the workplace and introduce them to coworkers.
- Have employees address the intern by name.
- Provide reliable equipment and demonstrate how to use it safely.
- Know and uphold child safety laws and sexual/ racial harassment policies.
- Explain to interns expectations about breaks, lunch, and appropriate behavior.

Relationship Building

- Model respectful communication and appropriate boundaries at all times.
- Create opportunities for the intern to observe/ learn professional behavior.
- Provide a supervisor/workplace mentor who meets regularly with the intern.
- Be sensitive to the individual realities of interns including youth of color; youth with disabilities; those who speak English as a second language; and teen parents.

Youth Participation and Voice

- Learn about the intern’s interests and expectations for the internship.
- Develop a workplan with the intern to guide the experience.
- As part of the work-plan, list expected tasks and what skills the intern will learn from those tasks.
- Get regular feedback from the intern about his or her internship experience.

Skill-Building

- Discuss 21st century skills important to your career field.
- Design assignments incrementally to build skills, interests and confidence.
- Provide a variety of activities and scaffold them so the intern can take on more challenging tasks as the internship progresses.
- Incorporate self-assessment and constructive feedback on a regular basis.
- If the intern’s performance diminishes over time, check-in to see if the student is bored or is not sure how to do the work.

Community Involvement

- Provide brochures and other materials explaining your company’s values.
- Discuss how your company contributes economically and socially to the local and global community.
- Involve the intern in an employer-driven community service project.



Tip #4: Develop workplace strategies based on adolescent development

Youth want to be appreciated and respected as individuals, first. It also helps to know a little about their background and culture, as well as what you can expect from teenagers developmentally.

Adolescent Characteristic	Workplace Strategy
Interested in sense of independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make the intern accountable for his or her work.
Up-front about what he or she wants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve the intern in project development. • Ask the intern about his or her interests.
Appreciates fairness and truth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be frank, honest, and nonjudgmental.
Wants to do well but does not know how	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be friendly and clear. • Discuss project activities, and/or company expectations (e.g., objectives, agendas, dress code).
Prefers involvement in multiple activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve the intern in a variety of tasks.
Underdeveloped time management skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign due dates; review timelines. • Model and explain time management skills. • Have the intern keep a project journal or time sheets.
Lacks self-direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check in with the intern to ensure he or she is clear on what is expected. Help set goals; the case manager may be able to help.
Knows everything; influenced by peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elicit and respect the intern’s ideas. • Provide alternative suggestions and share reasoning.
Learns in short intervals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give new information in small steps. • Provide opportunities for the intern to practice and reinforce what he or she is learning.
Has already had jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore skills the intern already has and look for ways to enhance and build on them.

Tip #5: Anticipate how you will handle difficult situations

Since the young people with whom you will be working don’t have a great deal of life experience, some of them may need extra coaching about appropriate workplace behaviors. For example, what if the intern dresses inappropriately or uses inappropriate behavior/language?

- Assess whether the inappropriate behavior is “situational.” Was the intern aware of the expectations of the workplace?
- Talk to the intern. Review company policies and their importance. Discuss what is appropriate with friends or family may not be at the work setting, and vice versa.

- Explain that sometimes differences between settings are insignificant; other times, they may cause serious misunderstandings.
- Consider the intern’s interpretation of the situation. Ask the intern what prompted the behavior, and discuss alternatives.
- Take time to document any concerns you have and share these with the intern’s case manager.

Tip #6: Provide an orientation for supervisors/ workplace mentors

Orientation and training provides an opportunity for supervisors/workplace mentors to clarify their role and responsibilities for creating a safe and high-quality experience for the intern. The orientation needs to cover required policies and procedures related to workplace safety; confidentiality; equity; and sexual harassment. Participants should also receive tips for

creating a youth-friendly workplace, how to work with teenagers from diverse cultural backgrounds, and characteristics of adolescent development.

Tip #7: Develop a plan to fit your needs as well as the intern's

The following questions will help guide your planning efforts:

- How many interns should you take? How many can you support?
- Do you want an intern for a specific project or general support?
- Will the intern work in one area or rotate through departments?
- How will you keep the intern busy and engaged in meaningful work?
- How will you ensure all youth are welcomed regardless of racial, age and socioeconomic status?
- What will an intern orientation to the workplace look like?
- What training will you provide the intern to develop soft skills?
- How will the intern's interests be incorporated into assignments?
- How will the intern be recognized for his or her work?
- Who will have the primary responsibility for the intern?
- What kind of progressive intervention or discipline will you have if there are concerns or issues?
- Who on staff will be the lead in this coaching/oversight?
- How will you train staff who will be working with the intern?
- Does the training prepare the staff to know who to turn to if the intern has issues that are beyond the workplace setting?

Tip #8: Structure the internship experience

A well organized internship sets the conditions for a safe, productive, and positive experience for the intern and the supervisor/workplace mentor.

Tip #9: Provide an orientation session for the intern

A good orientation will set a welcoming tone while clearly establishing roles, responsibilities and expectations. You will want to clearly address workplace rules such as appropriate dress attire, phone usage, text messaging, as well as workplace policies and procedures. It is equally important to allow time for the intern to discuss his or her expectations.

Tip #10: Hold regularly scheduled meetings between the supervisor/workplace mentor and the intern

Tip #11: Use an Intern Expectations and Interests Form* to get to know the intern

Tip #12: Use an Intern Workplan* to match the intern's interests and skills with work assignments

Tip #13: Check in with the intern between meetings, since most interns work faster than you think

Tip #14: Provide feedback to the intern about his or her performance using Mid and End-of-Term Intern Performance Evaluations*

Tip #15: Acknowledge the intern's work at the end of the internship

*Tools available in *Creating a Youth-Friendly Workplace: An Employer's Guide to Building a Quality Internship*.



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