In the Starter Blocks: What is Workforce Readiness (and Why Do We Need It?)

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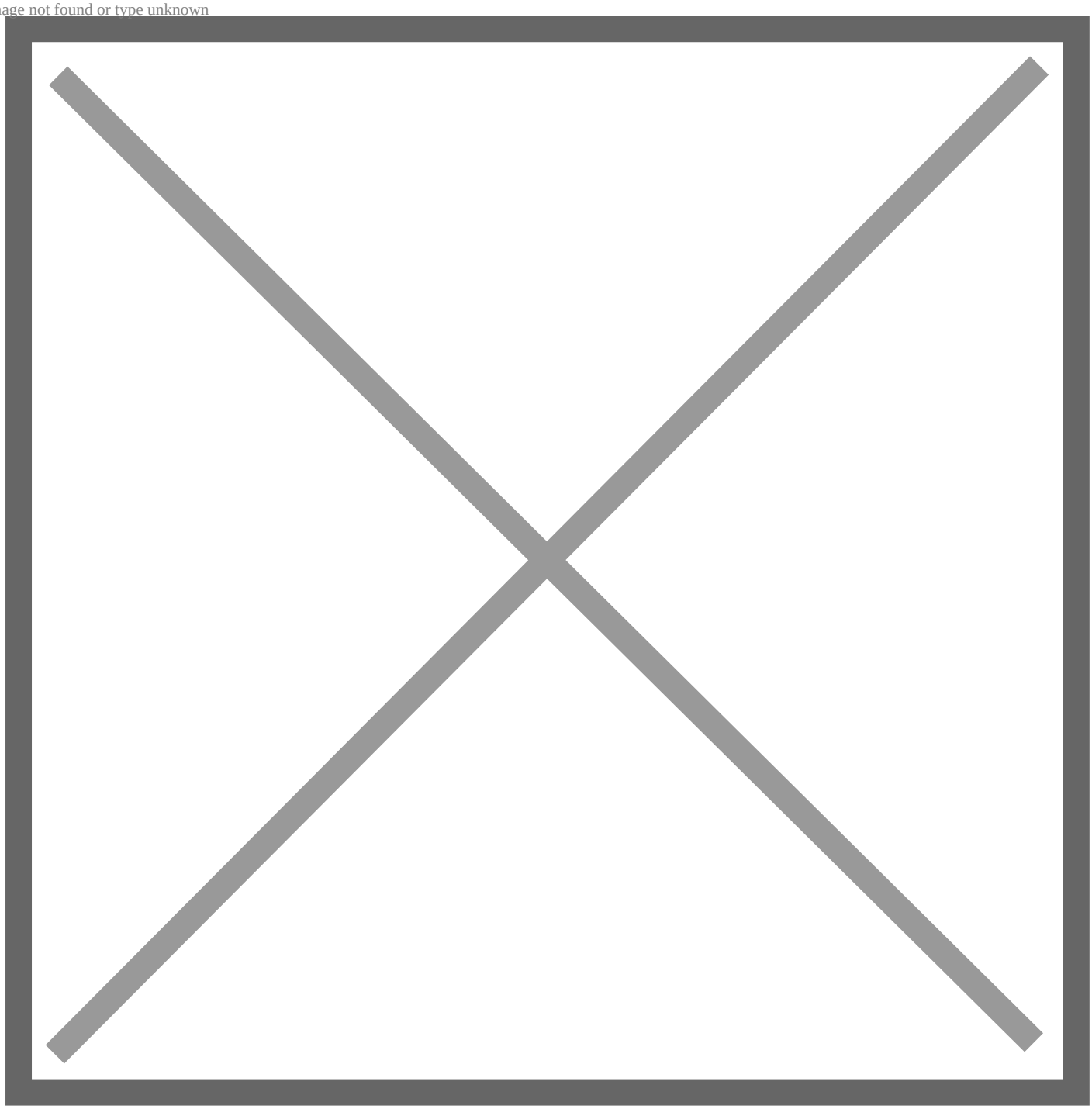


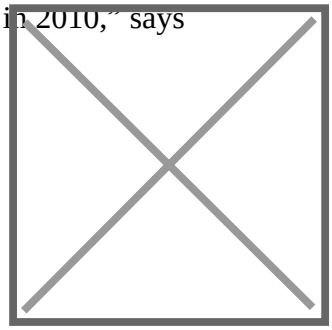
Without enthusiastic sparks that ignite innovations, imaginations, and curiosity, the world of tomorrow might fail to launch. That's why internships are a mutually beneficial way for companies to tap into and embrace the minds of the next generation, while simultaneously setting both parties up for success.

Students are eager to gain real-world employment experience, and businesses are in need of skilled employees who are willing to learn, grow, and excel at rewarding work.

Toyota is championing this winning formula. Through its workforce readiness strategy, which is committed to equipping young people to be productive and accomplished members of society, the company is exposing future workers to new careers. From financial services to marketing to manufacturing to mobility, Toyota offers students internship opportunities to learn from the best in the field.

It's an initiative that helps companies grow and stay competitive. Roughly 1.5 million internships are filled annually in the United States, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE).

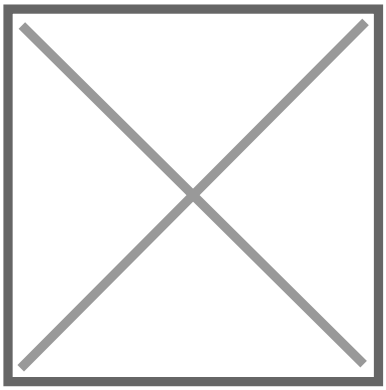
"We've had over 200 students participate in our Making Life Easier internship program since it officially started in 2010," says



Damion Tucker, a senior analyst at Toyota Financial Services, who oversees the company's workforce readiness strategy. "We want to make career pathways for students that are a part of our programs. We're giving them opportunities to intern with us – now we really want to hire them and complete that story."

From intern to long-term

And what a triumph it's been. The Making Life Easier internship, which is a community-based program that partners with nonprofit organizations like Girl Scouts of the USA and Boys & Girls Clubs of America, has yielded several favorable outcomes. For instance, the company has hired 17 of the Making Life Easier interns since the program launched in 2010.



Brittani Wynn is one of them. As a member of the Boys & Girls Club of Collin

County for roughly eight years, she was encouraged to apply for the Toyota Boys & Girls Club of America internship by the organization's regional director. She applied and acquired a position. Today, as a full-time employee, she knows firsthand that the journey from internship to employment is invaluable.

"When you start off as an intern, you think it's just going to be something that lasts through the summer, and then it's going to be done," says Wynn. "Many companies have interns that stay for the summer, and then you never hear from them [the company] again. At Toyota, they wanted to stay in contact. And not only that – the goal was to transition into full-time employee. What I hoped would happen, actually happened."

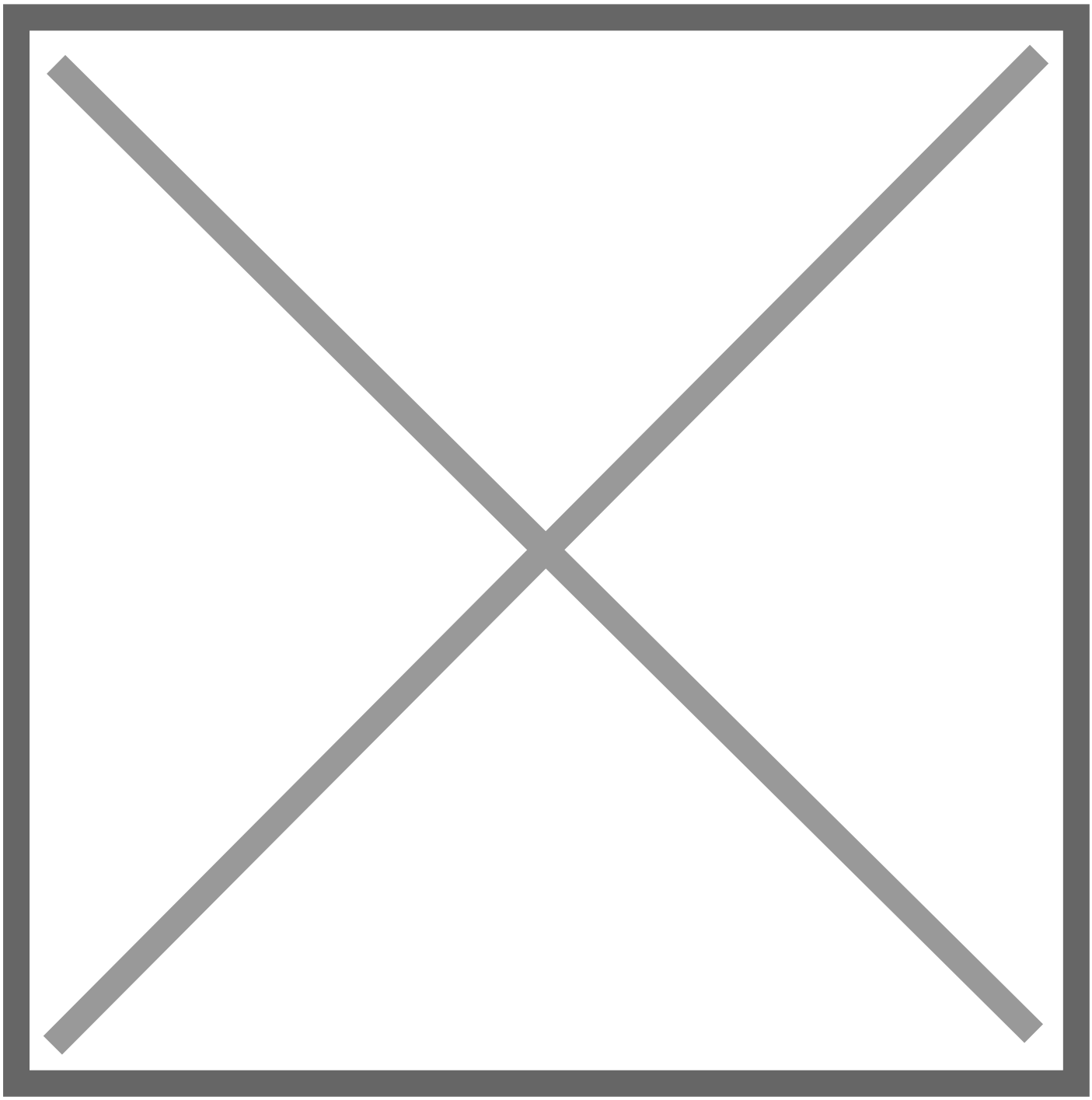
Wynn has been at Toyota since her 2017 internship, and currently serves as a full-time compliance support specialist at Toyota headquarters in Plano, Texas.

Internships through Toyota Financial Services are only open to its nonprofit partners, such as Junior Achievement and Girl Scouts of the USA. Boys & Girls Clubs of America is one of the program's most prominent partners and where the company recruits most of their interns.

"The nonprofits that we partner with, such as Boys & Girls Clubs of America, work with the underserved youth," says Tucker. "What we're trying to do is expose them to things they may not get exposed to in the communities that they come from. We're trying to give them opportunities and exposure to the corporate world."

Before students receive Toyota internships, they typically undergo a mentoring process with the partnering nonprofits. Shannyn Baumgartner, a credit supervisor at Toyota Financial Services in Denver, has served as an ambassador and judge who mentors intern and scholarship applicants through Boys & Girls Clubs on behalf of Toyota.

"We sit down with each of them, we interview them, and we give the ones who don't win feedback and tips on what they could do going forward," says Baumgartner. "Each Boys & Girls Club has its own mentors and coaches that really help the kids."



Where mutual benefits flourish

Experiential learning is crucial to developing prospective employees, regardless of industry. Internships not only provide enriching opportunities that give college students valuable hands-on professional experience and practice, they benefit the companies that eventually hire these students full-time.

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Keith Jones, senior manager at Toyota Motor North America (TMNA), who spearheads the company's Rainbow PUSH scholarship and internship program, agrees that the benefits go both ways. "Interns get to check us out as an employer," he says. "We get to check them out as a potential team member. We get to tap into bright minds with new ideas, new ways of looking at things. We get to test drive them. And they get to test drive us during those internships."

If both parties find the working relationship productive, potential job offers can be presented to interns as soon as a year before graduating from college. Not only does that alleviate post-graduation job hunting stress for interns, but it gives Toyota first dibs on qualified applicants in a tight job market.

According to a 2019 report conducted by NACE, the average conversion rate from intern to full-time hire nationwide is 56.1%. That's an increase over five years ago, when employers reported converting an average of 51.7% of interns to full-time hires in 2014. And as companies, such as Toyota, create more opportunities to groom young talent, it establishes a pipeline for an already-trained workforce.

The Rainbow PUSH partnership program offers a $25,000 scholarship for three years to college sophomore students with a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) attending primarily historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Jones says they wait until students have a year of college under their belt before they are eligible for the Toyota internship program.

Students from HBCUs like Xavier, Morehouse, and Spelman placed through this program have scored positions across Toyota's departments, including manufacturing, research and development, sales, IT, marketing, and more.

A strong commitment to diversity

Toyota's history with Rainbow PUSH, which was founded by Rev. Jesse Jackson, goes back to the early 2000s. The organization's mission is to protect, defend, and gain civil rights by leveling the economic and educational playing fields, and to promote peace and justice around the world.

“In early 2000, Reverend Jackson came to us and said, ‘Hey, Toyota, you can do more,’” Jones recalls. “At the time, our leadership agreed, and our diversity plan was established. Then, in late 2013, the conversations around supporting their educational efforts started.”

And those efforts have paid off for many, including Tina Watson of Chicago. Watson was a Rainbow PUSH scholarship recipient who landed an internship and later joined the Toyota family as a full-time employee.

“Tina got her degree at Tuskegee, and received the scholarship through us,” says Jones. “At the end of her first internship, the HR team was ready to hire her. When she graduated, she came right back and accepted our offer. She’s been with us for three years now.”

Although securing talent from the internship pool is good, it’s not the only road to success for Toyota’s interns and scholarship winners. For Malachi Haynes, a recipient of the 2018-2019 Boys & Girls Clubs of America National Youth of the Year award and Making Life Easier scholarship, who plans to study kinesiology at Colorado State University, working at Toyota is not on track for him professionally. “Malachi wants to go into sports medicine, so Toyota is not going to be a good fit for him,” says Shannyn Baumgartner, a credit supervisor at Toyota Financial Services in Denver, who mentored him. But that’s a success moment, too. The point is to support and launch these young professionals, no matter where they land.

“My internship taught me to work hard and believe in myself,” says Wynn. “It gave me the confidence to know that I can do it. I wish that every kid could have the opportunity to be in the Toyota internship program. I hope there’s many more to come.”