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Internships Help Firm Find the Right Fit

 By **SIMONA COVEL**
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Mill Steel Co. had plenty of job candidates knocking on its door. The problem? Most weren't the kind the steel processor wanted: The company would get flooded with a motley stream of resumes from online job ads, when it wanted driven, entry-level workers who would learn the business and stay for the long haul.

But four years ago that changed, thanks to a partnership with nearby Grand Valley State University, in which the company provides paid, semester-long internships for students and works with business classes on company projects.

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SMALL BUSINESS LINK: RECRUITING



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During those stints, Mill Steel gets to determine if the interns have what it takes to stay with the firm long term and move up its ranks. Meantime, word about the company spreads through campus, raising its cachet among students.

Each internship is like "a three-month interview," says Tom Stanfield, director of people development at Mill Steel, which employs 140 people in four Michigan locations and sells steel parts to auto companies and office-furniture manufacturers. Before the program started, Mr. Stanfield adds, he had to interview 10 times as many candidates before finding the right person. Seventy percent of the interns accept full-time jobs with the firm after graduation.

Finding job candidates who are the right fit and and stick around is a common problem among small businesses. Often, people, especially younger workers starting out, will take job at a small firm to get experience and then move on. And, of course, companies don't really know if people will work out until they hire

them. But Mill Steel's intern strategy shows how zeroing in on a locale for specific talent and giving them a shot to show their mettle can pay off.

Small firms "have a tremendous opportunity with young people that they don't know they have," says Kevin Wheeler, president and founder of Global Learning Resources Inc., a recruitment consulting firm in Fremont, Calif. They need to "figure out how they're going to make the students aware [they] exist."

School Pact

Given Michigan's high unemployment rate, Mr. Stanfield always received lots of responses to ads he placed on CareerBuilder.com and local online job sites. But he found himself "wading through volumes of resumes" to find the handful



that fit his parameters.

Mill Steel's Tom Stanfield and intern
Amy Michael

Then in 2003, Troy Farley, an assistant director in Grand Valley's career-services office, approached a Mill Steel executive who lived down the street from him and suggested a partnership: Mill Steel would offer a semester-long internship program, promoted by Grand Valley's career-services office, and Grand Valley would help brand the company on campus, bringing executives into classes.

Mr. Farley says he wanted to offer more job opportunities to graduates of Grand Valley -- a mostly commuter state school with about 20,000 undergraduates and two campuses in the Grand Rapids area. Students often think they'll graduate and secure jobs with large, well-known companies, but "that just isn't the case," he says. Students "don't understand the value of working at a small or medium-size organization," he says.

Mr. Stanfield, 59, says gauging a potential employee's skills through an internship "gives us much better information than trying to read somebody's life story on a resume."

FACT BOX

Business: Mill Steel Co.

Founded: 1959

2006 Annual revenues: \$200 million

Employees: 140

Executive: Tom Stanfield

Title: People development director

Age: 59

Years in position: 16

Biggest hurdle overcome: Finding a great pipeline of young, energetic talented future candidates

Biggest success: Mill Steel named the "Best of the 101 Best Companies to Work For in West Michigan" in 2005 and 2007

Mill Steel's recruiting efforts include having company executives be guest lecturers in classes at Grand Valley's business school. The company also hosts periodic open houses for students at its Grand Rapids office. And it enlists marketing students to administer its annual customer survey. All this allows the company to get to know students, who can, in turn, judge if Mill Steel is the type of company they would want to work for.

By the end of each semester working with a class, "we know who the shining stars are," Mr. Stanfield says.

'Mile Markers'

During the first year of the partnership, Mill Steel hired three interns at \$10 per hour. One stayed on as a full-time employee. The following year, it hired several more. Currently, the company hires six to 10 interns each semester and about a quarter of its employees are former interns.

Over time, Mr. Stanfield has learned to give interns assignments that can gauge their abilities and potential. "You build [the internship] with mile markers," he says. "If they can't get to a certain level by a certain time, you realize that you don't have the right person."

On occasion, he says, interns will have some difficulties. One former accounting intern, he recalls, couldn't put together a spreadsheet for customer credit collections. "It happens once in a while where it's not their natural thing," he says. "It's better than taking a job and quitting in six months."

Others fit right in. Brandon Wilcox worked as an intern in 2005. After graduating a year later, the engineer joined as a full-time employee. Mr. Wilcox, 26, says he also interviewed with a major auto maker, but found the company to be "high stress" compared with Mill Steel, which he says has a community feel. "I pretty much brag about how solid this company is, how stable," he says.

Striking up a relationship with local schools can make sense for firms without the means to travel to dozens of college career fairs or the cachet to make students swarm to their booths, says Mr. Wheeler of Global Learning Resources. He suggests focusing on state schools or smaller universities, where there may be less competition for talent. "Hold a free seminar on campus," he says. "Run an ad on the campus intranet."

Despite its success at Grand Valley, Mill Steel has had difficulty duplicating its recruitment strategy at other area universities. Mr. Stanfield says he has tried to reach out to officials at five other schools, but they weren't as receptive.

The key to getting the right fit, he says, is finding a career-services office that's willing to work with you and help establish the company on campus.

Write to Simona Covell at simona.covell@wsj.com⁹

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