

GROWERTALKS

Young Voices

5/1/2019

Finding the Right Intern

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Currently, there's a large push to get more students interested in Green Industry careers. For the future of our industry it's important that we all eventually be replaced (scary I know!). Even now, there are students out there who are going to be knocking on our doors looking for jobs in the next couple years. What about the students who are already on the path to a career in our industry?

Each year, I have the pleasure to be a part of the internship recruitment team at Ball Horticultural Company. We do a company-wide call for internships in early December, asking the various departments if they have projects for interns for the following summer. We strive to make sure that each project is comprised of meaningful work that will not only benefit the company, but will also offer a worthwhile experience for the intern. (This isn't the kind of internship you see in the movies.)

After our list of internship projects has been finalized in January, we set off across the country to find the right students for the jobs. We travel to various universities and meet with students who are interested in investing their summer with us.

Being able to do this has been a learning experience over the last four years; I get the chance to meet with all sorts of students. You'd be surprised by the wide array of majors, minors and areas of interest that I see on resumés—everything from engineering to enology.

However, with such a wide variety of interests, I've found that students know only a little about what careers actually exist for them once they toss their caps on graduation day. If you were to ask students about horticulture career options, you'd think that there were only four available to choose from: grower, landscaper, plant breeder and professor.

While I think everyone can agree that those four roles are extremely important, we can also agree that there are many other career options out there when it comes to this industry. We need students interested in sales, marketing, logistics, pest management, product development, finance, web development and human resources, too! Our industry, like many others, has a lot to offer students on the career hunt.

Could we look outside of students currently walking down the horticulture path? Sure ... but it would be great if we didn't have to. A student looking to work in logistics and expecting to be working for a company shipping automobile parts is going to have to learn a little about plants before signing on to work in a logistics department that specializes in shipping plugs from Colorado to Connecticut.

This lends itself to why we place such an importance on internships. It gives us a chance to see what happens

when we place a student with a specific knowledge base into a real-world situation. We get a glimpse of just how much training some students are going to need and the students get to see that merely knowing the names of plants isn't everything they need to be successful in the field.

What does the perfect prospect look like? Obviously, for each different internship or role there are certain requirements and skills that you look for, but across every position there are a few qualities that really stand out and set students apart from others in the industry.

- **Business acumen**—Do I expect any student to be able to understand all of the complexities involved in our business operations? Certainly not. However, students who are able to understand immediately that they're being hired to add value to a company and generate future success put themselves ahead of their peers. Students who understand what skills are necessary in a business setting are pretty rare. I'm not talking about negotiation skills or management techniques; it's things like knowing how to use Excel, Outlook and CRM systems. Learning how to make and operate a pivot table should be a graduation requirement. Even those frameworks are changing and evolving.
- **Communication skills**—I imagine that this is on the list for every industry and company looking for interns and employees. It's not enough to want to work with plants. There's a need to be able to explain what you're doing and why you're doing it. Not everyone is going to be an extrovert and our industry has more opportunities than most for people who prefer to work alone or in a small team, but there's always a need to adequately explain what you're working on and why it's important. If someone can't explain what sets them apart from the rest of their cohorts, they likely aren't going to be very high on my list—no matter what credentials exist on their CV.
- **Industry knowledge**—It's a small world out there and the horticultural community is even smaller! That's why it's incredibly frustrating to interview candidates who have no idea what our company does and where we fit in to the industry that they're pursuing a career in. I wish that more colleges offered industry overview programs showcasing how products go from concept to consumer—then all a student would need to do would be to Google “Company XYZ” and they'd understand a lot more about what they truly do.
- **Curiosity**—Students who have a general sense of curiosity paired with an adaptable mindset are an elite group. If someone has already “figured out exactly” what they want to do, they're likely going to be disappointed with their first roles in the industry. There's a need to be flexible and open. You learn a lot in college, but it's important for students to see that their learning journey is just beginning. I look for students who are willing to give things a shot, and find out what they're really good at doing, without bias. **GT**

Mason Day is the co-founder of GrowIt! The Plant Community. He is also a member of the internship recruitment team at Ball Horticultural Company.