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The CASE for Using Interns

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Would you like to attract younger audience members? Have you been meaning to develop a comprehensive plan to take advantage of social media tools? Are there projects involving computers or data management that you've been deferring? Do you have concerns that your orchestra's online image may not appeal to as wide a range of ages and ethnicities as you wish?

If you answered "Yes" to any of the above questions, then perhaps it is

time to consider starting a sustainable internship program. The recent economic meltdown has resulted in most orchestras seeing a decline in revenue, while some may be scrambling to simply stay afloat. As a result, the thought of unpaid help in the form of interns may seem like an attractive option. However, rather than viewing an internship program solely as a readily accessible source of low-cost labor to help tide you through lean times, I would suggest thinking strategically to consider the potential benefits your

organization could gain through a well-conceived and ongoing program. By doing so, you may actually gain a wider range of higher-level assistance in meeting, and perhaps exceeding, your organization's goals.

Three great reasons to use include:

1. Gain a perspective on what your organization really looks like to the 18-34 year old age group; help develop messages to engage younger audiences
2. Add timely and relevant social

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networking and other Internet-based communications skills to your team

3. Help manage and/or re-tool how you integrate audio and video media, technology, data, workflow and other processes into your operations

Of course, to benefit from the prospective, bright-eyed, enthusiastic intern one envisions walking through the door requires taking steps to establish a program that will attract the best possible candidate pool, a plan that should also help each student achieve his or her own learning objectives while contributing meaningfully to your firm.

From the perspective of the intern candidate, here are a few key questions they may be considering.

- Are my contributions likely to be valued by the organization?
- Will I have the opportunity to listen, learn, grow, and when appropriate, ask questions and offer suggestions?
- Will I gain new connections in my own professional network that can help advance my career?
- Do the attitudes and ethics of my host organization align with my own?

If the answer is “Yes,” to these questions or other similar ones, then you will likely attract the type of motivated and committed student who can help you advance.

The majority of California two- and four-year colleges have music, business, communication, and computer science programs that actively support internships or cooperative work experiences. You might reach out to the department chair or faculty in one of those areas and arrange a meeting. The staff of the college’s career center is another resource for developing an internship pipeline. Discuss the opportunity for mutual growth that you envision in starting an internship program with their school. Your faculty or career center liaison may offer guidelines as to what has proven successful for other internship host firms. Many educators are happy to look over your position or project description

and perhaps recommend specific candidates that may be a good fit

Academic internships normally run for one semester and usually involve a regular weekly work schedule for students. In most cases, if the internship will be taken for academic credit, the student’s institution will provide a rider documenting that the student is insured while on your premises under the school’s basic liability policy. Once you’ve identified a good fit with an intern, ask them to provide a written list of their learning objectives for their internship. If their list is too ambitious based on the allotted time, suggest paring it slightly; if their objectives are too vague, recommend they find two or three areas on which to focus their time and efforts to gain a better understanding of those aspects of your operation. Students need some structure to succeed in their role, so keep in mind that your intern is likely to be more productive (and you will be more satisfied with the results) if there are clearly defined projects with specific due dates agreed to in advance.

Make sure that students are able to observe staff and board meetings, even if they don’t actively participate in board meetings. It is important that they feel they are on the “inside” of your orchestra and come to identify with the importance of meeting the challenges you are facing. Many intern supervisors also schedule a weekly intern debrief of 10-15 minutes at the end of each week, at which time “anything goes” with regard to your intern’s questions. Such meetings help you to provide some weekly coaching and to gauge the intern’s overall progress.

Don’t be afraid to offer praise or suggestions for improvement to your interns whenever justified. After all, they are there to learn and you have graciously offered them the laboratory to test and improve their knowledge, skills, tact, and office acumen. Near the midpoint of their internship, it is good to speak with the student’s academic

advisor to share your perspectives (pro or con) on the progress the student is making within your organization. If there are concerns as to the student’s work, hearing that there is room for immediate improvement from their faculty advisor, in addition to your tips for improvement, should help a student see the importance in elevating their game. During the last week, schedule an exit interview with your intern which will allow you to give them an overall review of their contributions, share some career advice, and importantly, solicit the outgoing intern’s suggestions for ways to help make the experience more beneficial to your firm and students in the future.

Internships are playing an increasing role in students’ pre-professional training. They are being used to demonstrate evidence of business, technical and social competencies that employers increasingly value in the hiring process. As a result, doing well in an internship is perceived by top students as an essential building block. From the perspective of the arts administrator, developing a sustainable internship program in partnership with higher education can give your organization access to a range of skills, knowledge and perspectives that will likely help you become more competitive and appeal to a broader audience. Most importantly, you may be helping to kindle the spark in a future arts leader who will bring their 21st century knowledge and passion for the arts to a field that needs new talent to help insure our collective vision of an arts-rich future.

Keith Hatschek directs the Music Management program at University of the Pacific and has supervised many interns placed at ACSO member organizations. He is the author of How to Get a Job in the Music Industry and a contributing writer for the online music publication, “Echoes – Insights for Independent Artists.” ♦