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Targeting Today's Entry-Level Candidates

Many companies and public accounting firms are adding recent graduates to help them address business growth as well as corporate governance requirements such as those mandated by the Sarbanes-Oxley Act.

Hiring demand continues to outpace the number of

available entry-level accounting graduates, which makes for a competitive recruitment environment.

To secure the best and brightest for your department, you need to start early. Before you even place a job ad, you should build a strong presence on local college campuses. Here are some strategies to consider.

Open your doors

Consider creating an internship program to help accounting students get a foot in the door of the business world. Today's collegians know that on-the-job experience will give them an edge in landing that first professional position, and many will seek these opportunities before they graduate. Internships also provide you with a low-risk opportunity to evalu-

ate firsthand the potential of various individuals as full-time employees.

Talk to your local university's accounting internship coordinator or



head of the accounting department to learn about any requirements. Also find out whether interns will receive course credits for their time at your company, as this may affect the structure of your program.

Prepare job descriptions for your

internship positions as you would for regular full-time jobs. Clarifying objectives up front will help ensure there are no misunderstandings. Schedule an initial meeting with students before the start of the internships to review responsibilities and discuss how their performance will be evaluated.

Develop a reputation for offering quality internships by keeping clerical tasks to a minimum. You might start students with basic accounting work, such as entering, posting, and reconciling batches of journal entries, and then introduce them to more challenging assignments, such as preparing journal entries and researching account discrepancies. Provide ongoing feedback and advice so interns can succeed in their roles.

You may want to pair interns with mentors who can provide individual attention and training.

Additionally, give students an opportunity to meet with people throughout the department and organization. For instance, you might have them talk with staff members

in different specialties—such as audit, tax, and finance—so they can learn about various career paths. Invite interns to attend company events to provide them with networking opportunities.

Speak up

Another useful way to reach potential entry-level candidates is by giving presentations on campus. You might talk about what employers today seek in staff-level accountants or how Sarbanes-Oxley has affected the accounting function at your company. Students who are interested will likely approach you after your speech to learn about potential work opportunities.

Also contact your local university's career center. These centers frequently maintain a record of business leaders who are open to providing informational interviews to students who want to learn more about a company, professional field, or industry.

Go to the fair

On-campus job fairs are another strategy for promoting your firm with students and reaching possible hires directly.

To ensure your company makes the right impression, send a representative from your accounting team to the events in addition to human resources (HR) personnel. That way you'll have someone there who can evaluate applicants and answer specific questions about your firm's accounting department and available positions. Providing face-to-face contact with a financial professional at your organization can also help you stand out from competitors who only have HR representatives at their booths.

Take the interview to them

Many universities also orchestrate on-campus interview programs. These allow you to talk individually with students on the college grounds. The university will advertise your attendance, provide you with résumés, and then schedule interviews with individuals you'd like to meet.

Keep in mind that you'll generate more interest in your openings if you limit overly specific requirements. Try to differentiate between qualifications that are essential to the job and those that are simply desired. If you restrict interviews to those who have participated in international accounting internships, for instance, students may bypass your company completely as a prospective employer.

Making the extra effort to build company name recognition on campus can improve your success in recruiting accounting students. You'll help your organization stand out from other employers, and you'll make it easier to attract valuable entry-level talent to your organization. ■

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