



Internships help high school grads make contacts

[By Michael Kinsman]

Entrepreneur Aymen Ramlaoui knows engineers he can turn to when he can't figure out how to make something work. He knows marketers to call when he is exploring how to develop an audience for his product.

He also knows that certain CEOs will take his calls and offer advice when he needs it.

And there are venture capitalists willing to help him when he needs money.

Ramlaoui sounds like he's been around for years, but he's actually an 18-year-old freshman at University of California Santa Barbara who traces his vast base of business contracts to a semester internship during his junior year at High Tech High in San Diego.

"I really think the key thing about business is contacts," Ramlaoui says. "Every great product came out of somebody knowing something that they could share with someone else."

Ramlaoui is weeks away from launching his first business, an online social networking site that will match musicians from different regions of the country. He says he regularly taps into his network of contacts for expertise.

"You have to have people around you who can help you when you need it," he says.

One distinguishing factor of High Tech High is its real-world emphasis in the pursuit of education. The school seems to understand that the more exposure its students have to business, the more creative they will be as they develop career plans.

Each of the 143 juniors at High Tech High is required to do an internship during the year, making it one of the few high schools with such a requirement. Hundreds of students have gone through the program during the high school's six years of operation.

The Manpower academic internship program, sponsored by the staffing company, makes sure that students are prepared when they go looking for their first job. Students are interviewed by Manpower job counselors before reporting for their internships.

"It's a screening process many of the students have never seen," says Rebecca Haddock, director of community relations for the school. "They get interviewed by someone in a suit, just as they would be interviewed at a company."

Mel Katz, co-owner of the San Diego Manpower franchise, says the goal of the program is to prepare and steer students into meaningful internships that not only introduce them to the work world, but also instill a desire to learn more.

"You can't believe the opportunities these kids get," he says. "They get positions where they are responsible for getting jobs or projects done. It's not like they are sent off to file stuff. They have to drive themselves or take the bus to work, get there by a certain time and conduct themselves like any worker would. And they get to do meaningful work."

Ramlaoui, who is a physics major, had planned to follow his father and uncles in becoming an electrical engineer. He interned at Symwave, a small company that designs and develops high-performance integrated circuits.

He spent time with the engineers one day, and the next day he'd find himself engaged in helping the marketing staff.

"You find out how different they are in how they approach their jobs and how they communicate," Ramlaoui says. "I had no idea they were so different."

A second internship at SIPphone, a VOIP software company, also served him well. There, he struck up a friendship with President Jason Droege.

"I told him I was interested in business and asked if I could sit in on some meetings," he said. "What I learned from my internships is that I didn't want to be an engineer, but I wanted to run my own startup."

Drawing upon his contacts, Ramlaoui and another High Tech High graduate, Iain Hartley, hope to have their own social networking business up and running early next year. Hartley is now a computer science major at the University of California San Diego.

"I couldn't have done this if I didn't have the internships," Ramlaoui says. "But meeting people you can turn to when you need advice is how you succeed in business. You'd be surprised at how receptive people are to helping you once they've seen how you handle a project."

Even if High Tech High students don't create their own businesses, Katz hopes the internships will leave them with a more intense desire to learn.

"I think the internships can show you why studying algebra or geometry is important," he says. "You get to see how you need it on the job. It might make students feel what they are learning in school really is worthwhile."