

# TRENDWATCH



UPS's unique intern program transforms the perspectives of leaders.

By Jennifer J. Salopek

*An 80-year-old woman lives alone with her dog in urban Chicago. She has trouble hearing and making herself understood. She quit going out years ago; her parish priest is her only visitor. She has no family or friends who check on her or assist with her needs. Her apartment is in extreme disrepair and is fouled with dog excrement. Rats and roaches roam freely.*

*In McAllen, Texas, 40 percent of the population lives in poverty. Many residents earn less than US\$25 per week. Nearly 100,000 immigrants live in colonias, unincorporated communities that lack the most basic utilities. Many colonias have no paved roads or*

*running water. Light is often gained by running lines to a car battery outside. The local organization that helps people purchase land and build modest homes has a waiting list of 4000.*

Programs that require executives to temporarily undertake humble roles in their companies are enjoying a new cachet, thanks to the British-import television series, *Back to the Floor*. Airing on PBS, the program sends top executives to the front lines of their businesses to do everyday jobs with everyday employees, and films their experiences. For example, Carnival Cruise Lines president Bob Dickin-

son spent a week making beds and waiting tables on board the MS Imagination.

Another example: The United Parcel Service Community Internship Program, founded in 1968 by then-president James Casey, is hardly trendy. But CIP has evolved into an exemplary training effort that holds valuable lessons not only for its participants, but also for companies everywhere that seek more dedicated, satisfied leaders who understand the problems in the world around them—and actively try to do something about those problems.

When Michael Lockard walked into the 80-year-old woman's Chicago apartment, he was stunned by the filth and low standard of living. Lockard admits that he lived his life in Louisville, Kentucky, in a "comfort zone." A self-described workaholic, Lockard tended his duties as finance and accounting controller for flight operations while his stay-at-home wife managed the domestic scene. He admits that cleaning, laundry, cooking, and so forth were "not things I typically do."

As a CIP intern in Chicago, working through the parish of St. Margaret of Scotland, Lockard rolled up his sleeves. He and five other interns cleaned the woman's apartment from top to bottom. They made minor repairs, changed light bulbs, hung doors. But what made the greatest impression on Lockard wasn't the living conditions or the unaccustomed duties, but the spirit of the woman he had helped.

"She had a great laugh," he says. "Although she had nothing, she didn't see her situation as tragic. She was thankful, and hugged all of us at the end. Her attitude was inspirational. It puts happiness from material things into perspective."

Perspective. Inspiration. Spirit. Those are three of the intangibles that Don Wofford, corporate learning and development coordinator at UPS and coordinator of the Community Internship Program, hopes participants will gain during their four-week stints in underprivileged communities across the United States.

Each year, UPS selects 50 up-and-coming managers to participate in CIP. At a cost of about US\$10,000 per intern, the company has spent more than \$14 million on the program since its inception in 1968. More than 1100 managers and supervisors have participated. But there's little talk of return-on-investment: "It's emotional, not just financial," Wofford explains. "Our managers return from their internships filled with a different spirit."

UPS has a host of corporate training programs and leadership schools, spending more than \$300 million per year on learning opportunities companywide. But CIP "hits a whole different core aside from management and leadership training. It's about understanding yourself and your role in the world," says Al Demick, learning and development manager. "The ROI is that [the program] puts people in situations that call on them to use new skills, or to use their skills in new ways. Sometimes those are life-and-death situations. People are never quite the same when they come back."

Annette Law wasn't. Now UPS's manager of succession planning, Law participated in CIP amongst the tenements of New York City two years ago. An African-American woman who hails from Ogden, Utah, she says, "I thought I knew all about diversity. But what I saw were people just like me, only their opportunities and choices were different."

Wofford, who has been with UPS for more than 30 years, completed a CIP internship in Oakland, California, in 1976. He has never forgotten his experience, working as a liaison between corporations and the Black Panthers to form the New Open Committee and helping people prepare for and find employment. His pride is palpable as he relates, 26 years later, that he helped make 55 job placements in his six months there. "It gave me a great sense of personal satisfaction."

Now, as coordinator of CIP, Wofford works to spread that sense of personal

satisfaction to interns and to the beneficiaries of their efforts in Chicago, New York, McAllen, and Chattanooga.

Wofford outlines the main goals of the program. Participants are expected to

- gain awareness of the conditions that affect all communities
- understand the driving societal factors and why many challenges exist
- become sensitive to life conditions that may be affecting their employees and how those make them feel
- become involved in their communities once they return home.

“You think you understand society’s problems—that is, until you take off your suit jacket,” says Nancy Bottoms, district air manager for the Kansas district and a 2002 intern in McAllen. “I’d heard a lot about CIP and had voiced interest in par-

ticipating. But you have to be there to really understand.”

Armed with a copy of *Spanish for Dummies*, Bottoms worked with residents of the colonias—tutoring children, helping build houses, and assisting in a local drug abuse program. “Sometimes I had to turn around and look at the border signs to remind myself that I was still in the United States,” she says.

Like Lockard, Bottoms was most impressed with people’s spirit in the face of adversity. “The people in the colonias had no financial wealth, but they had immense personal wealth. There was a strong faith and sense of community. Even with so little, everyone always wanted to give back. They’re just good people who are trying to build a better life for their children.”

Back at work, Bottoms says her relationships with the 65 people she supervises have changed. “Now I tend to step back, to look harder at how I respond to people. I now know that we’re all here to accomplish one goal and that it’s about much more than being a boss and giving directives. My employees would say that I talk with them more and do more to get them involved in our community.”

Lockard, who left children ages 5 and 8 behind during his month-long internship, lived in the St. Margaret of Scotland rectory with Father Dan Mallette and five foster children. “I was very affected by my work with the kids,” he says, “and returned home determined to be more involved in our local educational system. We found that, in many cases, parents and grandparents were often part of the

problem. "How do we grow a generation that believes there's something better for them?" he asks.

"We try to select individuals who can make the greatest impact. They typically have 10 to 15 years of experience, and they have the wherewithal and authority to make things happen when they return," says Wofford. Participants also tend to supervise a lot of people, maximizing the ripple effect of the internships.

Reyes Cortez, site coordinator in McAllen and director of the Texas Enterprise for Housing Development, says, "I want interns who can impart their managerial expertise." Cortez notes that while many local social service organizations may have an intimate understanding of families and their needs, they often face managerial and operational challenges that they're not equipped for. The interns, he says, are valuable because they're "on the outside looking in."

In 2002, the 50 interns were selected from a pool of more than 2400 executives. "Training expenditures are often viewed as discretionary," he notes. "It says a lot that UPS cares to spend millions of dollars on CIP, even in tough economic times, and that the company is willing to invest in me." He admits, "In the past, I always made up some excuse not to participate in volunteer activities."

One of the most affecting of Lockard's experiences in Chicago was working with inmates in the Cook County prison system. The interns tutored inmates facing release within the next four to six months, preparing them to reenter the employment world by practicing interview skills and filling out job applications. "It's something I will remember forever," Lockard says. "It blew away my stereotyped ideas about why people are in jail. Many inmates are just like me, only they made some bad decisions. Now, they're trying to get an education and better themselves." Lockard says that the experience changed the way he interviews and

hires, and would push to change UPS's corporate policy against hiring felons. "I'm much more sensitive to the fact that we must make decisions on a case-by-case basis. Things are no longer black and white for me. I'm more open to giving people a second chance."

A major part of CIP is the journals that participants are expected to keep. Wofford explains that interns complete a daily log that "helps them download and examine their emotions." Bottoms found the journal to be an effective way of processing her feelings. "It was so difficult to put all those feelings—sympathy, frustration, anger—into words every night. But the month-long stay allowed us to work through that range of emotions," she says.

"The first time I heard about CIP, I couldn't believe it," says Cortez. "Down here, we're used to doing a lot of stuff with no money."

UPS continues to refine the program, holding an annual meeting in the fall with site coordinators from the four communities to exchange ideas and seek suggestions for improvement. "We continue to look at potential sites," says Bob Kapelski, who manages the corporate leadership schools at UPS. Because the company now operates in more than 200 countries, he says, "We'd consider expanding CIP internationally if the opportunity arose."

Cortez notes, "Many other companies are interested in replicating the program until they see the degree of time, effort, and expense involved." "It's not a minor undertaking," admits Wofford. "We expect total immersion from the interns. They're there for the long haul. It's much more than a casual involvement."

"I hope we never put a number on it," says Law. "We see ROI in the smiles and thank-yous. We will never really know how many lives we have touched."

*Jennifer J. Salopek is a contributing editor of T+D; [jjsalopek@earthlink.net](mailto:jjsalopek@earthlink.net).*