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Virtual internships: Learning opportunities and recommendations

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Introduction

As teleworking and remote working options are adopted more and more widely in many countries, so are e-Internships, one of two forms of virtual internships. The first form involves simulated training settings that allow students to train certain skills and test their knowledge in simulated environments. In this paper, virtual (or e-)internships involve real-world but computer-mediated internships with employers. This development is fostered by new tools and software that support e-mentoring, online webinars and remote working applications. In addition, cloud and social media make it easy to access work-related resources and networks. These features make virtual internships particularly promising options for small businesses that lack certain expertise in their local area or lack office facilities to accommodate interns. Indeed, a number of studies have demonstrated the increasing popularity of virtual internships over the last ten years.

The present paper draws on the author's online interviews with 13 internship providers as well as interns and the results of several surveys conducted with virtual interns over the span of several years. Interviewees included representatives of a dozen small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The interviewees were located across the USA, the UK, Ireland, Romania and India and the interns who were surveyed came from almost all continents and three dozen countries. The current article considers insights from these sources and focuses specifically on organizational learning outcomes that may emerge when employers adopt certain HR practices and processes. Relevant example references for further reading are also provided.

Learning opportunities for employers

When organizations first start to run virtual internships, they may quickly experience one of the positives associated with such internship schemes: Increased diversity. And this is due to a number of reasons. Generally, the motives of virtual interns do not vary significantly from those of traditional on-site interns, except for the need for more flexibility regarding the location and timing of the internship. Like traditional interns, virtual interns wish to gain more experience following or during their university education or seek experience in order to change careers. However, for virtual interns it is often important to find a way that allows them to manage their work–life balance due to family or other local obligations. For many with local obligations, online study options and

remote working options are often the only means available to manage these work-life demands. Moreover, some individuals may choose virtual internships as they are less able to finance a relocation to take up a traditional internship or face mobility issues due to disabilities that would make it more difficult or impossible for them to commute or relocate for internships. Virtual interns can therefore be any age and their motives for taking up virtual internships can be wide ranging (Jeske & Axtell, 2017). As a result, many organizations may find that their internship candidates bring valuable life experiences and different perspectives to the organization.

This diversity can increase the learning experience of all staff working with these virtual interns. Like traditional interns, working with virtual interns can therefore present previously unknown opportunities for mentoring for various staff within the organization. Some of the interviewees provided their interns with a unique mentoring experience by introducing them to various managers, consultants and peers. This generated a mutual learning process and also increased staff engagement with the internship scheme. When the learning and mentoring process is managed carefully, this learning experience can be a motivating and mutually beneficial experience for both the interns and the staff, particularly those that get to mentor their own interns. Recent work further suggests that after a successful first internship experience, the large majority of virtual interns are open to doing another virtual internship or open to virtual careers involving remote working (Jeske & Axtell, 2018a).

The potential diversity of virtual interns can also be a significant bonus for supervisors who wish to learn more about how the organization performs and how the organization is perceived by other groups. This might enable these organizations to gain more insight and possibly help them tackle issues related to customer and employer branding. Virtual interns will, when encouraged, readily provide feedback about how they experience the organization's communication efforts, evaluate the state of the art regarding the technology used, and reflect on their experience with current practices. Their outside perspective on how effective, well put together and useful such systems and practices are can then be used to increase the organizational efforts to address the needs of potential clients and other stakeholders. These experiences also helped both parties to stay up to date with projects, cooperate in developing appropriate training, client relations, products, software and new ideas.

The experience of supporting virtual interns with different backgrounds, experiences and needs can furthermore help supervisors and all staff involved in the internship scheme to understand the criticality of a number of skills and knowledge for their business. These may include interpersonal communication skills, cultural understanding of how to relate to individuals from different cultures, effective evaluation of tasks and feedback to give interns the learning experience and support that they expect from a virtual internship. This may then support young businesses in the identification and development of core competencies for their staff. Connections to educational institutions may be helpful here as well, particularly when they have programs such as industrial and organizational psychology or HRM – graduates of these disciplines are skilled in developing competency models for organizations.

Virtual interns with the right skills can play an important role in helping new start-ups to access talent and address organizational knowledge gaps and skill deficits (Jeske & Axtell, 2016). For example, some interns help organizations to redevelop or design websites, create different online

or offline materials (which also make useful portfolio examples for interns' later job applications). Interns with social media skills, marketing, computing, web or graphic design expertise tend to be particularly sought after by SMEs and start-ups for just these reasons. In addition, many interns engaged in contextual performance behaviors – they are willing to volunteer additional hours, help others, share information and resources with their employer (Jeske & Axtell, 2018a). This is an invaluable resource for many smaller businesses.

That said, educational support of virtual internships varies vastly from one country to the next (with organizations recruiting in India and in the USA being more likely to find educational support). This means that the potential support given by educational institutions to virtual internship providers is often subject to the degree to which such internships are accepted as valid learning experiences. Many career professionals in higher education are not yet fully aware of the opportunities virtual internships may present to many students (Kraft, Jeske, & Bayerlein, 2019), even in countries were virtual internships are slowly establishing themselves. Being proactive as a business may be critical here to ensure that the right virtual interns are recruited from the right programs or career tracks according to the specific learning needs of the business.

Recommendations

The following recommendations may facilitate the successful implementation and organization of virtual internships:

First, anticipate high organizational upfront costs and significant preparation time (e.g. time needed to test and select the right software for managing work; time required to train your staff to use the new software/systems; and time and ideas needed to develop templates, training materials and tools). In addition, it is essential that all tasks are carefully prepared and planned so as to enable the virtual intern to manage the work effectively (and possibly entirely independently). In the absence of everyday interactions, the materials, instructions and task descriptions need to be well prepared. Ideally, these resources ought to be available online so that interns have access to that information as and when it is needed.

Second, staff need to be committed and available to engage with and reach out to virtual interns on a regular – such as daily, or at least, weekly – basis (greater engagement will reduce potential drop-outs). Time and performance management skills become more important when you need to organize your meetings across time zones. Providing and receiving feedback, following up feedback, mentoring online and developing ideas jointly with another person require managers to utilize and use different staff development skills. Even computer-mediated and temporary learning experiences can lead to balanced and relational psychological contracts rather than merely transactional and transitional relationships (Jeske & Axtell, 2018b).

Third, outline your performance/meeting expectations clearly in the application materials, request samples of past work or assess skill levels using trial assignments to select virtual interns with the right skill set (including communication, writing and time management skills). Scheduling and recruitment flexibility may also be key as the selection of highly skilled virtual interns may be as difficult and time-consuming as for traditional interns. Goal clarity and perceived support satisfaction among virtual interns have also shown to increase their sense of being valued and their

self-reported job performance (Jeske & Axtell, 2017). These results suggest that providing goal clarity and support through regular interactions can be important steps to support intern performance.

Fourth, compensate virtual interns in line with best practice (see guidelines of the National Association of Colleges and Employers, NACE, 2011) and the quality of the work they do. Recognition and payment further help to acknowledge interns' input to the organization, but may also be key to recruiting skilled and talented candidates in the future. Especially highly skilled career track changers may be candidates for later recruitment: Treating and paying them fairly will increase the chances that they will accept later offers. Where possible, organizations should consider collaborating with universities as this might enable interns to obtain academic credit while still completing their studies (which increases further increases attractiveness of such internships for candidates).

Fifth, consider connecting your internship scheme to diversity initiatives (Kraft et al., 2019). There are many talented and incredibly skilled candidates for whom remote working and learning opportunities in the form of virtual internships will be attractive and relevant options. It may be helpful to establish links to educational institutions as academic support and their infrastructures could complement the efforts of small employers (e.g., by providing interns with additional access to mentors, career professionals and software).

Conclusions

In order for virtual internships to generate the benefits outlined above, it will be important for employers to create conditions that provide interns with a meaningful experience for skill development. Interns need to have the opportunity to develop their skills by also receiving meaningful feedback. Providing them with assistance or mentoring that will enable interns to make more informed career decisions will be critical for any employer who use internships as means to identify potential candidates they wish to hire later one. A great internship experience also means good online reviews for businesses, an important consideration for all organizations competing for talent. And as demonstrated above, providing an enriching intern experience will often create more fruitful interactions for those supervising, mentoring and working with these interns. That said, it should be clear that virtual internship schemes require a significant organizational commitment in terms of time, resources (staff and remuneration), careful recruitment and selection efforts. Moreover, to operate such internships successfully, the managers will need to have the required technical, interpersonal and time management skills to provide interns with clear deliverables, instructions and constructive as well as frequent feedback to support their learning experience. The requirements do, however, usually outweigh the many advantages that employers may gain via their virtual internship schemes due to the new opportunities that these may generate for employers in terms of mutual learning (Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010), exchanges, and diversity.

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About the author

Debora Jeske is a work psychologist in Berlin, Germany. She has been researching virtual internships for several years and maintains a number of links to research institutions in Germany and Ireland. You can find more research on virtual internships on her ResearchGate site.

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