

# Employers hire high school students to build talent pipeline

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Chicago Tribune

MAY 26, 2015

**H**igh school summer jobs are moving beyond lawn mowing and life guarding to career building.

Aspiring engineer Jailen Williams, for example, will begin a paid internship next month at Exelon's corporate headquarters in Warrenville, just days after graduation from Homewood-Flossmoor High School.

"This is a really great way to get a start on my career," said Williams, who will get a leg up on the job market before even moving into his freshman dorm at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., in the fall. "I never dreamed I'd have these kind of opportunities so early."

Once reserved for college students, the energy giant is offering paid internships to new high school graduates for the first time this summer, a sign of a growing interest in giving teens real-world experience at an increasingly earlier age.

"It's a little-known trend," said Pat O'Connell, executive director of ACE Chicago Mentor Program, which aims to attract students to architecture, construction and engineering careers through after-school and summer training. "Our students are a perfect example of how these internships can be a win-win: a life-changing opportunity for them, as well as a boon to participating firms."

Hiring and paying younger interns may help address a skills gap — the inability for students to transfer classroom knowledge to the field — that employers perceive. In a survey released last month by Career Builder, 1 in 5 employers don't think academic institutions are adequately preparing students for roles needed in their organizations.

The more robust economy has created more options for college graduates as well as younger job-seekers, experts say. When Urban Alliance opened in Chicago in 2012, the nonprofit that links students from low-income neighborhoods with internships partnered with 70 employers. Today that number has swelled to 125 in every sector — from Bank of America to the Chicago Bulls according to spokeswoman Wendy Dixon-Dubois.

At Chicago Public Schools' Early College and Career Education office, the story is much the same. Paid internships — usually for incoming juniors and seniors — have doubled in the last four years, said Veenu Verma, executive director.

"The recession and the long recovery has put a much bigger emphasis on career than ever before," said John Katzman, founder of Noodle Education, a New York-based website that connects students with post-secondary programs and other resources. "For the employer, it's a good investment. If these students are smart now, imagine what they'll be like in a couple years," he said. "For the student, you learn so much — about deadlines, about collaboration. And you have a much better feel for how the education you're getting will matter."

Katzman recently surveyed almost 1,000 parents of high school and college-age students and discovered that 73 percent ranked "acquisition of real-world marketable skills as the second most important factor in choosing a college, behind only a safe environment."

"Imagine learning to play football by just passing all day, but never playing in a real game," said Katzman, who has employed teens ever since he started the Princeton Review test preparation company in the 1980s. "It's a totally different experience."

Most paid internships for high school students are in the science, technology, engineering and math — or STEM — fields, where there's a high demand for employees and a limited qualified applicant pool.

And make no mistake, many of these young interns are not sharpening pencils or fetching coffee, but are in full-time positions and full participants.

Through the ACE program, interns have worked at prestigious firms in the city, contributing to high-profile projects such as Trump Tower and Kingdom Tower in Saudi Arabia, O'Connell said.

"This isn't just about providing career exposure," she said. "These kids have to demonstrate real value. When I think of putting high school students in some of the situations we've put them in, it's amazing how well they perform."

Saul Moreno, 27, an architectural designer at Thornton Tomasetti in Chicago, started at the firm as an intern while he was at Lane Tech High School. He returned to the structural engineering firm for several more summers while at Illinois Institute of Technology, which paved the way for a job offer after graduation.

"You get to learn early about what's expected of you, so by the time you're a full-time employee, you're already comfortable," Moreno said. "You know everyone and everyone knows you. Without the internship, I would not have been nearly as well prepared."

It's a benefit to other employees too.

"It was great for our staff," said Kathy Fanning, chief financial officer for Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture, recalling one high school intern so enthralled that "we couldn't get him to go home at night," she said.

"Sometimes, we lose touch. But then, we get around this fresh set of eyes and we realize that we really are doing unbelievable design work here," Fanning said.

Still, employers can be reluctant to bring high school students on board.

Exelon hires about 350 interns across all operating companies — typically rising college sophomores. But Tricia Joyner, Exelon's recruiting manager, is taking a chance on a trio of Homewood-Flossmoor students, including Williams. She viewed hiring them as a strategic way to help build a talent pipeline for the future, especially with an aging workforce.

"The value of identifying kids early is a risk, but it's a calculated risk," Joyner said. "Nuclear energy is not sexy, so the earlier I can get the process started, the better chance I have of attracting them to this industry."

She declined to disclose salaries beyond saying they are "more than minimum wage."

Tony Svozil, who teaches physics and college engineering at Homewood-Flossmoor, approached Exelon with the idea of hiring high schoolers. He expects a few "hiccups" along the way, but hopes the Exelon partnership will open a door to more options for his students.

"It's such a competitive world out there. An internship is something that sets you apart from the crowd," Svozil said. "You need to establish yourself as a brand."

It's not the pay, but the hands-on experience that is thrilling to Williams, who will make the hourlong commute each way to Warrenville from the south suburbs to pursue his passion.

"I was always that kid playing with Legos, so this should be really exciting," Williams said. "I've always liked to push myself, put myself in the hardest environment possible, so now I can."

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