

Co-op 101: An Employer's Primer on Co-operative Education

Day after day, the Chamber hears stories from businesses about how tough it is to find good employees. Co-operative education programs can be a creative solution to your staffing problems.

Many employers have questions about the process. Here are some answers.

FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Why should I hire a co-op student, anyway?

With employee shortages on the horizon, you don't have the time or the luxury **NOT** to hire one.

Here are more reasons why hiring a student can work for you:

- You create a future employee pool.
- By having senior employees mentor the students, you help retain older workers and keep them engaged.
- You can observe and evaluate potential employees on the job without hiring them permanently. As one Halifax employer was heard to say, "I look on co-op placements as a four-month job interview."

Don't these co-op programs involve filling out a lot of forms? I have a small staff and lots of competing demands and I don't have the time to mess with paperwork.

All co-op programs have worked hard to simplify their employment processes so that now, you don't have to spend as much time with forms as you once did.

Can I find people to do highly technical jobs? My workplace involves only this kind of work.

In the community college and university programs, there are students available in every field – from geomatics to engineering to applied mathematics. With some research and assistance from program personnel, you can most likely find a potential employee with the expertise you're looking for.

The jobs I could offer are mundane. Are the students willing to do basic work?

Of course! Students from both secondary and post-secondary levels can benefit from gaining basic job skills. Even so, you are required to offer any student an enriched educational experience. You or a senior employee should give useful on-the-job learning opportunities – formal and informal – to the student.

Do not underestimate the value of a "regular job" to a young person. "Regular jobs" teach young people much in-demand "soft skills": good communications skills, report writing, client and people management, punctuality and a good work ethic.

I can understand what a university or college student brings to the workplace. But what can a high school student do for me?

Younger co-op student on “career exploration” will bring you energy, enthusiasm and new ideas. They also have technological skills that are highly valuable in the workplace. High-school students also have an innate desire to prove themselves at work – a quality some senior employees may lack. And there’s another thing to get you interested: your young co-op student might just be your future employee.

How long is a typical work term?

Lengths vary. Terms can be for as long as six months, but the average length is three or four months. High school “career exploration” programs last 100 working hours.

I operate on a shoestring. Do they want big salaries?

Many post-secondary programs have funding support so you may be paying less than you think. High school co-op students on “career exploration” terms work free of charge to the employer.

My peak business period is in the summer. Can I get a co-op student for that time?

Yes, usually. Most university, college and high school programs operate during the entire year.

What are my responsibilities to a co-op student?

First, you must provide useful work and some training and supervision. Secondly, you must provide the student with a safe, comfortable work environment – one that meets or surpasses all workplace health and safety regulations.

If I’m looking for a co-op student, how do I find one?

All Halifax high schools have a co-op program. And most local universities and community college campuses have at least one program. For some degree and diploma programs, a co-op term is a mandatory degree requirement.

Besides finding potential employees, hiring a co-op student helps achieve bigger societal goals. You improve connections between the education and business communities. You are also working indirectly to improve the quality of the provincial education system – which, in turn, stimulates our economy. Those are goals all of us can applaud.

For more information, here are some websites to look at:

www.dal.ca/cooped/

<http://www.smu.ca/administration/coop/>

<http://www.msvu.ca/co-op/>

http://www.nsc.ca/Learning_Programs/Work_Experience/Co-op-EmployerGuide_08-09.pdf

<http://www.investinyouth.ca/eng/index.html> (or call your local high school)