A recent court ruling decided that unpaid internships are fair to students if the internship offers the student educational value and learning. But, this ruling is a little vague. What elements in an internship make it a valuable experience?

To make an internship program beneficial for both parties, employers should ensure interns apply knowledge learned in the classroom within the workplace and leave the internship with multiple quantifiable accomplishments. The trade-off, of course, is employers gain ideas from the fresh perspective of a current student learning new industry trends.

I firmly believe this ruling should not be used as an excuse to not pay interns. In fact, any company that hosts an internship program should compensate
interns with at least minimum wage for their hard work, if not right away, eventually.

But I do appreciate the focus of internships returning to the quality of the experience received rather than just money in exchange for work. After all, internships are supposed to be an extension of the classroom, not part-time jobs to pay the bills.

Here are a few suggestions for managing unpaid interns:

1. **Cultivate an environment of collaboration.**
   More than 77 percent of employers seek skills like leadership and the ability to work on a team when vetting new hires, according to a National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) study surveying 260 employers in 2014.

   Help interns hone their collaboration skills by providing plenty of tasks that require teamwork. If the intern thrives well with every project they are given, present an opportunity to lead a small project or direct an aspect of an event.

   **Related:** [5 Reasons You Need Interns to Build Your Business](http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/248720)

2. **Offer opportunities for career advancement.**
   More than 73 percent of 50,000 college students recently surveyed by Looksharp prioritize opportunities for career advancement when looking for an internship.

   Don’t host a dead-end internship program. Offer the potential for interns to be hired full-time, should a position become available. If there isn’t room in the company budget for growth, craft the program to include tasks relevant to real-world industry work, so the intern leaves with tangible, marketable experience.
3. Train interns to think critically and innovatively.

An overwhelming 93 percent of employers agree critical thinking, clear communication and complex problem solving skills are more important than a candidate’s undergraduate major, according to an online survey of 318 respondents conducted in January 2013 by Hart Research Associates.

In the internship program, prioritize helping interns develop critical thinking and problem solving skills. Give them projects that require them to overcome obstacles with innovative thinking.

For example, ask an intern to propose an idea for the next marketing event. Give him a budget and a few resources he can consult. This might help save the team time too, especially if the intern comes up with the perfect idea.

Related: Condé Nast to Pay $5.8 Million to Unpaid and Underpaid Interns

4. Provide networking opportunities.

On average, 16 percent of new hires are already connected with someone who works at the company where they are hired, according to data released by LinkedIn in March.

If traditional compensation or perks are out of the question due to budget constraints, one of the most valuable resources companies can offer interns in exchange for their hard work is connections with other professionals. The connections they meet may lead them to their next job, which may prove more important than an intern stipend in the long-run.

5. Be a meaningful mentor.

More than 60 percent of college students in Looksharp’s survey consider access to mentorship and executives a very important part of the internship.
As yet-to-be professionals, students need someone they can look up to and ask career advice. Either be that mentor, or assign the intern someone they can go to for guidance.

6. Be flexible with schedules.

About 57 percent of students emphasized the importance of work/life balance in an internship in Looksharp’s survey. After all, many students are taking classes and working a part-time job alongside an internship -- especially if the internship is unpaid.

Be flexible with intern hours. Each intern will have different needs according to their work and school schedule. In many ways, the ability to schedule real-world experience around the less flexible aspects of the student’s life will hold the most value for busy students trying to make ends meet.

Related: 9 Tips for Hiring and Managing Interns Startups Need to Know