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Introducing eInternships

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Internships continue to be an important part of the journey into employment. They are “temporary (non-permanent) work placements that reflect a period of transition from higher education to the world of work” (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018a, pg. 29). This entry introduces computer-mediated internships: eInternships (also known as virtual internships). These internships emerged about ten years ago (see van Dorp, 2008). This development was fostered by the emergence of new software and virtual collaboration tools. As in the case of traditional internships, eInternships serve to provide a learning experience to the eIntern, often as a means to qualify the person for new roles, a new career and employment. However, some characteristics set eInternships apart from traditional internships. First, eInternships are not necessarily location bound nor are they by default a transition from education into employment (they may also represent a transitional period between different careers). Second, eInterns may be trained entirely online by a supervisor or peers. Third, almost all work is completed using online platform, shared software and tools. And fourth, many eInterns are not enrolled in educational institutions (although the majority of eInterns are students). eInternship formats are therefore particularly suitable to roles and tasks that are heavily computer-mediated in real life as well. To date, there is no evidence that suggests eInternships are any less effective than traditional internships in teaching new cognitive and technical skills, although affective learning outcomes may be harder to obtain (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018a).

The current entry will briefly introduce the two forms of eInternships that exist, but will focus specifically on the second form (applied eInternships with employers). Following this introduction, the entry will outline the unique value proposition and challenges that arise for managers who wish to run the organisationally-applied eInternships.

eInternships forms

Two different types of eInternships are known today (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018a). The first form includes *simulated internships* that are indeed virtual: Interns may complete tasks in a simulated work environment which presents them with the same challenges that they may face in the workplace (Bayerlein, 2015; Ruggiero & Boehm, 2016, 2017). This eInternship is a popular option for many educational institutions that run them as these eInternships allow students to build and learn skills in a virtual work environment while the lecturers can also assess their performance in these settings (e.g., accounting, engineering). Many of these eInternships do not reflect the length of more traditional internships. However, in those cases, students are also able to get academic credit for completing specific internships.

The second and more applied form of *eInternships* (and the focus of this entry) are those internships that are essentially an extension of teleworking practices: eInterns work with an actual employer, using online tools, platforms, and teams (Jeske & Axtell, 2016a, 2016b). The intern (not necessarily a student, however) is engaging with an organisation as part of an internship that may last several weeks to a year (two thirds of such internships last 6 to 12 weeks, see Jeske & Axtell, 2018b). Most eInterns will be working part-time (rather than full-time). But like traditional interns,

many may be offered employment after completing their eInternship, especially if they are situated in the same country as the eInternship provider. Given their flexibility, these eInternships are an increasingly interesting for organisations regardless of location and size (e.g., a number of service providers specialize in marketing eInternships online on behalf of larger companies and public organisations, particularly in the USA, Australia and India).

eInternship prominence and characteristics

To date, these eInternships have been observed across the globe in most countries and across most continents (Jeske & Axtell, 2013, 2016a, 2017). Overall, they tend to be more popular in geographically large countries such as the USA and India (Jeske & Axtell, 2016a). Such eInternships may be located across various time zones and countries (which may not be the case with the simulated eInternships that are run by universities). eInterns may work in a number of different roles. These include predominantly marketing activities (including branding and design), programming (of websites, programmes, databases), and complete often work related to analytical tasks (frequently in start-ups; Jeske & Axtell, 2018a). However, eInterns may also work in roles related to online journalism, customer care (including eHealth solutions or online counselling) and other people-oriented roles (Jeske & Axtell, 2013). The nature of employers is very varied, as eInterns may work for any number of organisations, starting from government bodies, charities, museums, multinational businesses, to academic institutions and start-ups.

Organisational implementation

The implementation of eInternship programmes requires careful planning for HR and the managers supervising eInterns. A few examples demonstrate what is required. First, the national regulation of payment of interns and legal protection of interns while at work vary significantly across countries, sectors, and organisations (Jeske & Axtell, 2013, 2018a). As eInterns might work across national boundaries, organisations have to pay attention to several different legislative frameworks (particularly when the organisations are small and not multi-nationals). Clarifying the legal requirements will therefore be important for HR professionals. In addition to the legal ramifications a second point is worth noting: Managing interns with different cultural backgrounds may require new training for managers who have hitherto only managed local interns. Cultural values may vary (Stone et al., 2007) and therefore affect how practices and policies are interpreted by both managers and eInterns. Giving due consideration to cross-cultural situations and how they may be managed effectively will be important steps for managers to consider (Nardon & Steers, 2014). Good communication, expectation and process management will be essential to ensure the right candidates are recruited and both eInterns and employer benefit from the internship experience.

Third, managers of eInterns will need to have the appropriate ICT tools and skills in order to train their eInterns and to manage their performance effectively (not all eInterns will have access or experience with relevant tools). Fourth, it is important to ensure that managers have the interpersonal and supervisory skills to instruct, motivate and manage their eInterns. As part of this process, managers of eInterns need to consider what kind of relational investment they are willing to make and the resulting psychological contract they are building (transitional, relational or balanced; Rousseau, 1995). Research suggests that all forms of contracts can be found among eInternships. eInternship characteristics associated with balanced or relational contracts tend to

feature training, more structured internships, at least some degree of collaboration with others (inter-dependent team work) (Jeske & Axtell, 2018a). A variety of eInternship providers use online peer coaching (see also Parker et al., 2014). Peer coaching or mentoring is possible when organisations have several interns working for them simultaneously. Such activities can be facilitated via social media platforms and the appointment of experienced eInterns to help manage the onboarding process, support the knowledge exchange and engage in online community building.

Organisational benefits

eInternships feature unique value for organisations of all sizes. A few are briefly introduced. First, such eInternships enable even small organisations to access talent from which staff can learn and who they may also be able to mentor in turn (Jeske & Axtell, 2016b). This can be enriching for small organisations who lack the resources to hire new talent and whose staff seeks the exchange with others. This is particularly enriching for start-ups that are keen to increase the (temporary) intellectual capital while building the business (Jeske & Axtell, 2016a). This brings us to the second point: eInternships afford a degree of flexibility that even allows small organisations such as charities, small businesses or start ups to accommodate eInterns. In addition, the option to work across different time zones and days of the week means that many eInterns are not by default bound to regular working hours. This allows many organisations as well as interns to work in parallel or sequentially on tasks. Third, such internships allow organisations to increase diversity by recruiting interns from all walks of life (Jeske & Axtell, 2016a; Kraft et al., 2019). However, eInternships are not just of interest to students (Jeske & Axtell, 2014), but also working professionals and individuals who are unable to take traditional internships for a variety of reasons (Jeske & Axtell, 2016a). This includes those with family responsibilities, those with limited financial means, and those who are geographically limited (e.g., due to remote location or disabilities that impact individuals' ability to travel or commute).

Reader recommendations

A number of research gaps and questions remain. First, due to the lack of work in this domain, it is not entirely clear how simulated internships and applied eInternships can be best integrated in employer and educational internship programmes, despite their increasing popularity across many countries. Secondly, it would be helpful if employers and academics would exchange their experiences and approaches as interns are likely to become more diverse over time, particularly considering that many people pursue multiple careers paths. A number of resources are available for eInternships with employers as well as simulated eInternships (such as Bayerlein, 2015; Jeske & Bayerlein, 2018b).

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