Interns help open China to the outside world
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Published: January 8 2009 01:35 | Last updated: January 8 2009 01:35

When Li Da was nine years old, his family moved from his native Beijing to Canada. As a student, he went to Columbia University in New York for a year. Now he is back in China and has his own company.

And among the 30-odd employees of DeyaTech, a provider of electronic document management software, he hopes to replicate his own globalised mindset by taking in interns from foreign countries.

Mr Li is not alone. More and more private companies in China are starting to seek international exchanges or expose their staff to more international experience.

In a powerful sign of this, AIESEC, the international student organisation that helps arrange cross-border internships, had experienced rapid growth since it set up a branch in China six years ago.

With the notable exception of Lenovo, the world’s fourth-largest computer company that internationalised with a big bang through its acquisition of IBM’s PC business, corporate China is still worlds apart from such countries as Japan, South Korea or Taiwan, which have all seen foreigners take seats on the board, or even the top job.

However, there are clear signs that this is going to change. AIESEC has signed up more than 200 corporate partners – companies that take foreign interns, the majority from the manufacturing sector.

For Mr Li, looking for foreigners to work with his company was the most natural step.

“We hope that they can bring a more open, global mindset to the rest of the staff. It helps develop the kind of company culture we want,” he says.

So far, DeyaTech has had an Indian and a French intern. “One influenced people through his character because he was very outgoing. We placed him in sales,” says Mr Li. “The other was very methodical, and the other employees learned a lot from him in customer development and training.”

He believes that many other start-up companies, driven by their founders’ personalities and backgrounds, have a huge curiosity about other cultures and are therefore bound to be more open to taking on foreign interns.

For some of the larger companies, the motivation is rather different. “When we do the rounds with a view to bringing corporate partners on board, the most effective argument is that your competitor is doing this already,” says Alex Wang, head of incoming exchange at AIESEC China.

Huitongwang, an internet platform, took the plunge after learning that Alibaba, China’s largest business-to-business e-commerce company, had already signed up.

Once the interns arrive, this often turns out to be an adventure in a country that still does not easily embrace foreigners as part of society.

This was felt at Advantech, a Taiwanese-owned industrial computer maker with a large presence in China, which has taken in several foreign interns.

“When our first intern arrived in Beijing, he was stopped by our guards at the gate, and there was no way they’d let him in because he couldn’t explain who he was and what he wanted,” recalls Cong Wei, Advantech’s human resources manager in Beijing.

“It was only by coincidence that one of us looked out of the window and saw him, and ran out and let him in.”
Part of the challenge is the language. Normally, interns introduced through AIESEC and similar programmes do not speak more than rudimentary Chinese, and English proficiency in the average Chinese company is not widespread.

Therefore it can be a challenge to find the right place for the intern to work and to help him or her make an impact on other staff.

To avoid such problems, Advantech stepped up its intern programme slowly, with a first intern from Canada in Beijing in 2006, and other foreign interns in its Shanghai and Shenzhen branches a year later.

“In the beginning, people here were really shy and didn’t know how to communicate with their new colleagues,” says Ms Cong. “They needed encouragement. We needed to tell them that we want them to interact.”

Now that it has gained some experience, the company is expanding the programme, with two Americans in Beijing and one intern from Costa Rica in Shanghai.

There are also plans to have foreign interns in Xian, a big city further inland that is much less internationalised than the capital and the coastal provinces.

It plans in the future to bring interns from countries to which many Chinese have had even less exposure, but which are important markets for the company, including Brazil and Russia.

Once such a programme is firmly on track, the impact can be huge, especially in smaller enterprises. At Best88, a software start-up based in the southern province of Guangdong, an Indian business student who came as an intern has now been given a permanent job, and his task is to develop the market in his home country.

“We were focused purely on the domestic market before,” says Jim Guo, the company’s founder. “But now we’ve come to realise that there’s a whole world out there.”

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