

Firms Court New Hires -- In High School

Companies Aim to Build Relationships Earlier Through Scholarships, Internships and Jobs

By AMAN SINGH

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In his junior year at Whitney M. Young Magnet High School in Chicago, Geovannie Concepcion joined Future Business Leaders of America, a group for students interested in accounting and business. That led him to a series of internships with PricewaterhouseCoopers. Mr. Concepcion, now a 20-year-old sophomore accounting major at DePaul University in Chicago, hopes eventually to work for the accounting firm.

Employers like PwC are targeting students early with internships, scholarships, employment opportunities and college grants, aiming to build long-term relationships that could give them an edge in recruiting full-time employees. PwC, New York, starts contact with students as early as high school. It was one of several companies that provided financial support and mentoring for the FBLA club at Whitney Young. It granted Mr. Concepcion a \$1,500 scholarship for his freshman year of college, and he is one of a group of students whose paid internships with PwC have been renewed each semester.

"We begin looking for potential interns as early as high-school seniors and train them through their college graduation," says Amy Van Kirk, vice president of recruiting for PwC.

Such early nurturing fosters loyalty to sponsor companies, as well as getting students involved in the work force. Ms. Van Kirk says interns who are hired full time have the advantage of previous training and a deeper knowledge of PwC. The company, which began the program a decade ago, says these people have a higher probability of being strong performers and of staying with PwC longer. The number of people PwC hires from the program has climbed every year for the past four years, Ms. Van Kirk says.

"We end up offering 85% of our [college-senior] interns" full-time posts, says Ms. Van Kirk, and 90% of those accept the offers.

"It is all about labor pull," says Mark Stoeber, senior vice president of Monster Worldwide Inc.'s consumer-business unit. "Companies are gearing towards the best and most experienced professionals, and if there aren't many, why not train them to be that?"

Merrill Lynch & Co. offers 12-week internships to college juniors and seniors, and about 75% of the senior interns take jobs with Merrill. Spokeswoman Selena Morris says the system gives Merrill employees who know how the company works and are comfortable there.

PwC's program includes seminars, workshops and conferences for high-school students on accounting careers and on the company itself. It also holds job-shadowing days and offers college scholarships through the Junior Achievement organization. At PwC's annual Diversity in Business Leadership Conference, held this year in New York in July, 60 students from more than 35 U.S. colleges participate in three days of accounting seminars, workshops and team competitions in which they work on problems taken from real situations.

With such efforts, PwC aims to increase student interest in the accounting field and its monetary rewards, as well as in the firm itself, turning returning students into interns and, eventually, loyal staffers.

"It is a double-edged sword. ... There is this feeling that they are investing in training me and my loyalty belongs with them," says Mr. Concepcion, on a break from a summer training session at PwC. "I used to love the job-shadowing days with PwC in high school. Since then ... they have sort of earned a loyalty from me," he adds. His first internship was during the fall of his freshman year in college; he's now on his second stint, a summer program, and will continue with a third internship this fall.