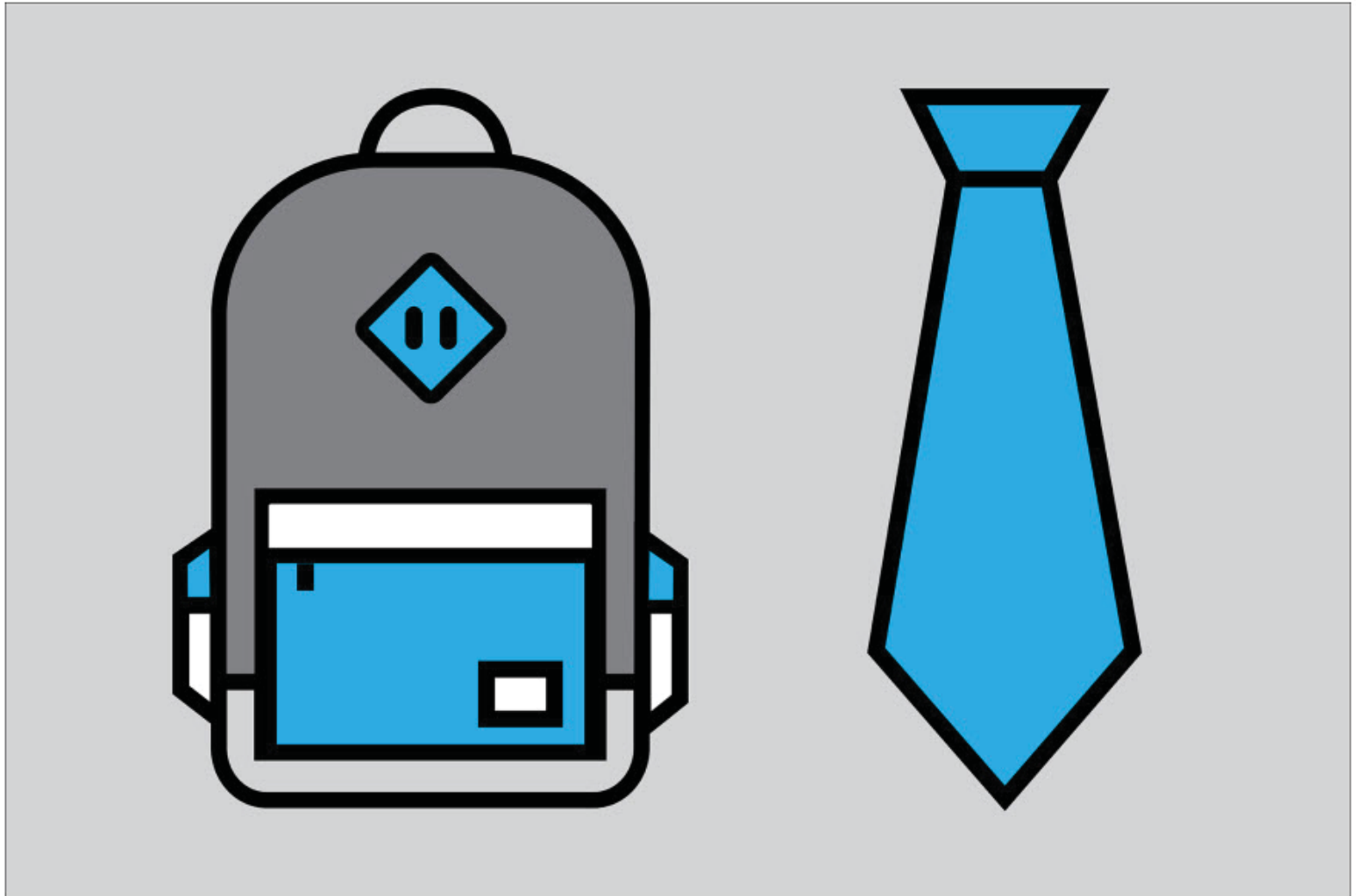


Working with Interns (the Other Kind)

For firms, college interns can create a pipeline of talent while they gain the professional experiences. Here is guidance on how best to make the relationship beneficial.

By [JEFF LINK](#)



A strong internship program can infuse a firm with talent and fresh ideas, while providing emerging professionals the work and client experiences necessary to advance their careers. Here, several architects, an intern, and a member of the AIA Intern Titling Work Group offer guidance on how to make the relationship most beneficial.

Get the Title Right

Before the hiring begins, a firm must understand state guidelines defining who can appropriately be called an intern, or a designer. A [2016 position paper](#) from the AIA specifies that though “intern” remains a supported title for students working in an architectural office while pursuing an architectural degree, it should not apply to graduates who have earned a National Architecture Accrediting Board–accredited degree and are working for a firm. For the latter individuals, the AIA paper supports the use of “architectural associate” and “design professional.”

"The main issue on titling is that you're not marketing your services as an architect when you don't have a license and you're not a registered architect," says Venesa Alicea, AIA, a New York-based architect and member of the AIA Intern Titling Work Group, which developed the policy statement.

Hire Wisely and Pay Fairly

Chicago-based [dSpace Studio](#) founder and principal Kevin Toukoumidis, AIA, invites students each year from top university architecture programs to apply for a paid summer internship at his firm, with wages typically starting at \$18 per hour.

"We're not looking for someone that can just draft, sketch, or 3D model," Toukoumidis says. "We want someone who can write, ask questions, and give us critical input. Someone who has opinions and suggestions for how we could be better architects and how our projects could be better."

Through experiences matched to their interests and aptitudes, dSpace interns are assigned to roughly 10 small projects and two large projects. They work independently and also shadow the firm's design staff on a range of tasks that include developing schematic designs and renderings and preparing written materials for project bids and design competitions.

Aaron Forrest, AIA, co-principal at Providence, R.I.-based [Ultramoderne](#)—a former Next Progressives firm that employs up to eight interns and emerging professionals at any given time—notes that it is easy to be captivated by a candidate's portfolio and overlook critical working habits or communication styles that might not be a good cultural fit. To counter this, Forrest recommends requesting and checking applicant references ahead of making any offers.

"Architects today are really good at putting together a portfolio, [but it's] a limited view of a person and their work," Forrest says. "You really have to go out and find out who they are, how they work, and what they're good at. It's good to speak with someone who has worked with them before and really knows where their strengths lie."

Facilitate Real-World Experiences

Interns may be well-versed in architectural theory and fluent in the latest design software, but they often lack experience developing detailed construction documents and in speaking with clients. To teach and cultivate these skills, Jake Brillhart, AIA, founder of his [eponymous Miami-based studio](#), gives his interns real-world experiences that can help them grow professionally and gain Architectural Experience Program credit hours, which are required in most U.S. jurisdictions for licensure.

"I don't hire an intern unless they can offer something," says Brillhart, who is also a professor of architecture at the University of Miami. "It's kind of selfish, but, in return, I will teach them something ... One of our recent

interns was adept at CNC fabrication and used a laser cutter to prototype furniture for us." Brillhart says. In return, "We let him sidecar on an apartment project in Miami Beach, doing interior drawings, meeting clients, and seeing how it comes together."

For Claire Wagner, a Rice University student pursuing a M. Arch. degree who spent the summer of 2018 interning at dSpace Studio, the opportunity to engage with junior and senior architects to develop a new interface for the firm's website and to design interior elevations and millwork details for a suburban Chicago residence left her thoroughly pleased with the experience. "That's why I value an internship program like this," Wagner says. "It prepares you for the technical components of the profession you don't get exposed to in school as much—[especially] how architecture works as a business."

Designate a Mentor

The success of an internship ultimately relies on mentorship—someone in the office responsible for orienting an intern to the culture and habits of the firm, providing appropriate guidance on projects, and helping them meet assignment goals. At the start of her internship, Wagner says she was paired with Ethan Werkmeister, a dSpace Studio designer who works on residential design, but also on marketing and in information technology. "He ... introduced me to a set of rolling projects I could be working on," she says. "It was nice to know who to talk to, right from the beginning."

Senior architects voices appreciation for her work, which she found encouraging, and midway through her internship she discussed her performance with Toukoumidis in a scheduled mid-term review. "He really took an interest in my development and encouraged me to speak up more in client meetings," Wagner says.

The egalitarian office structure, she adds, allowed her to ask questions and share ideas candidly, emailing architects with questions when she found herself stumped by a particular project or task. "Right from the beginning, I felt it was a friendly, open atmosphere," she says. "Each person came up to me throughout the week, asked how it was going, and told me they were glad to have me there. People have to be generous to give you their time and appreciate your role."