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

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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 electronic human resource management 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-internships 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-internships may not feature the same potential for face-to-face interaction, opportunities to learn by shadowing others or by the development of 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 provide interns with clear deliverables, instructions and constructive as well as frequent feedback to support their learning experience.

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). To address this knowledge gap, we decided to find, recruit and interview 13 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 selection and recruitment, 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 benefit from different (creative, marketing, computing and other) skill sets taught or used by various schools and professionals. This diversity can increase the learning experience of all staff working with these e-interns.

The potential diversity of e-interns can also 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 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 Jeske and Axtell, 2016). 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, working with e-interns can present previously unknown opportunities for mentoring for various staff within the organization. Some of the supervisors we interviewed provided their interns with a unique mentoring experience by introducing them to various managers, consultants and peers. This gave both staff and interns 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 Ratten, 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 e-interns and the staff, particularly those that get to mentor their own e-interns.

And finally, 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 feedback to give e-interns the learning experience and support that they expect from an e-internship.

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; and develop templates, training materials and tools). In addition, it is essential that all tasks are carefully prepared and planned so as to manage the 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 daily, or at least, 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 require 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 levels 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 (see guidelines of the National Association of Colleges and Employers, NACE, 2011). Recognition and payment further help to

acknowledge e-interns' input to the organization, but may also be key to recruiting skilled and talented candidates in the future. Where possible, consider collaborating with universities as this might enable e-interns to obtain academic credit while still completing their studies (which increases further 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 (Gault et al., 2010). In addition, e-interns can be a source of creativity and new ideas. 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 therefore provide these organizations with a unique opportunity to reach talent regardless of size, reputation or office space..

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