

CHAPTER

1



Planning FOR AN APPRENTICE

One of the first questions I am asked when I talk to jewelry business owners about hiring an apprentice is: What happens if an apprentice breaks an expensive piece of my customer's jewelry? And my response is always the same: An apprentice should handle a customer's jewelry item only to transport it, for no other reason. Then comes the question, "Well, what good are they then?" Remarkably, the logic jumps from "I can't hire an apprentice because they will cause irreparable damage" to "They will be useless." In reality, with some advance planning and a widened perspective, neither of these alternatives needs to be true.

The Advantages of an Apprenticeship Program

Apprenticeships are a wonderful way for students in the jewelry field to gain experience, but they are also useful for your business. Among the benefits:

- New, creative individuals will help you to gain fresh insights into your
-

existing practices, get exposure to new ideas, and rally enthusiasm for higher craftsmanship.

- An apprenticeship program can help you to better recruit well-suited staff, especially for small to mid-sized companies. When you “try out” a candidate during a semester or summer apprenticeship, you avoid the pitfalls of taking on a new hire only to find out that the person is not a good fit for your organization, or doesn’t like the segment of the jewelry field in which your company is engaged. An apprenticeship program allows you to benefit from added workforce help while being able to more accurately assess potential full-time employees.

- The added help of an apprenticeship also enables your business to take advantage of short-term support for special projects. With training, an apprentice’s extra set of hands will help your skilled employees to be more productive, freeing them up to accomplish more creative tasks that require their higher-level strategic thinking and expertise.

- The intentional promotion of your apprenticeship program—through your local chamber of commerce or local press—can enhance community loyalty for your business. If you offer an impressive apprenticeship program with a notable apprentice supervisor/mentor, your apprentices will talk about their experiences with peers, social media “friends,” and family members, essentially advertising your business and its services for free.

Steps to Take Prior to Initiating an Apprenticeship Program

While a worthwhile apprenticeship experience can and should be mutually beneficial, you first must lay the groundwork. The following outline can help you to ensure that both your shop and the apprentice will gain the maximum

reward from the program.

1. Involve all current employees by discussing apprentice-related issues at staff meetings or during one-on-ones with the managers. Without big-picture buy-in and staff cooperation, an apprentice will not feel welcome, focused, or engaged. And conflicting directives from uninformed staff members may make it difficult for an apprentice to meet specific program goals.

2. Conduct an informal survey of your employees. Some sample questions to ask:

What tasks and special projects require attention? What skill sets could your shop benefit from? Could any workflow areas and organizational tasks in the manufacturing shop or office be eased with additional help?

3. Based on that survey, make a list of the tasks and projects to which an apprentice could be assigned, and which skills would be needed.

4. Determine who could best serve as workplace supervisor, and see if their duties could be revised so that they have the time and resources not only to effectively train and manage the apprentice, but also to manage the program itself. Involve additional staff members by assigning them key roles in specific training areas, so the program can run more smoothly.

5. Decide when the apprenticeship should take place (steer clear of the stressful holiday season) and the amount of time that would be best to host an apprentice. (See Chapter 3, pages 41-42, for an overview of the most common apprenticeship timeframes.) To facilitate proper planning, you should elect a launch date of at least 8 to 10 weeks out—if you selected a summer time-frame, for instance, initiate the program planning, candidate search, and hiring process in March.

6. Figure out how to arrange the physical space of your business to accommodate an additional individual. (Ideally, the apprentice's bench would be next to—or in close proximity to—the workplace supervisor.)

7. Make sure your shop has basic security precautions in place, including video monitoring, alarm systems, safes, and established security practices for staff. To minimize liability risks, you should maintain standardized health and safety procedures, provide Safety Data Sheet (SDS) information, and comply with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations.

8. Research the legal ramifications of hosting an apprentice in your state. Consult with the Small Business Administration (*sba.gov*) or your state's labor department for information on employment and labor law, including which full-time employee benefits apply to an apprentice. Look into the regulations regarding workers' compensation, safety and harassment policies, age restrictions, and wage requirements. Speak with your company's human resource manager or legal counsel, or consult with an employment law professional through your local chamber of commerce.

9. Talk with your accountant and draw up a possible budget to determine whether your company can support one or more apprentices, and the financial impact it might have.

10. Develop a structure for the program. (In Chapter 3, you'll find how to accomplish this aspect.) Using the key information offered in this guide while adding your company's behavioral expectations, security protocol, and daily duties, you can ensure that the structure of your apprenticeship program will suit your company's unique needs.



*Based on staff input,
make a list of tasks
and projects for the
apprentice, and which
skills will be needed.*

Compensating the Apprentice

The logic of past eras, when apprentices were unpaid laborers or indentured servants who exchanged their time and labor for the educational experience of learning a trade, no longer holds up. Establishing an apprenticeship program as a means of receiving free labor violates the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which states that “the employer that provides the training derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the trainees, and on occasion the employer’s operations may actually be impeded.” The impediments your company may incur can be as slight as the time it takes to organize and implement an apprenticeship program, yet it is important to take the FLSA into consideration.

With an apprenticeship, you are legally obligated to offer at least minimum wage. The Code of Federal Regulations, Title 29, Chapter 1, part 29.5, states that you must provide:

A progressively increasing schedule of wages to be paid the apprentice consistent with the skill acquired. The entry wage shall be not less than the minimum wage prescribed by the Fair Labor Standards Act, where applicable, unless a higher wage is required by other applicable Federal law, State law, respective regulations, or by collective bargaining agreement.

To establish a baseline wage to offer, research current trends and applicant expectations of acceptable compensation. For a gauge of a “going rate,” check what a local temp agency is paying its temp workers. This rate is often slightly higher than the minimum wage in order to attract higher-qualified candidates. You are not obligated to pay unemployment, offer health insurance, or provide a severance package should you choose not to hire the person at the end of the apprenticeship. If you do wish to hire the apprentice permanently, you’ll need to reevaluate the compensation rate. Fair and adequate pay is the number-one reason companies retain employees.

Can the Apprenticeship Earn College Credits?

While an apprenticeship is definitely a “learning” experience, whether or not it qualifies for educational credits must be arranged with each school where said credits could be obtained. It is a misconception that apprenticeship work can be easily and equally exchanged for college or university credits. In reality, established collaborative programs between the jewelry industry and most educational institutions no longer exist. It is up to the candidate to pursue credit for an apprenticeship with their educational institution; your company cannot offer college credits directly as part of compensation unless you have established a program that has been accepted by an educational facility.

As an alternative to a paid apprenticeship, you can try to establish an internship program in conjunction with a local university or college metals program. This requires effort on the part of the business owner to cultivate and maintain the cooperation of the educational institution, and you may also need to have someone on staff with teaching experience or an advanced degree. Once established, though, an internship could provide a steady stream of apprentices who will come to you with some metalsmithing experience. (Read “Advice on Establishing a Joint Training Program,” page 22, to see how goldsmith/designer Gary Dawson set up an internship program with the University of Oregon.) Further on, this guide will offer additional structure and adult educational techniques to ensure that an apprenticeship or internship, depending on which you decide to pursue, will not end up badly.

Plan for What Happens After the Apprenticeship

An apprenticeship is a great way to assess the potential of a student, recent grad, or possible new hire, allowing you to gauge their skill levels and work ethic during this trial period. While it is important to give the apprentice real, meaningful work that will help your company accomplish more, run smoother, and complete projects more efficiently, there is the concern about what happens after the apprenticeship is over. What if the now-former apprentice is seeking employment with a competitor, possibly taking your proprietary designs with them? If this is a concern for your business, a “non-compete agreement” should be devised with the help of a legal service and signed by apprentice candidates before beginning their apprenticeships. A non-compete agreement should be limited to design ideas generated at your firm; it should not limit the apprentice’s ability to find work within any specific geographic location. Any restriction that creates an undue burden on the apprentice’s efforts to make a living may make the agreement unenforceable. Another way to address this concern is to make sure the apprenticeship program focuses on projects that support your craftspeople in ways that are not directly involved with your business’s proprietary design work.

The best way to minimize risks to your business is to start with a solid understanding of the process and to establish a flexible, well-established apprenticeship plan that can be adapted to your unique business needs. Once you create it, initiating an apprenticeship program can be as easy as checking items off a list.



With training, an apprentice's extra set of hands will help your skilled employees be more productive.

Advice

on Establishing an Internship Program



Gary Dawson, a goldsmith and custom jeweler who currently operates Gary Dawson Designs in Eugene, Oregon, has long been an advocate of preparing students for professional careers. Below he describes how he worked with the University of Oregon to develop an internship program at his then-business, Goldworks.

Please tell me how and why your jewelry business established a program for students.

GD: Metals students who discover they love the medium and then decide to pursue careers in jewelry or metalworking may encounter difficulties. Matriculating from the highly conceptual work of academia into a more structured world of metal-as-a-means-of-support may be made more difficult by the occasional lack of communication and cooperation between these two outlooks. It was this difficulty that we addressed in the establishment of a permanent working internship program with the University of Oregon Jewelry and Metalsmithing department. Closely related to the concept of an apprentice yet different, an intern is by definition “an advanced student or a recent graduate undergoing supervised practical training.”

How did you find the students?

My shop had already been “discovered” by some of the metal art students from the University of Oregon Jewelry and Metalsmithing department. I think that the relevance to students of this program is underscored by the fact that the original idea [for an internship program] was brought to me by a student. In 1998, an outgoing employee introduced me to a student who suggested he could work for credits. The idea intrigued me, as I realized that I had a variety of things I could offer students besides a paid position. I had 10 years of teaching experience through the U. of O. Craft Center and private workshops, and my shop could offer training in the practical application of goldsmithing techniques with three working journeyman goldsmiths in the studio.

How did you structure this program?

The program started out in a very loosely organized manner in the summer of 1998, and after some discussion with Kate Wagle, the head of the Jewelry and Metalsmithing department at the time, we initiated the pilot program with one student. We felt the program would work best for both students and my shop if students participated for two consecutive terms (approximately eight months) with a minimum time commitment of 12 to 16 hours per week. This schedule was equivalent to a three- to four-credit course per term. In my proposal, I asked that students be prepared to participate in all shop activities, from cleaning duties to actual goldsmithing to working the sales floor. Students would submit portfolios, resumés, and statements for me to consider.

In 2003, Kate Wagle, Tracy Steepy—a metals instructor at U. of O.—my shop manager, and I finalized the following format.

Internship Criteria

- 1.** Candidate must be a University of Oregon student in good standing (3.0 GPA or better) currently enrolled in a BFA or graduate art degree program with intermediate to advanced metal-working skills.
- 2.** Candidate must submit (1) an application form, (2) a resumé, (3) one letter of recommendation, (4) a personal statement indicating how the internship would benefit them, specifying the particular area(s) of interest, and (5) five slides of completed metal projects.
- 3.** Candidate should be willing and able to participate for a minimum of two terms of three to four credit hours each. Credit hours will be earned at the ratio of one credit hour for every four hours of work in the Goldworks studio per week.
- 4.** Application materials (#2 above) should be submitted to Jewelry and Metalsmithing faculty for review and forwarded to Gary Dawson at least three weeks prior to the end of a term for the following term.

Internship Requirements/Expectations:

- 1.** Honesty and integrity in the shop at all times.
- 2.** Commitment and timeliness regarding work schedule.
- 3.** Neatness of appearance. (We are a retail environment.)
- 4.** Cheerful participation in any shop-related activity, including but not necessarily limited to: cleaning and maintenance of shop and tools, answering phone in a professional manner, greeting

and servicing retail clients, setup and takedown, assisting in line production, all phases of bench work, and office duties.

5. A journal about the internship must be kept, and a 20-minute class presentation needs to be delivered (with support from Gary Dawson and faculty).

6. Design and completion of one precious-metal project (usually involving one or more gems) suitable for display and sale.

7. Completion of feedback form at end of term.

What benefits do you feel a company could gain from this program?

I sincerely believe that, under the best of circumstances, the choice to train can be a fantastic investment in a company's financial future and competitiveness. But like responding to a personal ad, it could also be (at the very least) a temporary disaster if one were to blunder into the situation without some forethought and preparation.