

# EMPLOYEE BENEFITS/HIRING

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## On the job

### Internships provide students with valuable work experience

By SARA WIDNESS

A young woman from New Jersey, who is studying public communications at the University of Vermont, recently engaged in a two-month internship with the Vermont and the New Hampshire Upper Valley Region of the American Red Cross.

For Natalie Glaser the internship has been, she said, “very rewarding and very related to my major. I do a lot of things that I’ve covered in classes. It’s great to get a foundation related to real-life experiences through my internship.”

She was assigned to Doug Bishop, director of communications and external relations. Among other tasks she helped write press releases, researched which social media platforms to use for different events and refreshed a list of pertinent Vermont radio stations to be contacted in the event of a statewide emergency.

As she moves into her senior year, she also brings experience from an internship in 2012 with the *New York Observer*, a newspaper in Manhattan, where she assisted with event planning and marketing.

“We have actually hired some of our interns,” said Angela Russell, American Red Cross regional volunteer director.

The organization uses interns in the summer and in the academic year. This past summer St. Michael’s College, Castleton State College and the University of Vermont were represented through internships.

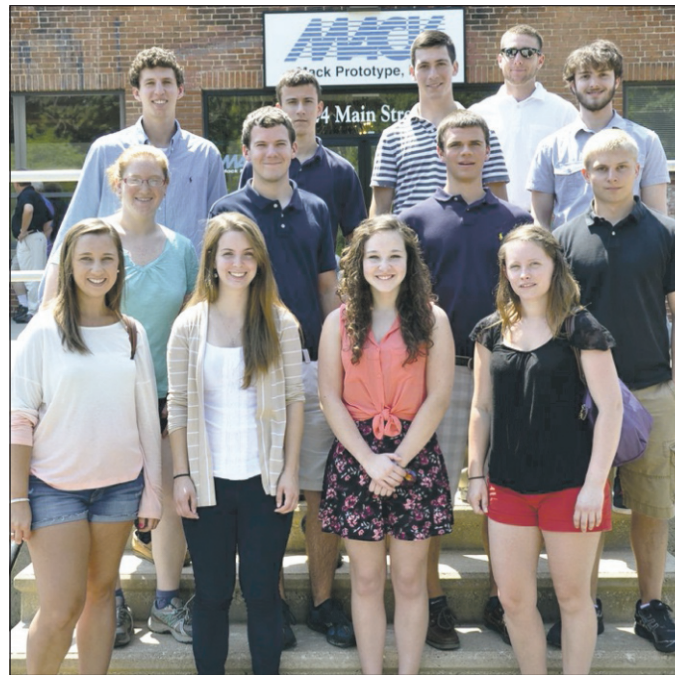
“We interview with the students to make sure that they are going to find a meaningful job within their degree. We will provide regular supervision for them and regular feedback. We want to make sure that what we give them is tangible and that they can complete [work] for their portfolio as well as for us that we can use,” Russell said.

Among this past summer’s intern projects was assisting with a fall event, the nearly decade-old Bears & Friends fundraiser for disaster relief held in December.

“You treat it as if they are being paid; you hold them accountable to the tasks,” she noted, adding that this can be a first stepping stone for them when they put on their résumé they have worked for the American Red Cross.

Green Mountain Power, headquartered in Colchester, at present has 670 employees. According to Steve Costello, vice president of generation and energy innovation, internships can be a way of filling new positions.

So important, in fact, is the food chain from colleges to the company, that this summer it announced a formal partnership with colleges in Rutland County to give interested students “as much of an opportunity as possible to get both practical experience and a view of what real-life work is like in whatever field of studies they’re involved in,” Costello said. “We’re a lot broader [in opportunities] than just wires and poles obviously. We will try to be as flexible as we can and work with as many



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**Fourteen college students from Vermont and New York interned at Mack Molding last summer, the largest intern class to date.**

students as we can. For some students, just spending a day with someone job-shadowing in the field they are potentially interested in could be a big help.”

He added that one of the reasons for the emphasis on internships “is to create the next generation of workers, not just for our industry and renewable industry but for Vermont in general. We need to get kids to stay in Vermont,” he said, noting that Rutland’s population dropped some 20 percent in the last two decades. “We want to help reverse the trend. With internship opportunities, kids are making connections to us and to the community. They may realize there’s a lot more opportunity here than they thought. We want some of them to end up here,” he said.

One intern in the human resources department went directly from that to a full-time, permanent position at Heritage Family Credit Union in Rutland.

“What we’ve seen over time is that a large percentage of students who intern with us stay in Vermont,” Costello said. “We’re helping education but we’re also helping create a skilled workforce here.”

Internships: 11

## A family affair

### Employers offer many benefits to parents

By PAT GOUDEY O'BRIEN

Many workers in Vermont, employed in both public and private sectors, have access to a range of parental and family benefits — for instance, taking extended family or medical leave without risking their job — that are defined through state and federal regulations. In addition, companies striving to establish a culture of family-friendly policies provide other benefits, for instance child care referrals or subsidies, parenting and other family-oriented classes, and on-site resources like lactation rooms for nursing mothers.

What constitutes medical leave and family leave is defined by extensive federal regulations under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). The state of Vermont has regulations in place as well under the Vermont Parental and Family Leave Act (PFLA). The acts have some differences, and employees may take leave under whichever act provides the greater benefit at the time of the leave, the Vermont act states.

The federal act provides for eligible employees to take up to twelve weeks of unpaid leave annually for covered medical or family reasons, with the right to return to the same or a similar job at the end of that time, often with health and other benefits remaining in effect. Employers are not permitted to retaliate against the employee for taking the time off. In some cases, accrued paid leave time — vacation days, sick days, etc. — may be included in the 12-week period.

Companies that provide for additional time off may do so under their own policies, with the possible addition of medical certification or other requirements in place for extended leave. Members of the armed services are covered by their own set of official regulations, as well.

Eligible companies under the federal act include state and federal employers, public schools, as well

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## Benefits

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as private-sector businesses that have employed 50 or more employees for a designated period of time. Employees must have actively worked for a covered employer for at least 1,250 hours for twelve months preceding the leave, with some exceptions and caveats.

John Berard, senior labor relations specialist at the Vermont Department of Human Resources, said Vermont regulations allow for extended paid time off that may be arranged through accrual of hours based on regular annual leave, paid sick leave, personal time, and possible compensatory time. Discussions with supervisors can work through questions of eligibility, paid and unpaid entitlements, and eligible reasons for medical or family leave requests.

Annual leave and sick leave can carry from year to year, he said, subject to caps on the maximum accrued. But compensatory and personal time can extend only into the next fiscal year before expiring.

Berard said flexible schedules and telecommuting arrangements to accommodate family needs are also available to employees, subject to the needs of the job.

Child- and elder-care referrals and advice, and help defraying these expenses for income-eligible employees, are also available through state Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) with the Vermont State Employees' Association and the Vermont Troopers' Association.

As explained on the State's website for the Office of the Attorney General, Vermont's PFLA

requires many employers to provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave annually for things like pregnancy, birth, adoption or illness of the employee or a close family member. Businesses with 10 or more employees come under the parental-leave sections of the Vermont act, the site explains, and medical-leave sections apply to employers with 15 or more employees. Workers generally must be continuously employed for at least a year for an average of 30 hours a week, it says.

Eligible employees may avail themselves of "short-term" unpaid leave under the Vermont act, as well, Berard said. The act provides for taking up to 24 hours in a year, not more than four hours in one month, for certain dental, medical, family or school-related needs.

For parents, both mothers and fathers are eligible to take time off to bond with a newborn or adopted child under federal and state guidelines. Pregnant women may take time off for medical needs, and regulations allow fathers to take time during prenatal months to care for mothers who may be incapacitated due to pregnancy or childbirth, as well.

Steve Schultz is second vice president for people, rewards and operations at National Life Insurance Company in Montpelier. He said National Life has a wide range of family-friendly policies and strives to create a culture of community within the organization.

"We do a lot of things here that really support families," Schultz said. For instance, parents can take a week of paid leave for the arrival of a new baby or adopted child that does not count against other types of leave or vacation time. Up to 40 hours of paid volunteer time is available, too, which parents

can use to participate in their children's activities, like coaching a team or volunteering to help with an event, he said.

The company also offers the possibility of creating a flexible work schedule for a period of time to accommodate home or parenting needs. Working with supervisors and managers, employees may create a schedule that allows them to complete their work during flexible hours beyond the normal workday or occasionally even from home, if their work can be done at a distance.

National Life also provides the privacy, comfort, and convenience of a lactation room for nursing mothers who must use a breast pump on a regular schedule during working hours, Schultz added.

The company sponsors some parenting classes that employees can attend at low cost, he said. Employees' spouses are welcome to attend these, as well, he noted.

On the National Life campus in Montpelier, Schultz said that a "near-site," subsidized daycare center, Kid Country Child Care, is located in a separate building. The privately operated center accepts children from within the company and in the greater Montpelier community, but he said it is very popular with National Life employees who appreciate knowing their children are being cared for close by.

The child-care center also participates in programs like the company's annual Christmas party, at which children serenade employees with carols and holiday songs and receive gifts provided by National Life.

"Parents and children are very important to us," Schultz said.

At the University of Vermont, Barbara Johnson, associate vice-president for human resource

services, said there's a culture of caring for the needs of employees and families. UVM policies apply to all benefit-eligible employees, whether male or female.

Johnson said supervisors are empowered to work with employees to arrange for leaves or flexible schedules, based on the needs of the job and applicable state and federal regulations and UVM policies. In many office environments, jobs can be adjusted or duties shifted for a period of time, for instance, to accommodate an employee's current circumstances.

Lactation centers are also provided on site for nursing mothers.

Johnson said two child-care centers are accessible to parents to arrange for care close to their work. One center, associated with the Living and Learning Center on campus, is a teaching site for early-education students. The other, located on the Trinity College campus now owned by UVM, is subsidized by the university, holding down costs to parents, most of whom are university employees.

As part of their wellness policy, UVM offers a child-care referral resource, classes and counseling programs for parents, and other family services. Johnson said the total number of eligible employees at UVM is about 3,800 people in Burlington and in university extension programs.

As a state with a large number of small businesses, not all workers are covered by the regulations in the national FMLA and statewide PFLA. Workers who want to know if they have access to these benefits can speak with their human-resource department or find additional information on the State's websites at [humanresources.vermont.gov](http://humanresources.vermont.gov) under "Salaries and Benefits," or the State attorney general's website at [www.atg.state.vt.us/issues/employment-law](http://www.atg.state.vt.us/issues/employment-law). ❖

## Internships

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**Mack Molding Company in Arlington** had more than a dozen interns plying projects this past summer. The interns came from Vermont or New York and were attending schools ranging from Harvard to Cornell, with majors including engineering, biology, physics, architecture, nursing and pharmacology, said Julie Horst, director of communications.

As with Green Mountain Power, her company's focus is two-fold: to try to keep youth in the Northeast and in Vermont, and to source particular talents who can step into engineering disciplines and technical fields at the company.

A few years ago President Jeff Somple of Mack Molding's Northern Operations told his staff he wanted interns but not just to do odds and ends and menial tasks. He wanted to create experiences for students

that would serve their own futures, said Horst.

As a result, staff must make a case for an internship request for specific projects with beginning, middle and end points. The president then signs off on the projects and the interns. By summer's end, each intern will have completed his/her project that goes onto a flash drive to show a prospective employer or to add to a résumé as a concrete accomplishment during their tenure.

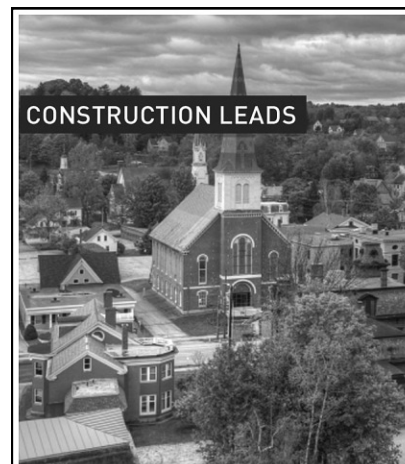
This highly organized internship program is a two-way street, with the company staging presentations for the students on subjects ranging from decision making to job interviewing to how this particular company ticks. Two programs are reserved for the interns who present the projects they're working on. Their audience includes their sponsors and senior management.

"This program has been beneficial for us," Horst said. "Hiring technical talent is an ongoing challenge when you are in Vermont. It's sometimes difficult to bring someone from the Midwest or South into

Vermont's challenging winters. By developing our youth in this state we have the opportunity to have valid internships that are at or near their homes. This gives them the opportunity to really learn about Mack, the markets, the services we offer and the

customers we interface with. They see bonafide technical and engineering positions here in the Northeast. It's a win-win on many levels.

"We have hired four of our interns over the last three years," she said. ❖



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