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Disney's Internships Provide a Life-Changing Work Experience



Walt Disney Company brings in 10,000 to 20,000 interns annually. While dealing with a massive volume, they strive to offer a personalized experience with a mission to “change lives”. Kristi Breen, a vice president in charge of recruiting, spoke about the two major internship programs offered at Disney.

Ten to Twenty Thousand Interns are Recruited Each Year

I would like to highlight our two major internship programs (see table below). One is Disney College Program (hereafter College Program). It is an internship in park and resort areas. The program has been around for over 30 years and is very much part of a culture at parks and resorts. We consider this a pipeline for our future leaders.

The other kind of program is Disney Professional Internships (hereafter Professional Internships). We provide opportunities to leverage technical knowledge within specific functional areas at our business units. The purpose of this program is to take in new, creative ideas from the new generation. It is also a pipeline of talent for us. These two programs collectively accept 10,000 to 20,000 interns throughout the year.

Two Major Internships at Walt Disney Company

Name of Program	Business Field	Years	Description
Disney College Program	Disney College Program	Freshmen through Seniors and recent grads	An internship opportunity at Walt Disney Resort or Disneyland Resort. Interns generally provide guest services.
Disney Professional Internship	Various business units at Walt Disney Company	Primarily for Juniors, Seniors and recent grads	An internship opportunity for students to put their technical knowledge gained at school in practice. They are assigned to specific functional areas (i.e. broadcasting/media, corporate, creative, entertainment, operation/travel, sales/marketing, technology/digital).

Table created based on websites:
<http://cp.disneycareers.com/en/default/>;
<http://profinterns.disneycareers.com/en/default/>

Availability of Credit-Offering Courses and Exposure to Senior Management

With the College Program, interns are with us for three, five or seven months. A five- or seven-month-long internship is unique. Since students need to take a semester off from school to participate in such a long internship, we offer courses that have been recommended for credits by the American Council on Education (ACE). Our collaboration with ACE is a critical enabler.

In the Professional Internship, interns will have a typical responsibility as the employee of the assigned department. On top of that, they will be given short- or long-term projects that they will present to the executives in their department at the end of the program. This is for a number of reasons: it makes the internship experience more meaningful; they have exposure to senior leaders; and it is an opportunity for the senior leaders to evaluate and identify the talent they want to convert into full-time roles.

Focus on One-on-One Treatment Despite the Multitude of Interns

As I mentioned, we work with up to 20,000 interns. A hundred thousand people apply each semester to the Professional Internship. I always remind my team that we cannot treat candidates like numbers. People have high expectations for Disney which we have to live up to. And, our purpose is not to recruit people but to change lives. When you think of a purpose like this, then it causes you to act differently.

Given the demographic of the students in the current generation, personalized attention is essential. They need to feel unique and special. We are analytical and value the metric when planning strategies, but we cannot forget that there is a person attached to each of these numbers. We always keep in mind of our purpose which is changing lives.

Enhance Program Satisfaction Rate and Build Reputation through Word of Mouth

Before building our internship program, we did a lot of research to find out what was important in an internship program. Feeling valued, feeling they are contributing, doing meaningful work, feeling valued by their leader are all the things that came up. Therefore, we make sure our interns have exposure to senior leaders within the organization.

We also perform surveys or focus groups at the end of the program to see if we met the interns' expectations. Students these days tell thousands of their friends via social media about their experience. Enhancing interns' satisfaction is important considering the potential consequence of the word of mouth.

Unconverted Interns are a Valuable Talent Pool

Many of our entry-level employees come from our internship programs. When we have additional openings, we look at the alumni population before posting the position externally. In order to facilitate this process we launched Disney Alumni Association last year. At the moment we have ten thousand members on its Facebook page. It is a pool of proven talent with a desire to come back and work at Disney.

We unfortunately have to let go of some of the strong, diverse interns as we do not always have enough entry-level positions. However, we are hopeful that they come back as boomerangs 3, 4 or 5 years later.

Six Thousand International Interns Join the Program from Across the World

We recruit about 6,000 international students every year from key universities around the world. We sponsor the visa, and provide housing and transportation to and from work for those working in our parks.

We are a global company. We have ESPN International, Walt Disney International, and Parks & Resorts in Paris. So we want to make sure we are acting as a global company. In order to bring all these businesses together as a whole, we share talent and resources across the world.

(Interview = CareerXroads)

Kristi Breen VP of Disney International and Campus Recruiting, Disney Cruise Line



Before assuming her current position in March 2013, Kristi was the Director of College & International Recruiting for Disney Parks & Resorts for seven years.

This column has been posted to the website of Recruit Works Institute.