



Talent **MATCH**

Hiring For & Cultivating Initiative

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Introduction

Does the idea of micromanaging a student employee prevent you from hiring a student? You're not alone.

The Conference Board of Canada and The Future Skills Centre published an Impact Paper identifying the number one barrier to small and medium sized enterprises (SME) participating in work-integrated learning: they do not have staff and support to onboard and mentor students.

While additional staff or mentorship training is necessary for many SMEs, one way to minimize this barrier is to **hire students who are able to take initiative**—and for your organization to cultivate an environment of initiative taking.

While supervising and mentoring student talent is not to be neglected, the stress of managing a student is alleviated when you're confident that a weekly meeting to delegate and review their work is sufficient. Employees who are capable of and encouraged to take initiative don't need to be micromanaged—and students who have this trait are out there.

But how do you figure out if a candidate has initiative? And how do you encourage them to work this way?



Hiring for Initiative

After you've reviewed applications and found candidates with the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities, the next stage is the interview—and that's where you can gauge a candidate's ability and motivation to take initiative.

Behavioural Questions:

In addition to technical questions determining the candidate's skills, you'll want to assess their behaviour. Don't bother asking what they would do in a scenario. A better predictor of how a candidate will perform is how they performed in the past. Consider some of these "tell me a story" questions:

- Tell me about a time you had multiple overlapping deadlines. Were you able to meet those deadlines? How did you manage?
- Describe a time when you took initiative to solve a problem or complete a task or project. How did you anticipate needs or issues?
- Tell us about a time you worked in a team when you faced a challenge. What was your role and how did you overcome the challenge?
- Describe a time at a previous job where you completed all your tasks, but your supervisor was not available to assign new tasks. What did you do?
- Tell me about a time you worked on a project or task related to your job that you did not enjoy doing. Did you complete it? How did you keep yourself motivated?
- Have you ever worked at a job or on a project where you thought of a way to improve the efficiency of your tasks? What did you do with that idea?

Thought Process Questions:

You can also ask questions that show how much the candidate has thought about what it would be like working for you.

- Tell me about our company and how it aligns with your personal values.
 - ◊ This will show how much research they conducted on your organization in advance of the interview and if they believe in what you do.
- If you were selected for this position, what are the first three things you would do in this role?
 - ◊ This may be tricky for students who are not yet experts in their field, but it can give you insight into how they're thinking about your organization, how they might make a positive impact, if they're ambitious, and what their thought process is like.

Cultivating Initiative

Having employees who are great initiative takers in an environment that doesn't cultivate initiative only results in dissatisfied staff who do the bare minimum. It's important to build trust with your student employee. As you learn about their capabilities, you'll be able to trust them to do good work, and managing them will be easier. If you want to encourage initiative, consider the following:

Be clear about expectations and goals.

Make sure your employees know the organization's mission and vision, and how their work contributes to it. Set goals for their projects. Be clear about which tasks require following step by step guidelines versus where employees can make decisions about their work and how to accomplish it. Set up weekly meetings to review work and delegate future tasks. Ask the student to create this agenda.



Foster transparent communication.

Let your staff know it's okay to ask questions and to offer suggestions. Ask them for their input and ideas on how to do things. When they have challenges, they should know they can approach you to ask for guidance. When they do, ask their opinion on how to manage the situation. Ensure your student knows how best to connect with you when they need you outside of weekly meetings.



Encourage collaboration.

Staff should feel like their ideas are heard when they present them to you and their colleagues. Encourage staff to bounce ideas off each other and to offer alternative methods to achieving goals. Allow your student staff to work with other employees who can also provide guidance in their work, while appreciating the ideas they bring forward. Consider using an instant messaging system like Slack for all team members to communicate.



Allow room for error.

Everyone makes mistakes and the best mistakes we make are ones we can learn from. What needs to be done immediately to fix it? What needs to be done in the long run? Involve your student in assessing the error, how to resolve it, and allow them to learn from it. Avoid expressions of anger, and correct yourself if you're unable to. You want to avoid instilling fear in your employee, lest they hide future mistakes.



Praise work and offer constructive feedback.

Praise initiative taking privately and publicly where appropriate. Acknowledge their good work and offer constructive feedback on why you think it was well done or how it could be improved.



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