

# The Massachusetts Commission for the Blind: Paid Internship Program Case Study



## Quick Facts

### Population

Students who are legally blind or visually impaired, 40% of whom are ages 21 and under

### Internship Length

6 to 8 weeks per summer – 120 hours minimum  
Individuals may participate for multiple summers

### Outcomes

800+ internship opportunities since 2005  
90 students participate annually  
At completion, 70% of interns are on track for permanent employment

### Industries

For-profit, non-profit, government, higher education  
Over 300 employers during the life of the program, and approximately 90 employers annually

### Funding

Vocational rehabilitation funds, employer wage payments

## About the Program

The Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) Summer Internship Program is a paid internship program offered to college students, and some high school seniors, who are legally blind or visually impaired and eligible for vocational rehabilitation (VR) services. All have an open case with MCB, and about half are enrolled in Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Pre-Employment Transition Services, with the internship aligned with Pre-ETS.

Over 300 employers have partnered with MCB since the inception of the internship program in 2005, with over 800 internships. At current capacity, the program places approximately 90 students into internships each year. Interns typically participate during their summer break for a minimum of 120 hours, though usually much more than that, for a duration of six to eight weeks.

To participate, MCB clients go through multiple screenings prior to acceptance in the program and placement at an internship. Students are identified as potential candidates through VR counselors and, in the Boston metropolitan area, are referred to MCB's Employment Services unit. (In other regions without employment specialists, the VR counselor coordinates the internship. For the purposes of this publication, we will discuss the process that involves the Employment Services unit.)

The Employment Services unit then reaches out to the student to gauge their readiness for employment and interests for placement. If the intern demonstrates professionalism and responsiveness, the Employment Services staff or VR counselor will contact their employer partners to identify potential placements. The intern then interviews for the position, allowing them to practice their interviewing skills, and ensuring the process is competitive.

In addition to these multiple screenings, interns receive Orientation and Mobility training and soft skills training prior to starting their internship.

During their internships, interns continue to receive support from MCB in addition to developing their skills with their employer. The employer provides a written job description and weekly supervision for skill development. Interns receive either payment

Placement of the intern takes into consideration their:

- Interests;
- Work experience; and,
- Current capabilities

through the employer or a \$1,000 stipend to cover associated costs of the internship through MCB.

In turn, the interns complete weekly timesheets, attend the opening and closing ceremonies for the internship program, and complete the soft skills training. Interns

continue to have access to VR services, including receiving any assistive technology they need for their internship.

Individuals clearly benefit from the internship program in terms of gaining work

Internship length:

- 120 hours minimum
- 6–8 weeks
- 2–3 days a week

experience. Business also benefit from the program. Many businesses prior to hosting an intern have never had an employee self-identify as having a disability, and the experience helps the employer develop a comfort level and competency that can open doors to future hires. The sensitivity training and guidance available to the businesses as intern hosts gives them the foundational knowledge they need to make their workplace more inclusive. Participating in the internship program also exposes employers to assistive technology and its compatibility with their systems and software, and they receive technical assistance on these issues if necessary.

Additionally, hosting interns for meaningful work-based learning experiences gives employers the opportunity to work with an individual who they could hire as a permanent employee in the future. Employers that have participated include the Massachusetts Secretary of State's office, Dunkin' Brands, State Street Corporation, Walgreens, Dana Farber, Securaserv, Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, New England Aquarium, Museum of Fine Arts, and the YMCA.

#### **Key Features:**

- Employers and MCB commit to supporting students through a meaningful paid work-based learning experience.
- Interns build a foundation for employment by developing their employability skills and work experience.
- The business partnership model focuses on continuous improvement of the experience for both interns and the employer.
- Students can gain multiple experiences in a variety of work environments over the course of several summers, to inform their future career choices and direction.

#### **Unique Aspects:**

- All interns participate in soft skills training, and opening and closing ceremony events provide a sense of camaraderie.
- Students can win a "Reach for the Stars" award, a competitive cash prize for telling compelling personal stories of overcoming inaccessibility challenges via a medium of their choice, e.g., essay, blog post, or podcast. Winners are announced at the closing ceremony.

## Supporting Meaningful Work-Based Learning Experiences

A core component of a successful internship program is that the employer provides a meaningful learning experience for the intern. The experience should meet the following criteria:

- Employers support the learning of participants through mentorship and supervision.
- Interns are assigned tasks that are relevant to their education and career goals, which are outlined in a clear job description. The tasks assigned to interns challenge them enough to advance their learning.
- The internship happens over a sustained period of time to give interns opportunities to develop their skills and gain experience in the industry.<sup>1</sup>

The MCB internship secures the commitment of employers to provide a meaningful experience for their interns, and provides wrap-around services to ensure successful completion of the internship. The employer clearly outlines what job duties are expected of the intern at the outset of the paid work experience. An example of an internship position description is provided below.

When taking on an MCB intern, the employer signs a one-page written agreement, develops a specific job description, provides weekly supervision to the intern, and completes an evaluation form at the end of the summer. Tasks are

### **OUTREACH SPECIALIST INTERN**

ESSENTIAL DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES include, but are not limited to:

- Work with Volunteer program staff to recruit potential volunteers for the Volunteer Program.
- Research and contact local senior centers and Council on Aging (COAs) in towns/cities where MABVI low-vision peer support groups are located. Contact staff to post flyers and additional materials to help recruit members.
- Work with Volunteer Program Manager to reach out to the consumers who are on the Volunteer waiting list. Ensure that they still want a volunteer and provide a brief update on their status.
- Ensures department confidentiality regarding all volunteers and consumers.
- Attends and participates in regular supervision with the Director of Volunteer and Support Group Services.
- Attends required team and agency meetings, trainings, and participates in agency functions.
- Performs other related duties as required.

developed in partnership with the intern, the employer, and MCB staff. As a result, the tasks interns are assigned vary depending on the employer's need and the intern's interest and capacity.

The interns receive feedback on their performance, which is also communicated to MCB. Employers evaluate interns on:

- Communication/ interpersonal skills
- Adaptability
- Relevant education / work experiences
- Commitment / motivation / initiative
- Organization skills
- Ability to perform job functions

In addition to evaluating the intern, ideally, the employer also pays the intern, which ensures buy-in for both parties. If the employer cannot pay the intern, for example if they are a 501(c)3 non-profit agency with a limited budget, then MCB provides a \$1,000 stipend to the intern to offset the costs of participating in the internship, e.g., professional clothing, transportation, and food. Compensation is important because it ensures that the internship program is equitable. Without compensation, students experiencing economic hardship would be prevented from taking advantage of the program. Additionally, it acknowledges their investment of time and energy while providing incentives for that sustained investment over time.<sup>ii</sup>

Additionally, to support interns' full and meaningful engagement, MCB provides a number of wrap-around services that connect interns to a community of individuals who are legally blind or have a significant visual impairment, which assists in building the student's confidence in navigating workplace environments and cultures. One key way in which MCB seeks to improve the confidence of interns is Orientation and Mobility training. MCB works with the intern to help them build the skills and confidence they need to navigate to the internship site. This is critical because they can carry this confidence and the skills developed through this experience with them as they pursue future employment opportunities.

Additionally, interns can participate in a Youth Council and blind-to-blind mentorship. Through the Youth Council, which meets quarterly, youth come together and advocate for themselves and each other, and develop a community of supportive friends. Through blind-to-blind mentorship, interns can take advantage of the program to connect with an experienced professional with visual impairment for questions they have about self-advocacy in the workplace, navigating office politics, and their career path. These services and opportunities ensure that interns leave the internship with the confidence, skills, knowledge, and supportive community they need to embark on other new employment experiences successfully.

## **Building a Foundation for Eventual Employment**

Another key feature of a successful internship program is that it builds a foundation for eventual employment. Throughout the internship, interns demonstrate and develop their “professional skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem solving, valued by nearly all employers,” and attain knowledge and skills they need to enter a specific career track or industry. <sup>iii</sup> MCB assists interns to build this foundation through the process, from expressing interest to participating in the program through updating their resume once they’ve completed their internship.

Interns start practicing and developing their employability skills as soon as they express interest in the program. When an MCB client has been referred by their counselors for the program, the Employment Services team reaches out to them about the program and begins evaluating their professional behavior.

This begins when MCB staffers initially reach out to the client, observing how responsive the individual is to emails and/or phone calls. When scheduling appointments, staffers consider if the client is organized with time. When meeting in person for the first time to talk about the program, they look to see if the client takes notes and asks questions. After the first meeting, Employment Services asks the individual to send a resume, and waits to see if the client follows through and if they send a thank you note.

Through this process, the Employment Services team determines if the client is mature enough to benefit from an internship. If it seems that the client needs some more experience before moving into an internship, then the client will receive that feedback. Some MCB clients referred for the internship program end up doing something other than an internship as a result of this process. Then, if still interested, they can try again the following year. Consequently, going through the selection process with MCB serves as a low-risk opportunity for VR clients to get feedback and build upon their employability skills, and prepares those selected for the internship placement process.

After a client demonstrates that they are ready for an internship, MCB ramps up their employability skills throughout the placement process. Prior to beginning the internship, interns are required to complete soft skills training. If they cannot attend a group soft skills training, typically offered in March or April, they then receive one-on-one training through MCB to ensure they are prepared to enter a professional workplace. An opening ceremony for internships is held, at which such issues as disclosure, office politics, advocacy, and how to make friends at work are discussed.

The internship placement process resembles a normal hiring process as much as possible. Interns are required to submit a resume, and take part in a hiring interview to assess their experience and readiness for the work, as well as their fit with the organization. In addition to giving the intern interview experience, this also helps them assess whether or not they are actually interested in interning with a particular employer.

Each employer interviews multiple MCB intern candidates for any one position, even if the employer is prepared to take on an intern based solely on their resume, making the process competitive. Going through this experience familiarizes VR clients with the job search processes, preparing them for the transition from school to the workplace after they graduate.

The most important reason for participating in the internship program is the work experience itself, and the knowledge and skills participants gain through their placement. Because the employer is committed to providing the intern with a meaningful experience, an intern gains industry knowledge, masters new skills, and demonstrates skill level and capacity. Since students can participate in an internship as many times as they want throughout their educational career, the internship program helps them build up their resume throughout their time in school.

#### **The MCB Soft Skills Training Program**

The Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) Soft Skills initiative began in 2012 as a pilot program for individuals who are legally blind. Since then, it has become an invaluable tool for improving the future success of employees already in the workforce as well as a job readiness pre-requisite for individuals with little to no real-life work experience. The program curriculum includes an overview of soft skills in the workplace, with a particular focus on:

- a) Attitude;
- b) Teamwork;
- c) Listening; and,
- d) Work ethics

The training curriculum also includes learning modules that help consumers develop skills in networking, job search navigation, interview preparation and follow-up, and disclosure.

Because the employer partners are diverse in industry, and interns are diverse in their fields of interest, the paths that interns take vary. Some students know what industry they would like to work in, and they might try different employers and positions within the same field. Other students might realize through the internship program that the field isn't for them, and make a change. Others use the internship program to explore different career paths to figure out what works for their interests and skills.

To ensure a diversity of experiences, MCB encourages participants not to do internships at the same site every year. Regardless of which path a student takes with their internships, their resume at the end of their college career reflects the development of their work experience and their resulting increased knowledge, skills, and capacity.

## **Continuous Improvement Approach to Business Partnerships**

Particularly when serving individuals with disabilities or other barriers to employment, a successful internship program depends on taking a continuous improvement approach to business partnerships. It's important to start small—a small collection of employer partners, a small number of interns per employer—and grow from there. This is critical to success because “small collaborations enable the partners to work through initial challenges with minimal risk, determining their interests in the collaboration while also establishing trust.”<sup>iv</sup> The history of the MCB internship program, their approach to onboarding new business partners, and the support they provide to every business partner hosting an intern all demonstrate the wisdom of this approach.

In its first year, the program began with placing three interns in house at MCB. Once ambassadors for the internship program were developed within MCB, the employment services staff could market the program to employers with confidence and evidence of success. The next year, MCB placed 15 participants at business and organizational partners outside MCB.

An internship program had been tried unsuccessfully before, so during these early years, it was critical to work on developing interest and investment in the program with MCB staff so that staff would contribute to and support the success of the program. Once placing interns with partners began, the focus was on building champions within their employer partners by being attentive and responsive to their needs. This helped to build the strength and reputation of the program so that it could expand.

Another way in which MCB still starts small with their business partnerships is through their treatment of new employers. New employers are brought on through word of mouth from successful partners, through active recruitment by the Employment Services team, and through VR consumers bringing new employers to MCB when they know they're interested in working with them. Regardless of how a new employer is brought on, MCB has a solid rule: new interns are not placed with new employers.

This rule serves the interests of both the intern and the employer. New employers often experience a steep learning curve and require a lot of support to be successful supervisors of interns and / or of individuals with disabilities. New interns also frequently experience a steep learning curve. Their first internship might be their first work experience ever, or the first time they navigate to a place of employment independently with a visual impairment, or any other myriad of first experiences that may result in conflicts or disruptions in the work experience.



Moreover, for interns who are totally blind and more raw in their functional skill set, MCB seeks to start them with a blind agency for their first internship before placing them outside the blind community.

By placing new interns with experienced employer partners, MCB ensures that they are in the most supportive environment possible. By placing only experienced interns with new employers, MCB manages the level of challenge new employers face, which allows them room to grow and be successful and willing to have more interns in the future, as well as to consider hiring individuals for permanent employment.

Perhaps most critical to MCB's success with the internship program is the supportive relationship they build with all business partners. Business partners receive support in a number of ways. All employers and direct supervisors of MCB interns receive sensitivity training. This includes standard information that all employers of individual with visual impairment may need, such as how to introduce yourself to a person with visual impairments and how to provide sighted guides. This also includes intensive situational support, such as how to handle individual challenges as they arise during the internship and technical assistance to integrate assistive technology with their on-site technology.

MCB also supports employers by soliciting their feedback. At the end of the internship, employers complete an evaluation which includes providing feedback on the intern, as well as whether or not they would host an MCB intern again. This gives the employment services team at MCB an opportunity to ask follow-up conversations about what worked well or didn't so that they can continuously improve both the employer and the intern experience through better fit placements and the development of more informed and experienced employers.

## **Lessons Learned and Tips for Replication**

### **For the VR agency:**

- Get buy-in from staff, and move forward with the early adopters as ambassadors. If you tried to get buy-in and didn't get any, pilot the internship within your organization.
- Keep it small at the beginning and work up from there. MCB started with just 3 interns, all placed within their office. Only once they themselves had hosted interns did they market the program to businesses.
- In identifying potential internship sites, understand the current and future demands of the local labor market, and align internships with these demands.
- Spend time marketing the program to employers and establish the partnership first. Take time to learn about the employer and their workforce needs, experience with internship programs, existing initiatives regarding employment of people with disabilities, etc. Get to know the culture of the organization and be clear about expectations. Once the partnership is established, make the employers your champions.
- Be careful about placement, and really consider the strengths of the students. Don't place brand new interns who have no work experience with a new

employer partner. Encourage them to branch out if they want to return to the same employer year after year.

- Start recruitment early, to ensure plenty of time for screening and placement.
- Value your employers and recognize their participation. Invite them to be involved in other ways as well. For example, MCB invites employers to the closing ceremony, which gives them a sense of the scale of the program.
- Look at the resources within the partnering organization or business to make sure they can support your clients.
- Create a comprehensive support system for interns that includes soft-skills training, opportunities for reflection on the internship experience both during the experience and afterwards, peer-to-peer supports, and recognition/celebration of the interns.
- Build in a strong support structure for employers, with a responsive customer service focus.

**For the employer:**

- Start small to keep the relationship with the individuals strong.
- Be careful about manager selection. If you have an employee resource group for disability and disability awareness, consider the managers participating there first. Make sure that any manager supervising an individual with a disability has enough cultural sensitivity or gets enough coaching to be a successful manager and provide the intern a good experience.
- Pull from all available resources, including all of your staff who have an interest in supporting individuals with disabilities, to provide support for interns. Draw broadly from the resources and staff within your company to triage the issues that come up, rather than trying to manage them alone.
- Fully integrate interns within the workplace, and avoid having a “disability internship.” Instead, view the internship as a typical internship for any individual, with supports provided as necessary due to the individual’s disability.
- As with any individual with a disability, be respectful of the intern’s privacy, and have them be the guide in terms of what information about their disability they wish to disclose.

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**Participant Profile – Alexis Goolkasian**

When Alexis Goolkasian started college, she had a lot of different career ideas. Beginning the summer after her freshman year, she completed four different internships through the MCB internship program. All of these internships were very different from each other, and she learned from each one.

Through her first internship, in which she provided administrative assistance in the customer service department of the Massachusetts Secretary of State Office, Alexis started to recognize fields she might want to go into: mental health counseling, writing, and journalism. She explored these career paths with her following internships. In her second internship, she worked for the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services on different projects, such as an anti-bullying campaign, diversity education programs, and writing for newsletters, and built upon the administrative skills she developed in her first internship.

Alexis's third internship brought her to the Spaulding Rehabilitation Network, where she learned about case management through shadowing social workers. Lastly, for her fourth and final internship, Alexis wrote articles for *Colonial Times Magazine*. Through these customized experiences, she received multiple job offers, developed a network, and found her career.

Alexis has graduated from school and is currently working as a mental health counselor for adolescents, which she considers her dream job.

Throughout these experiences, MCB supported Alexis through providing technology, assisting her with disclosing her disability, and developing her soft skills. To be successful in these internships, Alexis required ZoomText and text-to-speech technology which MCB provided. Additionally, MCB introduced employers to her visual impairment which was important for them to know prior to her interviews. Because Alexis's disability is not readily apparent, she feared it might appear that she was not making direct eye contact during interviews. Over the course of these internships, she developed the confidence to disclose this herself, and is now very up front with people about her disability in her current position.

Alexis also appreciated that MCB covers rights and discrimination during the soft skills training, which helped her be her own advocate through understanding what is and is not considered discriminatory. Overall, she feels that MCB internship program was a very supportive experience, and appreciates being a part of the MCB network.

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## **Employer Profile – State Street Corporation**

*State Street Corporation is the second oldest American financial services company, founded in 1792. In 2012, State Street started partnering with the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind to recruit candidates for their summer internship program. Since, the partnership has placed approximately two to three interns each year. State Street was recognized as MCB's Employer of the Year in 2015.*

### **The recruitment process**

Each year, the starting point for internships at State Street is sharing of job descriptions by the State Street workforce development team with MCB. MCB then sends applicants who may be a good fit. Candidates are reviewed based on the competencies and their resume. If qualified, the workforce development team has pre-screening conversations with the candidates. They then put together profiles of the students for hiring managers to review.

If a hiring manager sees a profile of a student they are interested in hosting but their department doesn't have a budget for an intern, the workforce development office will provide funding support so that more interns can be placed. The MCB interns then go through the same competitive interview process all of the State Street internship candidates.

### **On the job**

Once placed, interns recruited through MCB are integrated into the State Street summer internship program cohort. They are identified by the college they attend, as opposed to their VR agency, and it's up to the students whether to disclose any information about their disability. State Street notes that they are trying to create a culture where the students feel open and comfortable talking about their disabilities.

Tasks are matched to the skills on the student's resume, and expectations are the same as all of the interns State Street hires for the summer. This includes completing 30 hours of corporate training.

As their schedule allows, interns are encouraged to take advantage of professional development workshops and networking events. Past topics covered during workshops have included financial literacy, unconscious bias, and presentation skills. They also have access to an e-learning service, which reports usage to supervisors, where they can fill in downtime with learning modules. Additionally, interns are encouraged to participate in a mentoring program, join employee resource groups, and publish blog posts about their experience. If an intern isn't engaging with in-person networking events, team members will offer to attend events with the intern to help them grow more comfortable with the idea of in-person networking.

In providing support specifically for their interns with disabilities, State Street looks beyond assistive technology. They ask all of their interns, even those not referred through MCB, if they have additional needs to see if they need accommodations that were not previously identified. They also attempt to provide guidance to the students, referring them to other services with non-profits if it seems appropriate. Their workforce development leadership team also participates in a local consortium of business who are looking to hire individuals with low vision, where they can discuss strategies for making their workplace more inclusive and recommend high-quality candidates to other employers if they don't have a position for them.

In addition to the evaluation required by MCB, State Street encourages supervisors to provide feedback throughout the summer. They provide guidance to managers around performance management of interns, including the basics of check-ins. If managers are having trouble communicating about performance issues, they can ask for assistance. The workforce development office will check in to make sure that managers are staying engaged with interns.

If an intern likes their experience, State Street welcomes them to reapply for the following summer. They also may encourage them to try another company and come back, so that they can get a taste of a different workplace culture. In addition to summer internship opportunities, the firm has longer-term internship opportunities, including a professional development program for seniors, which is an advanced hire program through which interns are converted to permanent employees. State Street emphasizes that their interest in working with MCB is to capture talent they would not otherwise find, and they appreciate the straightforward relationship they have with MCB, which is characterized by strong listening and responsiveness.

### **Other involvement**

The role of State Street does not begin and end with the internship program. In addition to supporting the internship program, Richard Curtis of State Street notes that State Street and other companies “also spend countless hours supporting the relationship like: mock interview sessions, supporting MCB candidates at job fairs, and being a strong community partner wherever is needed.”

### **Ripple effects**

- State Street has hired 5 number of former interns placed through MCB into permanent positions.
- Other interns have taken their State Street experience and secured positions with other financial companies.
- Going through required training with their MCB interns, State Street discovered that one of their required training programs relies on icons that are not compatible with screen readers. Consequently, they realized they need to challenge the training provider to develop accessible programs.

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<sup>i</sup> Cahill, Charlotte. "Making Work-Based Learning Work." Jobs for the Future. 2016.

<http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/publications/materials/WBL%20Principles%20Paper%20062416.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>iv</sup> "Partnerships." Business Engagement Toolkit. ExploreVR. 2018. <https://www.explorevr.org/toolkits/business-engagement/partnerships>