

## **Roanoke-Alleghany Highlands Employer Panel**

**Quina Weber-Shirk:** Wonderful. Well, welcome everyone to our employer panel, highlighting employers in the Roanoke- Alleghany highlands region. This is a panel to share experiences within the context of talking about ways to recruit local students for high-quality internships. This panel is organized by the Regional Internship Collaborative. And I'm Quina Weber-Shirk, the project coordinator. Specifically, this panel today was organized and is facilitated by representatives from Virginia Career Works-Blue Ridge Region, the Virginia Department of Education, and the Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce. I appreciate your time today and I will turn it over to Kim Radford.

**Kim Radford:** Okay. Thank you, Quina. Again, my name is Kim Radford and I work for the Virginia Department of Education as a work-based learning specialist for Region 6. So there are eight superintendent regions and I cover Region 6, which starts in the Alleghany Highlands area, goes all the way through Montgomery County, the Roanoke/Salem areas, and then down through Franklin County and down to Danville. So kinda have that middle portion of the state. And I'm really excited to be here as your moderator today. And I wanted to go ahead, Brandon and Teresa, to give you guys an opportunity to introduce yourselves and your companies and a little bit about your business. So Teresa, I'll go ahead and start with you.

**Teresa O'Brien:** My name is Teresa O'Brien. I worked for Brown Edwards; we're a regional CPA firm. And I work in the tax sector. I'm a director in tax, dealing mostly with high net worth individuals and their related entities that they may own. Brown Edwards is located throughout Virginia, West Virginia, and Tennessee. And we have several different niches that we work in: construction, banking, municipalities. We do K-12 audits, but we do income tax for individuals as well as various entities. And then we have a consulting practice and a wealth management practice, all part of the firm. And we are in the top 100 firms in the nation, but we are a regional firm, just located currently in those three states.

**Kim Radford:** Okay, great. And then Brandon.

**Brandon Muse:** Hi, absolutely. I'm Brandon Muse with Beacon Partners Consulting. Beacon Partners is based here in Roanoke area. We serve clients literally as far as Wisconsin, so many of our clients are remote. We are a performance-based consulting group that specializes mainly in human resources, dealing with diversity, equity, and inclusion, and then dealing with marketing, branding, and that sort of thing. All of our practices focus on how we can help our partner organizations better perform, whether it be in the performance of their people, performance related to process, or just general operational efficiencies. As far as it's concerned with internships, that gives us a real advantage in the fact that when folks come to see us, they're not dealing with just one industry. We've got from landscapers to restaurants, to financial firms, to you name it. So it gives them a really global understanding of what's going on in the business world and allows them to get some hands-on experience around a number of different industries.

**Kim Radford:** Well, that's really great. Well, that kind of touches on how we wanted to start the conversation today with why your company was actually involved in offering an internship program and how it fits into your company culture. So Brandon, did you have anything else you wanted to add to that or I'll go to Teresa if you don't.

**Brandon Muse:** Sure. I'll just say that as far as how it fits into our mission, education is huge. I mean, that's truly what we do with our clients, is educating them on better ways to do things, more efficient ways to run their operation, or even better ways to handle things that relates to their things, their capital. So bringing interns in was a natural fit for us. Obviously, there's benefit in it for us. And the fact that we are not this style of organization where interns sit around and just observe what's happening or run to get coffee or do those sorts of things; our interns are involved in what's going on. They're able to make decisions along with us so that when they walk away, they definitely have some true experience that they can talk through for resume purposes.

**Kim Radford:** Wow, that's great. Okay, Teresa, do you want to tell us a little bit about your program and why your company offers internships?

**Teresa O'Brien:** Sure. Well, like Brandon said, I must admit that maybe 20 years ago, an internship at a CPA firm would involve getting coffee and making copies and things like that. But it has evolved tremendously. And now, interns start, usually start, by learning tax and they come in during tax season. And they are actually preparing some of our less complex tax returns. They're seeing how our software works. Most internships lasts for four months, but they can extend those and maybe work in a different department, working with auditing, working with IT, different things. We looked at other industries like nursing, where along with your degree, you had a requirement for so much hands-on, so that you really know what you're getting into before you graduate and it helps you make better decisions. So we have interns that start with us as sophomores, and currently a CPA requires 150 hours, so they may work for us for three years, on and off, different departments, being exposed to different things so that they truly understand what it's like to work in public accounting. And then some of them get some exposure to our clients as well. So they see what a CPA may do in industry and it really helps them make better decisions about where they want to go when they graduate and what they might want to do with their career.

**Kim Radford:** All of those experiences sound amazing. So can you tell us a little bit about the things that are working really well? It sounds like you're giving interns more responsibility now in some of your positions. So do you want to talk about that first, Brandon?

**Brandon Muse:** Sure. So yeah. One of the things that we like to be sure of when folks come to us, is that they have a really good understanding, kind of to what Teresa said, that when they come in, they understand what they're going to be doing. We've had some interns that have come in with the idea that they were gung ho about being a consultant. And then they realized, hey, you know what, this isn't exactly what I thought it was. It's not really the field I want to

work in. And then on some other occasions we've had folks come in -- they just kinda wanted to get a taste for it as it pertains to business in general -- that left saying, I am 100 percent going into this field. And I think that's really what it's all about. Again, its value to us, as employers by far, for having interns; they bring great value to the organization. And the fresh perspective on things oftentimes is really an invaluable part of having them. But again, at the end of the day when they leave, they really have a solid understanding of whether what we do is something that they want to long-term do, and if it's not, we spend a lot of time working with some of our interns to help them turn that around and say, What do you want to do? Is there a client that we have maybe that we could introduce you to that could give you some of that experience that would be beneficial? So again, I think that's really the value in them.

**Kim Radford:** Awesome. And then Teresa?

**Teresa O'Brien:** We solicit feedback from our interns constantly. We want to know how we can do things better. And like Brandon said, that's a fresh perspective because they don't know what we've always done, same as last year. So they have given us lots of great feedback. And we have given them the opportunity to write procedures and we have implemented those in the firm. And again, that's a great thing to see on somebody's resume. You know, that they have written procedure for a larger firm during their internship. But these are people who are going to school. Again most of them are going to end up with a master's degree. They don't want to be just data input. They don't want to be going to get coffee, going to the mailbox; they want to learn. So we try to embrace that. And every year, you know, what can we do better? What technology, you know, what processes can we automate? So yeah, we're always trying to improve our internships for us so that we're a better firm and also the experience for those students.

**Kim Radford:** Wow, that sounds really awesome. So I'm assuming then, with the feedback that you're getting and maybe some of these ideas, that you've been presented with some challenges with having interns. So would you, could you address maybe some of the challenges that you've had to overcome or maybe some that you're still working on? And Brandon, I'll start with you on that one.

**Brandon Muse:** Sure. That's a great question. Just like Teresa and the folks there at Brown Edwards, we do a really good job I feel of really getting feedback from interns, and they have given us perspective. I'll give a great example of that. Through COVID, the pandemic put us in a position where we focused a lot on remote interns. And what we realized in that, as far as the industries that we serve, it was very difficult for us to provide or offer the same experience that we offered in-person. I think what, in a lot of situations, happened, was folks that were assigned to work with interns because they were kind of out of sight; they were missing those connection points. And some of the interns felt forgotten, for lack of a better way to put it. And that was a teaching moment for us to make the decision of why are we doing this, and knowing that the real value is in offering the best experience that we could for our interns. It put us in a position where the feedback made us say, Hey, we may have some remote interns, but they will

be very specialized. And they will be for very specific reasons to ensure that at the end of the day, the last thing I want somebody to do is to come and spend a semester -- and some of them, like Teresa said, may stay with us multiple years depending on what they're doing or what they're looking for -- the last thing we want is for someone to leave feeling like they did not get the value that they're looking for out of the experience with us.

**Kim Radford:** Great. And then Teresa, what challenges have you all faced?

Teresa O'Brien: So yes, that is a challenge. We want to keep everyone engaged and learning, and remote for us in general, is something that we're still learning how to do successfully, because we're used to walking up to someone and showing them what we do via Zoom or Teams or any of the virtual -- we're learning how to share screens and stay connected. And honestly, there are some groups that do that better than others. The other thing we struggle with or a challenge with interns, is their availability. We like to talk to them and find a semester that they can work for us when they're available, at least 20 hours a week, because the work they do will be reviewed by someone else. And then there's usually feedback back and forth between them. And if you lose, you know, if they have to be off two consecutive days or something like that, then that causes a slowdown in the process. We have asked -- they all have a laptop that the company provides, and we ask them to take that with them, and not for any large period of time, but if they could give up one hour on the days that they're not working, to at least respond to emails, and then the firm knows that. So if I need an answer from Brandon and he's off today, then I know between 2 and 3, he's going to respond to e-mails and I'll make sure I have my questions out there in time for him to respond.

**Kim Radford:** Wow, that's a great idea, and that kind of leads us into what is it then -- you've all really explained well what you do and your internship opportunities -- so what do you look for in an intern, if someone were to come to your company to interview for a position? So Teresa, I'll start with you on this one.

**Teresa O'Brien:** Well, their technical abilities, no matter if they're a 4.0 student or a 2.5 student, what is actually taught in college is just scratching the surface of the depth of knowledge they will need to practice in public accounting. So we look for somebody that has good grades. But we're looking for those soft skills, those social skills; they engage us in conversation. They have questions about the organization. And then, when they get here, we can teach the technical that they need. Our profession has requirements for continuing education all the time, so you will always be improving your skills. But we're just looking for the person that can communicate, that shows a dedication, some that can work in a team -- excuse me -- as well as work individually, because not all projects are individual and not all of them are team. So more of the soft skills, what they've done, are they inquisitive? Do they want to learn those types of things? Now, we're just looking for someone who seems interested and is not just here to fulfill a requirement of some sort.

**Kim Radford:** Okay. And Brandon?

**Brandon Muse:** Sure. I think much of the same. One of the things that we do address is kind of Teresa's last point in the last question in availability. That's always a really zoomed in focus for us because if they don't have enough availability to be with us long enough to see the true value and take on the responsibility and have accountability for specific projects, it's really difficult for us to feel like they go away with a true value or a true experience of what it'll be like to work in the field once they've graduated. So we are very, very focused in on when we can do that. We tried the same thing, to stick in that 20-25 hour range, to make sure that we're finding the right folks there. So with that being said, I think past that -- I don't know, overall, I think, because we are such a big -- and when I say big, I mean, such a vast experience for our folks -- there are so many areas, I can go all day long about what they do get and what they don't get and what they should have. But someone with the willpower and desire to learn, they're going to walk away with a great experience. Someone that's checking a box because they're required to have an internship probably may not make it through the selection process. And if they do, they're probably not going to get the experience that they really should have gotten because part of it with interns is raising your hand saying, 'I'm willing to be involved, I'm willing to take that on. I've got questions about that.' And we see that in the selection process. So we're not as much focused on the grade side of things as we are 'What are you looking for? What can we bring to the table to add value to your experience? And then mutually, what will we get in that process as well?'

**Kim Radford:** Okay. Well, all of those things sound like something that I would want to know if I was going to be interviewing with your company. And so, when you do that selection process, what types of supports do you offer interns? Do you tell them about that ahead of time, or is that something that they learn when they're onboarding? And Teresa, I'll start with you.

**Teresa O'Brien:** We describe what the internship is like during the interview process. We also have recent interns or recent staff that have completed the internship program meet with the potential hires. Sometimes they may know them from school. And then a lot of times, they're just more open when they're dealing with someone that is closer to a peer with them, about what the process has been like. Then once the interns are hired and onboarding, they work in what we call intern headquarters. So it's actually a corner office in the Lynchburg office that was typically reserved for the managing partner of the practice. But we've turned it into an intern headquarters; they have great views of the mountain and the river. But there are several desks along the windows, so they're in there as a cluster, probably have five to six people at one time, so they have each other that they can feed off of and ask questions. And there is a lot of chatter in their back-and-forth, you know, "I learned this yesterday." "You can try that." And then we all, from the different tax and audit, pretty much everybody stops by each morning and says hello. We all try to wear name tags in the beginning so that we know their names. It's not just the intern in the blue shirt or they don't know us as the lady with the glasses on. So

that we develop relationships with them and find out what they're interested in, where they may want to work. And they just become part of the work family.

**Kim Radford:** Okay. That sounds pretty cool. And then Brandon, what do you guys do?

**Brandon Muse:** Yeah. So, you would you would think that Teresa and I had kind of gotten together and made notes on it, because a lot of that does sound very similar to what we do, and I can't take responsibility for it because I am one of the managing partners, but I am not on-site in the business on a daily basis. But we do have a very similar experience whereby the folks that are in the office, my partner, Will, manages the practice actively and he is with the interns every day. He's got a conference area in his office. And then down the other hallway, we have an area that's got multiple TVs, multiple workstations; our interns set up there and they are able to work together and bounce ideas off of each other. So normally they are working on independent activities. But it still allows them to say, "Hey, could you look at this with me?" "Give me your feedback." "What should I say?" "What can I put together?" "Have you gotten any experience?" I think the coolest part of that is looking at the relationships that they go out the door with because most of our interns come from Roanoke College; our second biggest source is Virginia Tech. But when they leave, they are Beacon intern family and it has nothing to do with where they go to school. I think that's probably the coolest part of the experience for us, is seeing them go away with those lifelong relationships with people that they can communicate with.

**Kim Radford:** Wow, that's really amazing. And so it sounds like, the way that you've described all that, that you both provide mentors for your interns and some type of supervision. So is there anything else that maybe someone who's watching the video today would want to learn more about, or know more about, in terms of how you put that all together, the mentorship and the supervision piece? And then Brandon, I'll start with you on that.

**Brandon Muse:** Sure. So the main thing I would say to any potential intern going anywhere for that matter, is really be deliberate and take time to understand what it is you're looking for, where you want to be, and find opportunities that meet and hopefully exceed what you are desiring to do. Oftentimes, again, people will say, I have to have an internship. So they're just applying for any kind of an internship they can find. But in the real working world, one of the most crucial things that we can do is find an environment where we fit in, feel appreciated, and that the work we do is a productive part of helping our organization be successful. And I think the same should be what an intern should look for in an internship. Look for a place where they can add value, but more importantly, get true value, that when they walk out of the door and walk into an interview, they're able to say, "Hey, here are some of the things that I worked on." "Here are some of the experiences that I had and how I can add value to the organization." If they can't do that, they probably have missed what I feel like is a pretty important part of the internship experience.

**Kim Radford:** Okay. And Teresa?

**Teresa O'Brien:** The experience that we hope to provide is that they feel like they are appreciated. All of our internships are paid internships. We try to remain competitive with that. You hear all of this, 3% across the board raises now; 5% cost of living, you know with the economy we're in. Our interns were part of that as well. They were not excluded. And so we just like to treat everybody the way we want to be treated. And I think you should look for that in an internship if you're a student and I think you should emulate that if you're an employer, because the way that -- really, the internship has become the first step to the hiring process in the public accounting firm across the countries. The way you're treated as an intern is pretty much how you're going to be treated as an employee. And we want that to be a very positive experience. And so putting them in a room by themselves, you know, and no interaction; if that's the culture of your office, great, they need to see that. But if that's not the culture of your office, they need to be exposed to what it's like, in the industry that you're in.

**Kim Radford:** Well, I want to be respectful of your time, so I'm wondering, just to kind of wrap up the conversation, if I'm a new employer -- I'm going to take a different role now -- and I really haven't done anything with internships at all, are there resources or advice or some tips, other than what you've already talked about, that you feel like would be important for an employer to know about? And Brandon, I'll start with you on that one.

**Brandon Muse:** Yeah, real quickly. I would say that research is necessary. One of the most crucial pieces of feedback that we've given to other organizations looking towards hiring interns is define what you're looking for. Again, because I feel like as a company, we have an obligation to provide an experience that really is valuable for that person that's coming in and trusting us with that part of their learning experience, and taking that a step at a time sometimes, as people say, doesn't always allow for the right experience. So we really have to put the onus on ourselves to make sure we understand what we're looking for, what [INAUDIBLE] we can give them, and it needs to be defined. And then the last part of that is any employer has to be ready to hold themselves accountable for that. If it's not working, you got to backup and punt again. And that quite frankly, I'm sure Teresa would agree, is how you continue to get good quality interns, one after the next, is because when you do that, they share the experience with others and you have them ready to come and experience that.

**Kim Radford:** Very good. And Teresa?

**Teresa O'Brien:** I think if I were someone starting internships for the first time, I would approach it just like if I were adding a new arm to my business; you know, you wouldn't do that without the research Brandon talked about, you would probably find somebody to mentor you in that new aspect of your business. So I would say find another business or someone who works with successful internships and just chat back and forth with them about what's working, what's not. And be very honest. You know, this is what concerns me about my internship right now. And then you've got feedback, you've got resources, because it's just not smart to just

think anybody can do it. Can't be that hard, right? So many new adventures fail. So there's some talent to it, some commitment to it. And some humble, you've got to be humble, that your process is not perfect. It's continuous improvement.

**Kim Radford:** Yes, and it sounds like both of you get consistent feedback, which is really amazing. So is there anything else, as we wrap up today's session, that you would like to share with anybody who might be watching the video? And I'll start with you, Teresa.

**Teresa O'Brien:** I would just say continuous improvement, you know, reach out for feedback. Don't take it personally, use it to make the experience better for the firm and the interns.

**Kim Radford:** And Brandon?

**Brandon Muse:** I couldn't agree more. I would say to the students, find what you're looking for, tell the potential employers what you're looking for, and then really work hard to get out of it what you want to accomplish through it. And to the employers: do it because you have a true desire to provide the right experience and teach. If that's not part of why you're doing it, a big part of why you're doing it, I would suggest not doing it at all.

**Kim Radford:** Very good advice. Well, I appreciate the opportunity to moderate today and you were both wonderful panelists and I'm going to go ahead and turn it back over to Quina.

**Quina Weber-Shirk:** All I have to say is thank you both so much for your time. I was really caught up in this conversation and the way that even though you're in different locations of our area, you're in different industries, that there were a lot of commonalities, when we're talking about best practices, about what makes an experience really high-quality, that were drawn out. So thank you for sharing your experiences today.