



# Internship for High-School Students With Disabilities Meets Short-Term Business Needs



## OVERVIEW

Vancity Credit union's vision is to redefine wealth in a way that furthers the financial, social and environmental well-being of their members and their communities. One of the programs that Vancity has implemented is the High School Student Internship Program, for students with disabilities to obtain work experience while meeting Vancity's business needs.

The internship program allows Vancity staff to focus on specific projects by having the student interns alleviate administrative duties. The success of the program was achieved by creating strong partnerships with the school board, providing relevant training to staff, and ensuring there was a safe space for managers to talk through concerns prior to the program beginning. Four students were hired on, and one has now been hired post internship.

## OBJECTIVES

Vancity needed administrative support on a variety of projects and programs, and were hoping to fulfill this need while giving high school students a work experience opportunity. Their specific objectives were:

- Have administrative support needs met for various projects and programs
- Ensure the project was mutually beneficial by providing high school students with relevant work experience
- Hire high school students with disabilities.

## APPROACH

To ensure success of the project, Vancity took a number of steps:

- Finding a school district to partner with.
- Getting senior leaders throughout the organization on board.
- Creating an environment where managers could share any potential concerns they might have.
- Selection of candidate.
- Training.

### Working with Internal Partners

Once a proposal was developed, it was taken to both the executive team and then to the union for endorsement because commitment from both was vital to the success of the program. Both were fully on board and continue to be strong partners in the program.

### Finding Partners

Since the project was to take place in the Vancouver Head Office, Vancity decided to engage with the Vancouver School Board to find high school interns. The partnership with VSB was integral to finding the right students for the project. One of the reasons that the VSB partnership worked for Vancity is because it encompassed all types of disability (visible and invisible, physical and mental).

### Securing Senior Support

In order to ensure the success of the project, it was critical that senior leaders throughout the organization were on board and felt supported in the roll out of the project. Critical elements to this included: ensuring their needs were understood, allowing them a voice in the process of how this project rolled out, and ensuring they had support from the partners on the project internally and externally.

### Myth Busting

Another important step was allowing managers and leaders to ask questions and share any potential concerns they had. Through this process, Vancity was able to engage in “myth-busting” and alleviate potential internal roadblocks.

One of the main concerns voiced was how these individuals would be trained, considering that they were high school students and previous work experience would not necessarily have given them the tools they needed for such a detailed, intensive project. These were the type of questions that were answered in the myth busting sessions.

### **Candidate Selection**

The candidates were chosen by the school district, and offered the opportunity to them based on VSB's recommendation. However, even though the candidates had been selected, each candidate went through a practice behavioural interview with Vancity to learn more about the candidate, and give them a typical interview experience.

### **Training**

The candidates went through a condensed version of Orientation & Immersion, Vancity's training program. This allowed each candidate to experience some of the orientation that a permanent hire would receive, and introduce the candidate to Vancity's culture, values and business.

## **OUTCOMES**

Overall the outcomes of this project were very successful. Having these highly efficient interns working on administrative duties freed up existing resources to focus on other projects, and built in time for others to work on collaborative cross functional projects. The students were also involved in various improvements that streamlined processes to make them more efficient, saving time for the organization as whole. The high school student internship program will continue for its second year – and Vancity will be looking to expand the number of interns, and spread them throughout the organization. One of the interns has also been hired on as a part-time employee this summer, before she returns back to school in the fall.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Vancity has benefitted from the knowledge gained during this project, and is keen to share these learnings with other organizations wanting to pilot similar programs. Some of the lessons learned are:

### **Stakeholder Engagement**

The stakeholders involved in the project needed a safe space to voice concerns and ask questions. Having a session to talk about why the organization was behind this, talk through the process, and help answer questions and alleviate concerns. This ensure that all internal stakeholders are completely onboard and comfortable, setting them up for success.

### **Focus on Ability**

Individuals with disabilities are just as efficient and effective as their counterparts without disabilities. In speaking about, and concentrating on their abilities (versus disabilities), colleagues and managers can change the dialogue to focus on strengths and ultimately ensure everyone's best skillset is utilized.



### **Examine Your Existing Policies and Procedures**

As Vancity went through this process, they learned a lot about the existing procedures and policies that apply to all employees. Programs like this one are a great way to learn where your existing procedures and policies may be barriers in recruitment, hiring or retention.

### **Specific Support for Managers**

While the managers felt supported in the process as a whole, they expressed wanting more specific information on different types of disabilities, so they were better equipped to provide support.

### **Have More Opportunities to Connect to Each Other**

Since the interns were spread across various departments, they were able to interact with lots of Vancity staff. There is a further opportunity for them to connect more with each other – to enhance their experience, learn from each other, and allow them to make social connections as well.

### **Expanding Orientation Immersion**

While all the interns went through a condensed Orientation Immersion (Vancity's training program), Vancity felt it would have been beneficial to give students the opportunity to go through a more fulsome training and onboarding – to familiarize them as a group on various processes, technical pieces, etc.

### **NEXT STEPS**

Vancity has decided to continue to run the program for its second year, given the success of the initial pilot. Out of the four students hired as interns, one has been hired on post pilot in a permanent role. Vancity will learn from their last experience, and continue to refine the program in year two.