

How 6 CPGs Use Internships to Fuel Talent Pipeline, Encourage Industry Careers

Industry hopefuls learn the ins and outs of what could be their future career.

By **Cheryl Winokur Munk** | July 5, 2023

Summer internships are in full-swing at many CPGs where industry hopefuls are getting acclimated to the profession, performing tasks such as market analysis, benchmarking, product testing and marketing as they learn the ins and outs of what could be their future career.

Many companies, including **Anheuser-Busch**, **Conagra Brands**, **Coca-Cola**, **General Mills**, **Hershey**, **J.M. Smucker**, **McCormick & Company**, **Mondelēz**, **Nestlé**, **PepsiCo** and **Post Consumer Brands**, have well-established internship programs. These paid opportunities often take place over a 10-to-12-week span and vary in terms of the number of interns accepted, experiences offered, timing, eligibility criteria and full-time hiring potential.

The hallmarks of a good program include meaningful, hands-on projects, exposure to various parts of the organization, strong mentorship, management interaction and professional development, according to college career professionals who routinely place interns at CPGs.

“Students want to know, if they came back full-time, what it would really feel like. They want to feel really supported and that everyone is invested in their success,” said **Jessica Christopher**, associate director and career advisor at the **UCLA Anderson School of Management**, who helps place MBA students at multiple CPGs.

Here’s a sampling of programs offered by six CPGs:

Conagra

The paid program for college students spans 11 weeks and interns have day-to-day work responsibilities similar to someone in an entry-level role, **Nicole Ramirez**, the company’s early talent programs leader, said in emailed comments. For example, a finance intern might help “close the books” for the fiscal year. In addition to daily tasks, interns are assigned a project that has an impact on the business, such as testing the durability of compostable bowls for frozen entrees, Ramirez said. This summer, Conagra has around 90 interns, up from about 75 the previous summer, according to the company’s posts on LinkedIn.

General Mills

This year, 173 undergraduate and graduate students, 18% higher than in 2022, joined the company from 56 different colleges and universities. They are serving in 20 locations to support various projects in areas such as finance, brand management, supply chain, packaging, and manufacturing, according to company data.

On average, 90% of these interns will receive a full-time job, 86% of which accept and return to General Mills post-graduation. “The internship program is the company’s largest pipeline for filling full-time early career positions with more than two thirds of the company’s early career talent being made up of past interns,” the company said in a [blog](#) posting.

To view the graphic, [click here](#) or go to https://www.cpgspecialist.com/c/4134204/533754?referring_content_id=4134204&referring_issue_id=533754

Hershey

The company posts available co-op and internship positions on this [link](#), but it also offers an opportunity for younger students, in partnership with the Milton Hershey School, which was started by company founder, **Milton Hershey**. This summer, 23 rising high school juniors and seniors will work on a comprehensive project aimed at improving consumer engagement and driving business growth, said **Star Gibbs**, manager of talent development, in emailed comments. Projects are intended to help interns gain exposure to real-world business concepts, develop basic research and communication skills, spark creativity, encourage teamwork, and build confidence through sales practice and presentation skills, Gibbs said.

Smucker

The company offers [internships](#) in spring, summer and fall, the majority of which are located at its corporate campus in Orrville, Ohio. Internships can be in areas such as information services, finance and accounting, supply chain, marketing, sales and category management, operations, research and development, human resources, and communications. The company has about 150 interns each year. The company says on its website that it regularly offers full-time roles to interns who excel.

McCormick

The company hires about 50 interns each year in the U.S., and around 85 globally, depending on the year, said **Nikole E. Freeman**, global head of talent acquisition, in emailed comments. Interns in the paid 10-week program are recruited to work on important business projects across several disciplines including sales, marketing, finance, food science, human resources, and communications. They work on a combination of projects related to market analysis, competitive benchmarking, and research. Interns also participate in “Speaker Series” events with McCormick leaders and tour the company’s facilities. The organization has an annual conversion goal of 50%, which it exceeded in 2022.

Post

The company’s 10-to-12-week-long internship program is open to both undergraduate and graduate students. The numbers vary slightly year-to-year, but this year the company is hosting 23 interns. “In planning for our internship program, our goal is that every intern position would potentially become a full-time role,” said **Lily Langan**, the company’s talent acquisition specialist, in emailed comments. Summer interns work on a business team at the company’s corporate office in Minnesota or at one of its manufacturing plants across the U.S. and Canada. The company focuses on giving interns hands-on experiences in areas such as marketing, product development, food science, engineering, and operations, Langan said. Interns also present their capstone projects to senior leadership, illustrating the tangible impact they had on the company.

To view the graphic, [click here](#) or go to https://www.cpgspecialist.com/c/4134204/533754?referring_content_id=4134204&referring_issue_id=533754

Tips for Success

CPGs should constantly be looking at their intern programs to see where tweaks may be necessary, college career professionals advised.

Companies should offer real-world projects that have a clearly defined set of responsibilities, timeline and deliverables. “It’s okay to have them do some other things here and there, but they should own a project from beginning to end,” said **Jon Quinn**, senior lecturer at **Ohio State University’s Fisher College of Business**.

Good internships offer professional development opportunities, through workshops, seminars and on-the-job-training.

Mentorships are also critical. An ideal mentor should be someone who is approachable, has the time to devote to the relationship, and is close in age for bonding purposes. “The poorest internship experiences have been when interns feel they have no one to go to or the assigned person isn’t available,” Quinn said.

Managers also need to engage closely with interns. UCLA’s Christopher recommends CPGs try to place interns with managers who are truly interested in offering guidance and have the time to do so. Don’t place them, for instance, with a manager who travels frequently, is scheduled to go on maternity leave, or is too busy for weekly check-ins, Christopher said.

There should also be a good balance of work and social activities so interns get a good feel for the company’s culture, without being given the impression that work is all fun and games, said **Lindsey Steiger-Muck**, senior director for career services at **The Sam M. Walton College of Business at the University of Arkansas**.

Successful programs also benefit from close coordination with universities and colleges. University of Arkansas’s business school, for example, offers a for-credit one semester internship course that can be done in a student’s sophomore, junior or senior year. About 15% of the students enrolled in that course are in CPG-based roles, Steiger-Muck said.

The business school also hosts on-campus career fairs and networking events to connect students with potential employers, including CPGs. Being active on campus is a good way to recruit, Steiger-Muck said. “That’s what really lets a company build their brand.”

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