

How to run successful e-internships: a case for organizational learning

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to outline unique learning experience that virtual/e-internships can offer small and medium-sized enterprises and start-up organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – We interviewed 18 experts on e-internships (interns and managers of internships) across several countries to learn more about the learning experiences for both organizations and interns. The information from these interviews was also used to formulate a number of recommendations.

Findings – The interviews provided insights into how e-internships can provide development opportunities for interns, managers and staff within these organizations. One important benefit pertains to the skill development of both interns and managers. The interns get unique working experiences that also benefit the organizations in terms of their creativity, input and feedback. In return, managers get a unique learning experience that helps them expand their project management skills, interpersonal skills and mentoring.

Practical implications – We outline a number of recommendations that consider skill development, the benefit of diversity in numerous forms as well as mutual benefits for enterprises and start-ups.

Originality/value – The discussion of the various benefits and conditions under which virtual internships will succeed in organizations provide practitioners an insight into the organizational opportunities available to them given the right investment into e-interns and internship schemes.

Keywords: virtual internship, e-internship, organizational learning, mentoring, diversity

Introduction

Increasingly, organizations utilize new technologies so they can offer internship schemes with distant interns. These e-internships offer employers the opportunities to access a larger pool of candidates and talent than they might locally. In addition, e-internships are facilitated via many computer-mediated programs that support e-HRM and are part and parcel of telework and virtual work (e.g., online recruitment, e-mentoring, online platforms for collaborations and support). These features make e-internship particularly promising options for small businesses that lack certain expertise in their local area or lack office facilities to accommodate interns. At the same time, such e-internship may not feature the same potential for face-to-face interaction, opportunities to learn by shadowing others, or for developing long-lasting relationships.

How these aspects are managed and reconciled effectively is up to the organization. We propose that there are several upfront requirements that need to be in place for such internship schemes to succeed: first, the emphasis is to provide interns with a meaningful experience for skill development that will help them develop their skills, help them make career decisions and possibly enrich their portfolio for subsequent job applications. Second, these schemes require a significant organizational commitment in terms of time, resources (staff and remuneration), careful recruitment and selection efforts. Third, to operate such internships successfully, the managers need to have the required technical, interpersonal, and time management skills to support interns with clear deliverables, instructions, and constructive as well as frequent feedback to support their learning experiences.

Insights from the experts

Very little is known about the prevalence and characteristics of e-internships or organizational practices to date (but see Jeske and Axtell, 2014). In order to address this knowledge gap, we decided to find, recruit and to interview 18 individuals with direct experience with e-internships, focusing on their management practices and the organizational learning outcomes. Interviewees included representatives of a dozen small and medium enterprises (SMEs). As the interviewees were located across the USA, the UK, Ireland, Romania and India, all interviews were conducted online. The semi-structured interview guide focused on human resource, organizational learning experiences and the extent to which e-interns can provide an important source of inspiration, feedback and staff development. Interviewees were also asked for recommendations for the design of e-internships. In this paper, we focus on opportunities for organizational learning and the recommendations.

E-internships as learning experience for organizations and interns alike

E-interns can bring diversity into an organization as they can be any age and their motives for taking up e-internships can be wide-ranging. These motives include gaining experience following university, changing careers, managing work-life balance due to family obligations, and managing college classes in addition to obtaining work experience when doing both locally is not feasible. In addition, some individuals may not be able to finance a traditional internship or have certain disabilities that make it more difficult for them to commute or relocate for internships. This diversity represents a wonderful opportunity for managers to learn more about

regions, languages, cultures, different software packages and different (creative, marketing, computing and other) skills taught or used by different schools and professionals. This diversity of interactions can increase the learning experience of all staff working with these e-interns.

The potential diversity of e-interns can be a significant bonus for supervisors who wish to learn more about how the organization performs and is perceived by others. E-interns can provide good feedback about communication, technology and current practices by providing an outside perspective on how effective, well put together and useful such systems and practices are to outsiders such as e-interns, potential clients and other stakeholders. E-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 (see also in Jeske and Axtell, in press). For example, some e-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.

Like traditional interns, e-interns may also benefit from staff expertise. In return, their *presence* can present previously unknown opportunities for mentoring for various staff within the organization. Some of the supervisors we interviewed tried to provide their interns with a unique mentoring experience by introducing them to various managers, consultants and peers, thus providing both staff and interns with the opportunity to learn from one another and share their experiences. 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

(see suggestions by Rattan, 2012, on utilizing cloud-based learning). When this process is managed carefully, this learning experience can be a motivating and mutually beneficial experience for both the interns and the staff that get to mentor their own interns.

And lastly, supporting e-interns with different backgrounds, experiences and needs can help supervisors and all staff involved in the internship scheme to understand the criticality of a number of skills and knowledge. These include interpersonal communication skills, cultural understanding of how to relate to individuals from different cultures, effective evaluation of tasks and providing constructive and timely feedback to provide an appropriate learning experience.

Recommendations for the implementation of e-internships

Our interviewees made the following recommendations for the implementation of e-internships in organizations.

First, anticipate high organizational upfront costs and significant preparation time (e.g., to test and select the right software for managing work; train your staff to use the new software/systems; develop templates, training materials and tools). In addition, preparation and planning of tasks ahead of time are skills that become pivotal to managing work effectively. 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 e-interns on a regular – such as weekly - basis (greater engagement will reduce potential drop-outs). Time 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 requires managers to utilize and use different staff development skills.

Third, outline your expectations clearly in the application materials, request samples of past work, or assess skill level using trial assignments to select e-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 e-interns may be as difficult and time consuming as for traditional interns.

Fourth, remunerate e-interns in line with best practice for their effort and creativity of the interns is (see guidelines of the National Association of Colleges and Employers in reference section for the US for-profit organizations, NACE, 2011). Recognition and payment further help to acknowledge e-interns' input to the organization, recruit the more skilled and talented candidates. Also collaborating with universities might enable e-interns to obtain academic credit (which increases attractiveness of such e-internships for candidates).

Conclusions

E-internships can provide unique learning opportunities for the managers, staff and colleagues of these interns by increasing diversity at work, opportunities for mutual learning and meaningful experiences that increase interns' employability (e.g., Gault, Leach and Duey, 2010). E-interns can be a source of creativity and energy for an organization. The organization gets unique opportunities to access talent from different regions, disciplines, and can obtain valuable feedback on processes, technology, and ideas. Especially for more specialized or geographically remote SMEs and start-ups, well organized and supportive e-internship schemes can provide these organizations with a unique opportunity to reach talent regardless of size, reputation or office space.

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