

New River Valley Employer Panel

Quina Weber-Shirk: Well, welcome everyone to our New River Valley employer panel. We're together discussing the topic of recruiting local students for high-quality internships. This is a panel that's organized by the Regional Internship Collaborative and specifically planned and facilitated by representatives from the Virginia Department of Education, from Radford University's Center for Career and Talent Development, and from Virginia Tech's Career and Professional Development Center. Today, we are joined by Ben Barani, COO at Oransi, Austin Prosser, recruiter at Torc, and Samantha Livesay, the Director of Business Engagement at Onward NRV. So I will turn this over to our moderators to briefly introduce yourself and your role. And then invite our panelists to introduce yourself and your internship program at your organization. Thank you.

Carolyn Sutphin: Thank you. I'll go ahead and kick it off. So I'm Carolyn Sutphin at Radford University and my role here at Radford is Employer Relations and Events Coordinator. So I work with employers to connect with our students and plan our events here at Radford.

Jim Henderson: Hi, I'm Jim Henderson and I lead the Employer Relations team at the Virginia Tech Career and Professional Development. So my team works with recruiters near and far, helping them to connect to our students and to our academic departments.

Ben Barani: My name is Ben Barani. I'm the CEO of Oransi, who has recently moved to the area as of last year.

Austin Prosser: My name is Austin Prosser. I'm a university recruiter at Torc Robotics.

Samantha Livesay: And Samantha Livesay with Onward New River Valley. We are the regional economic development organization and excited to be here.

Carolyn Sutphin: I guess I will go ahead and kick off with our first question. And so for our panelists, the first question is, why did your company decide to start an internship program? And within that, can you let us know what's working well and also what's not working well?

Ben Barani: I guess I'll go first. So with us being in start-up mode, we are getting close to production. We wanted to -- it was actually a last second decision, but we wanted to start a internship program, kinda run it as a guinea pig project. That way we're prepared for next summer. And so luckily we actually reach out to Onward, actually Samantha, who connected us with Radford University and Virginia Tech. And we were able to actually get a intern from Radford University to join us this summer.

Austin Prosser: So here at Torc, we started our internship and co-op program to really get an early talent pipeline. Through -- Our goal is to convert our interns into full-time. So having them come in during their studies and learn with us, work directly on our projects, can allow that transition from the internship into a full-time role to be smooth. We also started it to diversify our workforce and bring in young new ideas and, you know, come from a different younger

demographic. So they might have ideas that some of the senior talent might not. What's been working well for us is allowing them to work directly on our projects. Like I mentioned before, adding value to the team. And so it's a two-way path. Working on the projects for them allows them to learn about what we're working on as a company. And then on the other side, the teams get good value, like I mentioned before, the new ideas that they can bring to the table. Some of the challenges that we've had are huge growth that we've been going through. Filling the needs of the teams with the right people is hard to do, especially when your teams are growing substantially.

Samantha Livesay: So at Onward, we, ourselves as an organization, we do not have an internship. What we have is the NRV experience and we are actually about to wrap up our third cohort. And it is an internship program where organizations and communities within the new river valleys such as Oransi will enroll their interns that they already have within their organization. And we see it as an extension to existing internships. The purpose is to retain talent here in the New River Valley. So they're already having a great time learning a lot of hands-on experience within their internship. But what we're doing is taking that a step further and exposing them and really having them be immersed in our community and region, to let them see that the New River Valley is not only a great place to work, but it's also a great place to live. So they do that as part of a seven-week internship program, where we have the kickoff event or wrap up event. And in between that, we take them out into our communities and do really fun excursions, let them see that our community is not just Radford University campus and Virginia Tech campus, both of which are amazing. But you can't live there after graduation, unfortunately. So for us, the success for that is just like I mentioned, we're on our third year. We have 34 interns enrolled into the program for this cohort. A challenge for us would just be getting our community to know what a great asset this is for their internships. And I hope that we can reach the capacity of 50 interns for our following years.

Jim Henderson: Well, I have a second question and we'll start with Ben and Samantha, when I get to you, I'll tweak the question just a little bit. So the question is, what do you look for in students that you hire for internships? What skills are most important for students to possess before entering the workforce?

Ben Barani: Yes. So with our program that we started this year, kind of what we're looking for, again with us being in pre-production, start-up mode, is looking for an intern that is eager to learn, kind of learn the ropes of all sorts of the business aspects. There's many areas that you'll be able to get your hands on. So with that, eager to learn, but also being flexible. We were looking for an intern that was flexible. One day they'll be working on the electronics. The next day they'll be in the warehouse shipping section and in the design aspect. So getting your hands really dirty, I guess in all aspects of the business that we're currently in, is what we are currently working on. As we grow, it'll get more and more defined for specific areas. It had worked out with the intern we received, or got from Radford University this summer, who was very eager to learn all the trades of the world and the business world.

Jim Henderson: And Austin.

Austin Prosser: Had to unmute there. So we're looking for two main things, hard skills and soft skills. On the hard skills side, we're looking for software engineers, a lot of coding that we do, specifically in C++ and Python, and then on the soft skills side, like Ben mentioned, we're looking for people who are eager to learn, and then also fit within our core values of hungry, humble, and people smart. So those are the main things that we look for in interns.

Jim Henderson: And Samantha, you talked about your internship program. Maybe you can talk about the skill development that you see students gain through your program.

Samantha Livesay: Yes. So apart from the fun side of the excursions, tubing down the river, doing the ropes course, we also have professional development, because we do hear from organizations such as Oransi, Torc, that those soft skills are extremely important and not only important professionally, but personally as well. So we want to be able to provide our interns with professional development. So we utilize a leadership company, Acceleration. And they meet with our interns once a week for five weeks and we talk about these soft skills and then hope that they can go back to their internships, back to college, and then onwards to their professional careers. But we do things such as communication skills. How are you seen and heard, which is extremely important right now because we live in such a virtual world. So what are some basic things to have, when you are communicating via Zoom? Emotional intelligence. How are you being able to interact and communicate with multi generations in a workplace? So all of these things are our needs and wants, that we're hearing from the business community, so we're making sure that we're applying that to the interns so that we can have these folks be successful and hopefully in our community.

Carolyn Sutphin: Great, thank you. So the next question is, so how do you create opportunities for interns to learn about your company culture?

Ben Barani: Yeah, so we're building a culture. Oransi has grown tremendously over the past couple of years. We're kind of in the weeds of building our culture, from a company standpoint and putting our interns through that phase and learning from them and giving them opportunities, such as being part of the Onward internship program, attending those events, et cetera, and also being part of other events such as happy hours that we do. And then just creating that company culture around that as well.

Austin Prosser: We invite our interns to join into our company culture by being very team-oriented, allowing them to work directly on our projects, directly with our teams, to allow them to be team-oriented and really dive deep into what our culture really is at Torc. So, even if it's playing ping-pong with your with your workmates in between projects or at lunch, or even, like Ben mentioned, going to happy hours or off-site events with Torc. We encourage our interns to join with every work event that we have.

Samantha Livesay: So for us, again, this is where we utilize Acceleration, for them to really communicate and educate our interns on what company culture is. How can you be an active participant in company culture? But also, the networking that comes out of our internship program. This is an opportunity for all of these interns from all different walks of life, all different types of discipline backgrounds, to hear what's going on at their internships, so they can hear what is or isn't happening within their company. And hopefully then, they can utilize the communication skills. How are they seen, how are they heard, and taking that back into their company or their internships.

Jim Henderson: Alright, so the next question, again, we'll start with Ben. Talk a little bit about your internship program and how you use it as a pathway for full-time employment.

Ben Barani: So like Austin mentioned earlier, the goal and key of the internship program is also to create a pipeline to full-time employment. And so with our interns we, during the course of the summer, try to gauge where their thinking is, have conversations with them, see what their interests are and what issues they're having. Obviously nothing's perfect. So we kinda gauge with that and have a conversation. Us being in Radford, and our only intern right now is from Radford University and going into his senior year. We've had a couple of conversations with him, joining us afterwards or joining us during his senior year as a part-time employee. And so it's communication and engaging in conversation with them, making sure this is still the right fit with them and go from there.

Austin Prosser: So here at Torc, obviously the end goal is to get our interns to transition into the full-time role. As I've mentioned before, we allow them to work directly on our teams, directly on our projects for their time here. So that allows them to know who they're working with and know what they're working on. And after the internship is done, obviously, we want them to transition, but it's also in their court. Do they like what they're doing and their team members? So it's kind of a two-way street there. What else? Had something in my mind and then it slipped me.

Jim Henderson: And Samantha again, just maybe tweak it a little bit for you. And I know your program is relatively new. But have you noticed any results were students who go through your internship program tend to get more full-time offers?

Samantha Livesay: Well, so again, as you mentioned, it is new; we're on our third year. We have not quite been able to get that data to show because a lot of our interns are going into their junior or senior year. So our inaugural event was in 2020. We only had 15 interns who would have been graduating. So we haven't been able to get solid data on that. But I will say that we have had at least three or four interns that have gone through our program that aren't from here, that have found full-time employment here, which is what we want to see. And then also in communicating and talking with our interns from this cohort, I've been talking to two that are from Oklahoma and Texas. Both have said they have loved the area and wouldn't have otherwise considered living here. But luckily, because they were able to go through this

program, are thinking about staying here, obviously, if that's where the job leads them through their internship program. But we do see ourselves as an asset to those employers that utilize our program because we are offering this experience, where they are seeing the benefits of living in this area. And they're also working on those communication skills. So hopefully we are in turn offering our interns an opportunity to stay here and also with their internships that they are doing.

Carolyn Sutphin: Thank you. So for your employees that work at your organization, that mentor and supervise interns, what type of support do you provide for these employees that make this program successful?

Ben Barani: Yes. So from our standpoint, with each intern, only one intern this summer, but we designate a employee that's full-time that's in a manager position and they will oversee everything they do, the intern; that is why they're here. And they're the ones who are interacting, communicating, having conversations, creating those learning skills an intern is looking for and in the background, will be helping the manager or mentor with any questions they have, any ideas that help guide them as well throughout the course of the internship from that standpoint.

Austin Prosser: So our mentorship program here at Torc is under construction. It is; it's new and we're working on it. However we we do have -- so when an intern comes in, we do put a mentor on the team to oversee what they're adding value to, to which projects? Typically, it's a mid-level engineer to try and get them a little bit more experienced with managing people, to maybe get them into that senior level role where they can manage the whole team. But support that we give the mentors themselves is monthly chats with them, or even more frequently than that, to just ensure that the intern is doing what they're supposed to and everything is going well with the team. And working cross-functionally that way to make sure that it's a good experience for both the team and the intern.

Samantha Livesay: Love to hear about the mentors in the workplace. I will pass on this one. Not really sure how we can pivot that one towards the NRV experience.

Jim Henderson: All right, and our last question. What resources helped you as you developed your internship program and then made it into a high-quality internship program? And if it's a paid internship, were there other resources you used to help you with a paid internship?

Ben Barani: Yeah. So like I mentioned earlier, our startup, our internship program was kind of a last second decision. And so we quickly used the resource, such as Samantha at Onward, to connect us with the local universities, Virginia Tech and Radford. And so we were able to immediately start that connection, relationship with the two universities from there. Then I think within two to three weeks, we were able to have an intern signed up, recommended by his professors as well. So those resources are very valuable, the universities and Onward, right there, from that standpoint. And our internship is a paid internship. We did offer, or do offer,

the holiday benefits as well. So the resources is -- we don't have any outside resources with regards to that.

Austin Prosser: So the resources we use for our high quality internships; internal referrals are huge for us. If we have a co-op or an intern, or even a full-time employee who can go to bat for someone and say, hey, they really know what they're doing. Then we utilize that heavily. Our amazing staff at Torc; we're a lot of go-getters, so the infrastructure to support high-quality internships is there for us. And our internships are also paid, based on levels. So we have three levels: Bachelor's degree, master's degree, and Ph.D. degrees. So we like to be competitive in our market and our industry and as Ben mentioned, Virginia Tech and Radford being here is also a great source for us to fill those high-quality internships with high quality interns.

Samantha Livesay: I would say for us to be able to create and maintain this high-quality internship program is just building and maintaining our relationships with the higher education institutions, Radford, Virginia Tech, New River, as well as industry and business leaders in our community. Not only do we want them to enroll their internships into our program, but we want our interns to have a great network of fellow interns that they will create friendships, great connections, so not only do they see this place as a great place to work, but then they have their own little cohort that they were able to build and create by going through the internship program, that will in turn build this great pipeline of talent for our business industry here in Virginia's New River Valley.

Quina Weber-Shirk: Well, thank you all. I would open it up to any of our panelists, if you have additional thoughts that didn't get asked in the questions or if you have questions of each other as we conclude this panel.

Ben Barani: I would just say thank you for thinking of Oransi as being a partner in this panel. Again, appreciate that ask.

Austin Prosser: Yeah. I second that. Thank you guys for having us.

Samantha Livesay: Yeah. I greatly appreciate it.

Quina Weber-Shirk: Wonderful. Well, I appreciate all of your of your time and your attention. And I'll officially end this panel and recording.