Chapter XXXVIII
Distance Internships

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ABSTRACT

Academic internships and cooperative programs exist so that students can build a bridge between their academic learning and their professional lives. These programs exist primarily for the student, but also serve a purpose for the university as a way to promote their academic program and for industry to become familiar with the talents and knowledge of new graduates. In a global economy where industries distribute work around the world, internship students may need a chance to become acculturated and familiar with this new professional environment. Distance internships may also provide opportunities for students that are not available locally.

INTRODUCTION

Academic internship programs provide students an opportunity to work outside of a university setting in a real workplace environment and achieve some measure of university credit. Depending on the school, these internships can vary between paid and unpaid positions, between 1 and 12 hours of credit and can be either undergraduate or graduate level courses. Internships are a requirement for the fulfillment of a degree at some institutions and are not a requirement at other institutions; some institutions pay their internship directors to negotiate positions for impending graduates and others give no benefit to faculty for performing this service for their students and for the university. The nature of internship programs varies greatly depending on the academic department and the importance placed on this pivotal step in the career of students.

As industries and companies open multiple offices around the world, the importance of working in this global setting increases for practitioners who want to compete for jobs in this marketplace. Skills in working at a distance during an internship can give practitioners more opportunities for placement in this global economy. Distance internships can also give students options with regard to the type of work they want to do, work options that might not be available to them locally.

Traditional internships provide many challenges for students, universities, and industry.

Distance internships can provide even more challenges and opportunities. This chapter will initially examine the background and need for traditional internships to situate this model of distance internships and will then give a working definition of a distance internship.

This chapter will examine a model that represents the need to balance the requirements of the three parties involved within an internship: the student, the company, and the university. The student requires acculturation into the profession, transition from consumer of education to provider of services, and work experience. Companies require competent workers familiar with the needs of industry who are able to bring the latest academic ideas into the marketplace. Universities send students out into industry as representatives of their academic program, students who should be able to demonstrate the skills they have learned during their time in school.

To balance the needs of these three groups, some safeguards to prevent problems need to initially be put in place so that each group has a concept of the requirements of the internship. With distance internships, these safeguards become more important. There are also ways to increase the productivity of the internships by bringing together industry and the university. Finally, this chapter will examine trends that could make distance internships more feasible and relevant for future practitioners.

BACKGROUND

Internships have a place in many professions. A number of engineering students each year find cooperative work during the summers between their academic semesters and these internships often lead to permanent positions. In 1932, the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education suggested that a college program laid the foundation for a career that would be built by experience (Silva, 2000). Engineering internships and cooperative programs provide the beginning of that experience. Journalism has a history of valuing first-hand experience gained through internships and apprenticeships (Silva, 2000). Medical interns gain a knowledge of patient interaction and hospital dynamics that is unavailable to them while they are in medical school. Education programs frequently place teachers in classrooms with more experienced teachers to guide them in the management of the classroom and their lessons. Many trades have systems that allow experienced workers to oversee new members of their trade.

The ubiquity of these training programs speaks to their necessity and effectiveness in the workplace. However, many academic programs do not prepare students for the workplace by giving them adequate experience in managing projects and operating in a business environment. In studies conducted with the cooperation of industry and practitioners, there is a chasm between what students are taught and the skills they need in industry (Southard, 1988). Whiteside (2003) found that "over 50% of managers also rated project management, problem solving skills, and business operations knowledge as areas these employees lacked" (p. 311). Whiteside (2003) also found that "60% of technical communicators that graduated with an undergraduate degree in technical communications between 1999 and 2001 felt initially uncomfortable with their knowledge of business operations as they transitioned into business and industry" (p. 310). Effective internships can provide students exposure to business operations and the politics of the workplace. As Freedman (1996) relates concerning internships, "students were inducted into the ways of thinking, that is, the ways of construing and interpreting phenomena, valued in that discipline"(p. 405).

The modern global economy also requires students to have aptitude in intercultural workplaces because "work and jobs move rapidly and frequently from one continent to another" (Doerry, Doerry, Bero, & Neville, 2004). Doerry