



Orange County Associates Virtual Exchange (OCTAVE)

is a vehicle for collaboration of the **Tourism Cohort**
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Dear reader:

In our evaluation process, which included surveys, focus groups, and interviews with top tourism leaders in Orange County, a key request was for more information on best practices for people and the environment. On that subject, we offer this newsletter, which includes an overview of CSR and its best practices, as well as a model internship design.

- Zoot Velasco, Consultant for Jobs First/ OCBC in Tourism

OCTAVE is a newsletter of the Orange County Business Council. Send us your questions, tourism success stories, needs, challenges, best practices, skills gaps, and emerging trends, and we will try to include the most relevant ones in OCTAVE!

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In our next edition, we will showcase new technologies and systems for tracking visitors in areas that have historically been difficult to monitor.

[I would like to subscribe!](#)

The Four Ps, If You Please

By Zoot Velasco

This year, I am a contractor hired to shepherd the *California Jobs First* Activation Plan for Tourism. But I haven't always been obsessed with visitor counts and the like. I had a long career leading cultural centers and teaching business at several local universities as an adjunct professor. At California State University, Fullerton's business school, I taught a senior-level management course titled "Business and the Environment." A large part of the class focused on the ethics of corporate citizenship, known internationally as "CSR" or "Corporate Social Responsibility." So, I was pleased that, in my interviews and evaluations of Orange County tourism leaders, when asked about best practices and recommendations, many mentioned improving CSR with people and the environment.

In today's tourism economy, CSR is no longer a peripheral initiative. It is a core business strategy. For destinations like Orange County, where visitor experience is deeply tied to environmental quality, workforce readiness, and community well-being, CSR represents both a moral imperative and a competitive advantage. Research shows that tourism firms engaging in CSR can reduce risk, strengthen stakeholder trust and longevity, and even improve financial performance by aligning their business operations with broader societal values.

In CSR, I taught about “the 4 Ps” (quite different than “the 4 Ps” of Marketing, another class I taught). These 4 Ps are: **PROFIT, PEOPLE, PLANET, and PROGRESS**. The basic concept is that every company has a PURPOSE (Uh-oh! That's a fifth P!) in making a PROFIT, treating their PEOPLE well (both employees and customers), leaving the PLANET better than we found it, and PROGRESS in practices and technology that makes the world a better place. If a company can do all of this, it will have a long record of success.

PROFIT is the easy one—easy to understand, but harder to make a reality at scale. It is what every for-profit company aims to do well. However, in the age of online startups, profit is not always the goal; often getting users is the aim to attract venture capital, with the idea that profits will come later. But ultimately, profit must come for success to exist. There are myriad classes and books that will tell one how to make a profit, but generally it comes down to having a great product or service at a price point people want to pay, with adequate marketing to attract buyers/users.

CSR in tourism is often misunderstood as a cost center (a unit of the company that incurs expenses but does not directly generate revenue). In reality, strategic CSR enhances profitability through brand differentiation, customer loyalty, and investor confidence. Studies indicate that tourism companies with strong CSR practices experience more favorable market reactions and reduced perceived risk.

In Orange County, where competition among destinations, hotels, and attractions is intense, CSR-driven branding can directly influence visitor choice. Nationally, companies like Marriott and Hilton have embedded sustainability and community engagement into their core value propositions, resulting in measurable gains in customer satisfaction and repeat visitation.

Locally, hotels that reduce water usage, source food from regional suppliers, or participate in community initiatives are not only lowering costs but also appealing to environmentally and socially conscious travelers, a growing segment in Southern California, and, let's face it, everywhere.



It becomes a bit harder to understand what makes a company good at managing, supervising, and leading **PEOPLE**. CSR in tourism begins, and often succeeds or fails, with people. This includes both **customer care** and **employee management**, which can take many forms.

For customers, it means treating people with truth, honor, and respect; listening to them, and making adjustments based on their needs. For guests, CSR shows up in authentic, respectful, and inclusive experiences. This can include accessibility initiatives, culturally competent programming, and transparent communication about sustainability practices. Travelers increasingly expect businesses to reflect their values, particularly around diversity, equity, and environmental stewardship.

For employees, it involves purpose-built recruitment, training, and company culture. Employees are recognized as key stakeholders. There are incentives for employees to think of their work as more than a job, but a place of mission, vision, respect, and upward mobility for them. Employers who can master this have a low turnover rate and high job satisfaction.

Recruitment is most effective when employers partner with local workforce development programs, community colleges, and nonprofits to create inclusive hiring pipelines, especially for underserved populations. Employers often complain that young employees lack soft skills. However, job-seekers from difficult backgrounds often have GRIT, experience, and soft skills beyond their years. Employers who recruit for these qualities can often find employees worth investing in.

Once hired, employees are only as good as the training they receive. Since COVID, many employers have cut their training programs and then wonder why employees don't stick around. Training must provide not just job skills but career pathways, including leadership development and cross-training. Training programs should also build teams and empower teamwork.

We often think of benefits as the basics, offering living wages, healthcare access, and predictable scheduling— all critical in an industry often marked by volatility. However, while good pay and comparable benefits are important, these are not the biggest reasons people stay or leave a company. The biggest reasons for “quiet quitting” and outright leaving are not feeling a sense of mission, respect, team camaraderie, or a bad boss. With investments in leadership training and team building, most of these issues can be addressed. Empowering staff to resolve issues and contribute ideas improves both service quality and employee retention.



Another word for CSR in the PEOPLE department is what many hospitality leaders now call a “CARE” philosophy—Care for guests, Care for employees, Care for community, and Care for environment. This approach aligns with research showing that CSR in tourism frequently emphasizes employee relations, community engagement, and product/service quality as key dimensions. In Orange County, workforce development programs, such as hospitality training pipelines through community colleges, demonstrate how CSR can address labor shortages while advancing economic mobility.

Tourism in coastal destinations like Orange County is inseparable from the environmental health of our **PLANET**. Beaches, wetlands, and open spaces are not just amenities; they are the product. CSR-driven environmental stewardship includes:

- Reducing water and energy consumption in hotels and attractions
- Eliminating single-use plastics in food service and events (see our article on this in Newsletter #5)
- Supporting biodiversity and habitat restoration
- Educating visitors on responsible tourism practices

A standout local model is Orange County Coastkeeper, which works with businesses, municipalities, and volunteers to protect water quality and coastal ecosystems. (See our article on them in Newsletter #5.) Tourism companies that sponsor cleanups, support watershed education, or adopt ocean-friendly practices are directly investing in the long-term viability of the destination.

Nationally, certification programs and eco-labels have emerged to standardize these efforts, evaluating everything from supply chains to transportation impacts in tourism operations. The takeaway is clear: environmental CSR is not just about compliance. It is about protecting the very assets that drive visitation.



The fourth “P,” **PROGRESS**, reflects how tourism companies are leveraging innovation and technology to advance CSR goals. Emerging areas include:

- **Smart energy systems** in hotels that optimize consumption in real time
- **AI-driven staffing models** that improve scheduling fairness and reduce burnout
- **Digital guest engagement tools** that promote sustainable behaviors (e.g., towel reuse, low-carbon transport options)
- **Data transparency platforms** that track and report ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) metrics
- **Better tracking of visitors** to manage parklands from overuse and cut lines.

Strategic CSR frameworks emphasize aligning these innovations with core business operations to create shared value that benefits both the company and society. In Orange County, where innovation ecosystems intersect with tourism, there are growing opportunities to pilot technologies that enhance both visitor experience and community impact from smart mobility solutions to climate-resilient infrastructure. But Progress is not just about technology. It also includes policies that help manage people and the environment better.

For Orange County’s tourism industry, CSR is not a side initiative— it is a destination-wide strategy. The integration of Profit, People, Planet, and Progress creates a more resilient, competitive, and equitable tourism economy. As visitors increasingly choose destinations that reflect their values, and as communities demand more accountability from the tourism sector, CSR will define not just how tourism operates, but whether it thrives.

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Designing the Perfect Internship



Let's be honest: the word "internship" still makes students think of juggled coffee runs, outdated filing systems, low or no pay, and a supervisor who says "do a great job" without ever explaining what the job actually is. Since COVID-19, internships, especially in tourism, have too often drifted into the gray zone between on-the-job learning and low-paid labor, offering long hours, vague duties, and little real mentorship or opportunities for advancement. Since the pandemic disrupted both education and service industries, many students have simply opted out, choosing flexible gig work or part-time jobs that pay better and respect their time. Recent estimates suggest that only about 21.5% of U.S. college students participated in an internship in 2023, a notable drop from pre-pandemic estimates that often exceeded 50%. If tourism employers want interns to come back and stay, they need to redesign internships into something far more meaningful: structured, paid, skill-building experiences that launch careers instead of just filling shifts.

1. Program Structure and Length

An effective tourism internship typically lasts **10–16 weeks** (seasonal model) or **6–12 months** (extended/rotational model). The appropriate length depends on the complexity of the roles, the organization's capacity for mentorship, and whether there is a permanent job waiting at the end.

Recommended Structure:

- **Week 1–3:** Orientation and foundational training with full onboarding.
- **Week 2–8:** Departmental immersion (e.g., guest services, events, marketing, operations) with mentorship from an experienced partner or boss.
- **Week 8–12+:** Capstone project + increased responsibility
- **Final Week:** Evaluation and presentation

Note: Longer internships provide cross-departmental exposure, which is particularly valuable in tourism settings where collaboration is essential.



2. Recruitment Best Practices

In tourism, technical skills can be taught, but GRIT and people skills are often what determine long-term success. GRIT: Defined as perseverance, resilience, and the ability to follow through, can be identified in the hiring process by looking beyond polished resumes to lived experiences. Candidates who have balanced school with work, supported family responsibilities, navigated setbacks, or shown sustained commitment to a goal often demonstrate the kind of determination that translates well to fast-paced, guest-facing environments. Simple shifts in hiring practices, such as structured behavioral interview questions (“Tell me about a time you handled a difficult person” or “Describe a situation where you had to stick with something challenging”), can surface these qualities more effectively than GPA or prior industry experience alone.

Equally important are people skills: empathy, communication, adaptability, and cultural awareness. In tourism, these combine to be the foundation of exceptional guest experiences. Employers can assess these through role-playing exercises, group interviews, or scenario-based prompts that simulate real-world interactions. For example, asking candidates how they would assist a frustrated traveler or collaborate with a diverse team reveals far more than a traditional interview.

Tourism internships should prioritize diversity, accessibility, and local workforce development, especially in destination-based economies. Focusing on GRIT and interpersonal strengths also helps level the playing field in DEI-focused hiring. Candidates from underrepresented or nontraditional backgrounds may lack formal experience but often bring high levels of resilience, multilingual ability, and community-based knowledge—assets that are invaluable in tourism. By prioritizing these attributes, employers move away from narrow credential-based screening and toward a more equitable model that recognizes potential, not just pedigree. This approach not only broadens access but also builds a workforce that better reflects and serves an increasingly diverse traveling public.

Key Strategies for Recruitment:



Engage **underrepresented communities** through targeted outreach, usually through education partners. Partner with **community colleges, universities, and workforce boards**. Partnerships with educational providers such as Community College PROMISE programs (for first-time college students), Rising Scholars programs (for system-impacted youth), and other similar programs can help an employer find gritty, self-starting candidates with pluck and soft skills. Work with college partners to offer online classes for interns that can help with their workload.



Offer **paid internships** at a level above low-wage jobs (15-25% above minimum wage) to remove financial barriers. This will not only give you a higher-caliber candidate and make your internships more competitive but also show that you care about your employees.



Allow for a flexible schedule and the ability for some work to be done from home. Students often encounter the challenge of balancing academic responsibilities with internship schedules. Full-time students may find it difficult to manage both. Offering greater flexibility in work hours and location could be a valuable way to support them.



Clearly communicate **learning outcomes and career pathways**. Make your internship stand out as an opportunity!



Invest in the time and energy it takes to recruit and hire great candidates for the best return on investment. “You get what you pay for.”

Sample Recruitment Poster Copy:

“Launch Your Career Where the World Comes to Visit”

Join our top team for OC Entertainment & Events Management with hands-on, well-paid experience in guest services, events, marketing, and destination management. Work alongside industry professionals, build real-world skills, help create unforgettable visitor experiences, and place yourself in the leadership pipeline for our industry!

What You’ll Gain:

- Paid, hands-on experience
- Mentorship from industry leaders
- Exposure to multiple departments
- Networking and career opportunities

Who Should Apply:

- College Juniors, graduate students, or recent graduates interested in hospitality, tourism, marketing, or business; or tourism industry professionals with 3 years or more experience.
- Strong communicators with a passion for service and culture
- Orange County Residents, *Promise* program students, and system-impacted youth are encouraged to apply. We are an equal opportunity employer.

Call to Action:

Apply today to join our team and learn to lead for life!

3. Training and Development



Once you have hired the right candidate who shows promise of becoming a great team member and future leader, **training** should combine onboarding with culture, technical instruction, experiential learning, and reflective practice.

Core Components:

- **Orientation/Onboarding:** It's best practice to have a buddy system. Each intern is assigned a seasoned employee to mentor them. Interns get a well-designed training with:
 - A tour of the company and department
 - A lunch or coffee in which their team and company leaders are introduced
 - A handbook and presentation on the organizational mission, vision, values, and plan, customer service standards, etc.
- **Skills Training** may include CRM systems, booking platforms, event logistics, and communication protocols.
- **Team-Building:** Fun, inclusive, educational, and measurable ways to include new hires and interns in existing teams. Include interns in team meetings, outings, tours, and all online and in-person discussions.
- **Cultural Competency:** Serving diverse visitors with inclusivity and awareness. This could include some cultural training and leveraging interns' diversity and language skills to train others on the team, making them the stars.
- **Job Shadowing & Rotations:** Exposure to multiple roles at the company may show interns different paths for their participation and show the company their skills for possible future leadership and placement.





Best Practice is to incorporate a blended learning model:

- Classroom-style training sessions
- On-the-job training
- Peer learning and group discussions
- Team-building exercises:
 - Weekly **cohort meetings** for reflection and peer support
 - Group challenges: For example, designing a visitor itinerary or event concept, or having the team create an emergency earthquake and fire plan for the building and team.
 - Social activities tied to the destination (site visits, cultural experiences)

Decision-Making Integration:

- Assign interns **real responsibilities** (e.g., handling guest inquiries, assisting with events)
- Use **scenario-based exercises** (e.g., handling a service failure or high-demand situation)
- Encourage participation in **team meetings and planning sessions**

Capstone Project Example:

Interns develop a proposal to improve a visitor-experience touchpoint (e.g., wayfinding, digital engagement, sustainability initiative) and present it to leadership, either alone or with their team.

5. Advancement Opportunities

Internships should clearly connect to the company's career **pathways**. Approaches may include:

- Provide **career mapping sessions** with the company's HR professionals, outlining industry roles.
- Offer **priority consideration or first interview opportunities for open positions**.
- Create **alumni networks** to maintain engagement.
- Offer **online training opportunities** in related fields for jobs you may have coming open. For example, online social media marketing courses an intern could take for a job helping in the marketing department, or training on a specific sound-and-light board for technical assistance to the events' sound-and-light crew.
- Issue **certificates, badges, or micro-credentials** for skills learned by employees and interns.

A strong internship program should serve as a **direct pipeline to full-time employment**, reducing recruitment costs and improving retention.

6. Benchmarks and Evaluation Process

Evaluation should be **continuous, structured, and two-way**. It is typical for the intern to fill out a questionnaire. The supervisor, mentor, and/or team may also fill out the same questionnaire on the mentor's performance and, together, discuss it, with an emphasis on strengths, time spent on needs, challenges, and goals. The tone of this meeting would be one of helping the intern achieve their goals and company appreciation for their work. Often in these situations, the intern may be harder on themselves than others, and conversations can be very productive and enlightening. Evaluation will occur at the midpoint and end of the internship, with a Final Evaluation and the Capstone Presentation to demonstrate critical thinking, creativity, presentation skills, and ability to adapt to the environment.

Key Benchmarks:

- **People Skills:** Communication, ability to work within a team, relationships with mentors and company leadership, and customer relations
- **Skill Acquisition:** Technical proficiency and hard skills adaptability
- **Professional Behavior:** Punctuality, adaptability, social and soft skills
- **Project Outcomes:** Quality and impact of assigned work
- **Guest Feedback:** Where applicable



Feedback Loop (through HR):

- Conduct **exit interviews** to improve program design
- Track **post-internship outcomes** (employment, continued education)

7. Key Success Factors

A high-quality tourism internship program is:

- **Structured but flexible**
- **Supportive and inclusive**
- **Experiential and meaningful**
- **Aligned with workforce needs**

When done well, internships enhance not only the intern's career trajectory but also the **overall visitor experience**, as engaged and well-trained interns contribute directly to service quality.

Tourism internships are uniquely positioned to shape the next generation of industry professionals as well as a company's workforce and culture. By investing in thoughtful recruitment, robust training, collaborative experiences, and clear advancement pathways, employers can build a sustainable talent pipeline while elevating their destination's competitiveness. In a service-driven industry, the quality of people ultimately defines the quality of place.

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Upcoming Job Fairs

📌 June 2026 [Orange County Virtual Job Fair](#)

Newsletter8



📌 July 2026

- **ORANGE COUNTY In-Person Community Employment Day Career Fair**

- 📍 Holiday Inn Santa Ana-Orange County Airport

- 📅 **July 23, 2026, 11:00 am – 3:00 pm**

- Large community hiring event with many local employers.*

- [Orange County Virtual Job Fair – Jul 30, 2026](#)

📌 August 2026

- **Orange County Job Fair & Career Fair**

- 📍 Courtyard Marriott Santa Ana

- 📅 **August 13, 2026** — regularly scheduled fair series.

- [Orange County Virtual Job Fair – Aug 18, 2026](#)

NOTE: Additional Job Fairs are available to registered students at all local Colleges and Universities. Check with your College Counselors.