


# Developing a Meaningful In-house Internship Program

**Law Department Management**

**Career Development**



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As the prestige and allure of corporate counsel positions has continued to increase in recent years, so too has law student demand for experiential learning opportunities in these coveted in-house roles and departments. Simultaneously, corporate legal departments are facing mounting budgetary scrutiny amid unpredictable economic cycles and yet must still maintain efficiency and productivity despite strained resources.



In-house careers are increasingly desirable and feasible pathways directly out of law schools. Artwork by LightField Studios / *Shutterstock.com*

Fortunately, today's pool of law student talent is stronger than ever, teeming with students champing at the bit to gain meaningful exposure to in-house careers and gain practical experience in corporate legal departments. This is an environment in which not only is there ample opportunity for in-house legal departments to give back to the legal community and foster the next generation of in-house leaders but to gain meaningful department lift as well.

As both a former participant in my alma mater's corporate legal externship program and now as a yearly host to a corporate extern, I have seen first-hand the positive impact that these types of opportunities can have not only on developing lawyers but on their host legal departments as well. Below are key drivers I have observed in the execution of successful intern or extern programs, which will hopefully help other legal departments create similarly rewarding opportunities for the next generation of corporate counsel.

## Align student and company objectives

While interviewing candidates, and in the early stages of your program, develop an understanding of individual student goals and objectives. Experiential learning isn't one-size-fits-all; individuals may be interested in corporate counsel work in the broadest sense or in specific functions or experiences afforded by in-house practice. Equipped with this understanding, roadmap your time with the student and look for logical points of direct or indirect overlap.

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For example, if a student is interested in commercial contracting, earmark forthcoming engagements with clients or vendors likely to produce multiple drafting turns and provide visibility or involvement in those negotiations. This will keep the student engaged throughout the internship period, and supervised drafting may free up full-time department resources for other projects and initiatives.

## Don’t manufacture an experience

Provide an accurate portrayal of the day-to-day function of your department, and the challenges and rewards associated with such work. Aspiring corporate attorneys deserve an honest view of the in-house legal world, including its less glamorous elements, so that they can plot out their career objectives accordingly. Rising law students are discerning, curious, and capable of identifying tasks made up for the sake of occupying their time, which can result in a negative experience for the student.

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Alternatively, even rote work, when assigned with clear explanation and context, can nonetheless provide meaningful experience. For example, an entirely mundane NDA you would otherwise review in a few minutes may be the first contract a student has ever reviewed (with supervision), resulting in a net-positive for both the student and the department.

## Give and accept feedback

The key to an effective internship program is finding ways to iteratively improve the experience with successive students. You may have preconceived notions about what makes an experience meaningful for a student and your department, which upon completion of a placement benefited neither party.



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As you provide guidance throughout your intern or extern experience, and upon completion of the program, ask for feedback in addition to providing responses about the student so that they may develop as attorneys and people. Over time, you'll likely find that these reflections help not only your experiential learning program but your entire department. Each new class of young attorneys brings a fresh perspective that can help your team improve and develop in meaningful ways.

## Nurturing future leaders

Corporate legal careers remain highly sought after, both as an ultimate exit opportunity for attorneys that cut their teeth in law firms and, increasingly, as a desirable and feasible pathway directly out of law schools. Fortunately, for developing lawyers, the modern landscape of interconnected global corporations and new, innovative businesses will only further expand the need for capable and dynamic in-house counsel. In my experience the above best practices have not only helped to better equip students for this landscape, as they prepare to embark on their own in-house journeys, but they have also resulted in meaningful improvements to my own department as well.

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Fraser joined Employer Direct Healthcare directly from his alma mater, Southern Methodist University's Dedman School of Law. He is a dual degree JD/MBA graduate, having also specialized in finance at the SMU Cox School of Business. During his studies, he gained experience in aerospace, labor and employment, and NHL legal departments. He received his bachelor's degree in International Relations from Michigan State University's James Madison College.

Fraser has served as a guest lecturer on lawyering and ethics for business attorneys at SMU Law. He maintains involvement in a number of programs at SMU, including as a Corporate Counsel Externship Program host, and has been recognized for contributions to a number of textbooks focused on in-house legal practice (*Inside Counsel, Practices, Strategies, and Insights*, by Marc I. Steinberg and Stephen B. Yeager) and ethical decision making for business attorneys *(Lawyering and Ethics for the Business Attorney*, by Marc I. Steinberg). He has also been published academically in the Securities Regulation Law Journal.

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