



How to structure an internship that is great for the intern and the manager?

Dr. Sudarsan Rangan, Texas A&M University

Dr. Malini Natarajarathinam, Texas A&M University

Malini Natarajarathinam is an Associate professor with the Department of Engineering Technology and Industrial Distribution in the Dwight Look College of Engineering at Texas A&M University. Dr. Natarajarathinam's teaching activities surround classes in purchasing, distribution networks and strategic relationships. She strives to make learning fun, relevant and perpetual to her students. The students of the Industrial Distribution Program presented her the Award of Distinction in 2010. Dr. Natarajarathinam's research interests include coordinated decision making in stochastic supply chains, handling supply chains during times of crisis and optimizing global supply chains. Her research articles have won best paper awards at Association of Collegiate Marketing Educators Conference and Society of Marketing Advances Conference. She currently serves on the Editorial advisory board for International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management. Dr. Natarajarathinam has worked on several research projects funded by government agencies and industry. She has a strong passion for student development. She is the founding faculty of the Society of Women in Industrial Distribution (SWID).

How to structure an internship that is great for the intern and the manager?

ABSTRACT

Internships are a great opportunity for students and companies to assess each other before making a commitment to a full time job. However, this goal can be only be achieved if the internship is effective both for the company and students. Companies often criticize that the student did not achieve the objectives with which he/she was hired for the internship. Students are dissatisfied many times with their internship experience. Th authors believe it is due to a basic disconnect in communication and expectations between these two parties. The authors have discussed with companies and surveyed students to see what the causes of this issue are and how effective internships can be structured. The authors identify that the students are focused on getting a good training during their internship even if the internship is extremely challenging. The authors also provide details on how to structure an internship to satisfy the needs of the student and the companies.

I. Introduction

Internships often provide the first foray for a student into the real world. Gone are the days when being an intern meant running errands, filing documents and getting coffee. Well-structured, effective internships are the key to maximize the potential of these bright young minds, and guide them to be contributors.

An effective internship experience is mutually beneficial to both the intern and the business. The student is exposed to best practices, effective management and an understanding of the skill sets and the application required to successfully transition into a productive contributor. The business benefits by providing structure and guidelines to the student which helps them understand the opportunities within the organization and the industry, and these businesses often end as the first choice for these trained contributors.

Often times, there is a disconnect between the expectations of the intern and the manager and this disconnect results in bad experiences for all. In this paper we discuss student expectations from an internship experience, and the responsibilities of the business in terms of meeting these student expectations. We will also discuss ways to structure and plan the internship so that the business can better assess the potential and the capabilities of the intern. This can help businesses avail the internship experience as an extended job interview to hire good candidates – candidates with organization specific training that fit in with the organizational structure and culture.

II. Intern Expectations

Internships do not mean just “busy work” anymore – whether it was running errands, filing documents or clerical work; students now have real expectations from their internships. In recent times, the responsibilities and the expectations associated with internships are much elevated. Students now understand how a good internship not only helps them get ahead of their peers in the classroom, but also helps them be better prepared to evaluate and narrow down their career options. The students ideally want their internship experience to help them learn new skills that they can leverage toward their career¹.

Interns want a good experiential learning program that can help them understand how the business works and how they can apply concepts learnt in the classroom in the real world. Additionally, they gain valuable work experience while making some money and/or gaining college credit. Ideally, they learn something new and exciting and in the process, they often develop valuable personal and professional interests. If the intern's interests and business' objectives match, it is a win-win scenario for all parties.

In order to get insight about what motivates and excites students about internships in industrial distribution and supply chain management, juniors and seniors in the university were surveyed. Students were asked an open ended question about what their expectation from an internship were. 43 responses were received and that is a strong enough sample size. There are future plans to extend this survey to include more students from various different disciplines. From the 43 responses received, the top five student expectations from an internship experience (with the frequency in parantheses) are as follows:

1. Get real world experience (30)
2. Acquire knowledge about the companyv(16)
3. See applications of what they learn in class (9)
4. Build new relationships (4)
5. Gain hands on training (3)

It is very interesting to see that pay or location or nature of the job do not make the list. It is all about students getting a taste for what they going to face in the real world when they graduate from college². The survey results here show that the students do no neccessarily decide on an intership based on the wages; However, the students expect at least their day-to-day expenses during the intership to be covered.

III. Business Responsibilities and Benefits

In the current economic scenario, it is becoming extremely difficult to find and retain a quality workforce loyal to the organization. Well-structured internship programs provide a way for an organization in creating quality, loyal employees for the future³ in addition to showcasing the organization. Internships provide organizations a competitive advantage in recruiting the best. Successful interns understand the organization culture and goals which reduces training time, improves productivity and reduces churn rate if they are brought back in the future. In addition, internship programs help establishing the company's brand and cultivate relationships with the potential recruiting pool. It is easy to see the potential benefits to an organization that has a well-established internship program. The companies that hire our students agree that the following are the top five benefits for organizations through the internship program.

Top Five Benefits to Businesses from Internship Programs⁴

1. Hiring future talent.
2. Building loyalty and reducing churn rate.
3. Low-cost labor with a fresh perspective.

4. Establishing your brand and cultivating relationships.
5. Giving back to the community.

IV. Structuring the Internship Experience

Organizations should understand how to effectively structure internship programs. In addition to understanding student expectations, it is important to ensure that the internship program's objectives are aligned with the organizational requirements. Thus, the first step is to arrive at a consensus decision on program goals among all involved along with management support. The goals of the program drive the length and type of internship. Typical internship programs are 3 to 6 months long, and the interns may work on a specific project or a series of projects. Irrespective of the type of the internship, it is important for the organizations to understand the unique characteristics of the "Echo Boomer" generation. Understanding the candidate characteristics will help structure the internship around their strengths.

V. The Candidate - An Echo Boomer

The "Echo Boomers" commonly refer to the generation born from 1980 to 2000. This generation grew up tech-savvy and inclusive. While the common complaints are that they are disrespectful, lazy, indifferent but demanding, learning their positive sides will help organizations use them to their potential⁵.

Traits used to describe Echo-Boomers⁶

- Tech-savvy
- Well-rounded
- Optimistic
- Civic-Minded
- Inclusive
- Multitasking ability
- Keen and Interested

These traits of the echo-boomers sometimes cause issues in a working relationship. Given that most businesses have a mixture of folks from various generations that do not necessarily understand these traits; it may sometimes be hard to understand what makes these echo-boomers tick. It is important that the business assigns mentors to provide direction, feedback and recognition through the course of the program. Additionally, the responsibilities assigned to these candidates should be evolving through the program, and need to challenge them. This is a reason why we now see a lot of internship programs that have rotational responsibilities where candidates work in different sub-divisions of the organization rather than like traditional internships where they are assigned to a particular division for a particular responsibility through the internship.

VI. Characteristics of a good internship

Given the traits of the "echo-boomers", a good internship program should be structured⁷ to take advantage of these traits and satisfy intern expectations while meeting organizational goals.

1. A good internship is a planned internship. The tasks that are need to be accomplished have to be decided before even starting to interview for an intern. A sample plan for the internship and the day-to-day activities is shown in figure 1 and figure 2.
2. The internship should be structured such that the intern gets to work in various divisions or areas of the company. This helps interns not only better understand the organizational structure, it also takes advantage of their ability to look at the business from different perspectives.
3. The tasks need to challenge them continuously. Tasks and objectives should be clearly defined. The tasks should also be related to the degree the intern receives at school. The tasks should ideally help them relate classroom learning to work environment.
4. Make them responsible but do not micromanage them. Train them and provide them with the resources to complete the tasks and hold them responsible.
5. Need to mentor them. It is important to assign a supervisor to guide the intern, help them feel like a part of your team. The mentor should also have frequent meetings with the intern to provide feedback and direction
6. Need to recognize and reward them. Everybody likes to be recognized for their achievements, and interns are no different. While it may be great to take them along for business trips, and help them understand their path to progress or promotion, sometimes a lunch or even letting them off early as a reward goes a long way. It is important the interns perceive their work is contributing to the organization's success.
7. Provide them with meaningful tasks during downtime and let them free. More importantly, don't give them tasks nobody wants to do.
8. Pay them well, housing or relocation allowance, even a small signing bonus. The supervisor should understand that school comes first, and be mindful of their family and school commitments.

While the compensation for the interns is dependent on the organization, it is important to understand that internship programs are a business decision. The management also needs to make sure they understand the Department of Labor restrictions on compensation and the US Fair Labor Standard Act applies to the organization. From our survey, the average compensation for interns was \$15 per hour. In addition,

- 50% of employers provide housing and relocation expenses
- 33% provide food expenses, and
- 24% provide cell phone expenses.

Week 1:	Company Overview/Facility Training	
	Introductions IT/HR Admin Facility Training	Corporate Overview Warehousing Customer Service
Week 2:	Projects Overview	
	Company Overview National Accounts Overview	Training Projects Review
Week 3:	Market Overview	
	Current Markets Markets of Focus	Current Market Strategies
Week 4:	Project Work	
	Project Data Detail	Joint Calls
	.	.
	.	.
	.	.
Week 11:	Prepare write-up/presentation	
	Develop write-up and presentation	Wrap up projects
Week 12:	Final Presentation – Corporate Office	
	Deliver write-up and presentation	

Figure 1: A 12 Week Internship Plan

Week 1:	Monday – Corporate Office	Responsible
	Video Message from CEO	Ms. K
	Introductions	Mr. M
	New Hire paperwork	Mr. A
	Corporate Office (phones, supplies, kitchen use. Etc.)	Mr. K
	Filing Expense Reports	Mr. E
	Laptop Review and ERP Training	Mr. M
	Tuesday- Branch XYZ	
	Ride w/ van driver	Mr. B
	Wednesday – Branch XYZ	
	Warehouse Operations	Mr. E
	Thursday – Branch XYZ	
	Ride with bulk shipment truck driver	Mr. B
	Friday-Branch XYZ	
	Customer Service	Ms. S
Week 2	Monday – Corporate Office	
	Company History and Business Overview	Mr. P
	Company Structure	Mr. P
	Contacts through Company	Mr. P
	Project Review and Expectations	Mr. P

Figure 2: Day-to-Day Internship Plan

VII. Recruiting the Best Interns

While the candidate interviewing and selection is beyond the scope of this article, there are some responsibilities to ensure the organization gets the best candidates. It is important to identify educational institutions that have the candidate pool with the academic backgrounds and skill sets that you need in your interns. The business can then work with faculty and students with projects, get involved with student organizations⁸ and develop relationship with the school to establish their brand. Additionally, the organization could also develop relationships with career center or internship coordinators and student advisors. The organization should also consistently be present at job fairs and internship fairs to improve visibility. The number one tip from businesses with established internship programs is to get out there early. The sooner the business identifies interns, the longer they have to establish a mutually beneficial relationship.

VIII. Conclusion

Effectively structuring internships provides organizations with a competitive advantage in identifying and developing a competent contributor. These practices help businesses better assess the potential and the capabilities of the intern and in effect, help businesses avail the internship experience as an extended job interview to hire good candidates – candidates with organization specific training that fit in with the organizational structure and culture to facilitate success.

Bibliography

1. J. A. Cannon, M. J. Arnold. 1998. Student Expectations of Collegiate Internship Programs in Business: A 10-year Update. *Journal of Education for Business* 73(4) 202-205.
2. Weatherton, Y. P., Chen, V. C. P., Mattingly, S., Rogers, K. J., & Sattler, M. L. (2012). Sustainable engineering internships: Creation and assessment. Paper presented at the ASEE Annual Conference and Exposition, Conference Proceedings
3. Lee, C., & Chao, C. 2013. Intention to “Leave” or “Stay” – The Role of Internship Organization in the Improvement of Hospitality Students’ Industry Employment Intentions. *Asia Pacific Journal Of Tourism Research*, 18(7), 749-765
4. Watson, Bibi S. 1995. The intern turnaround. *Management Review* 84 (June): 9-12.
5. C. Espinosa, M. Ukleja, C. Rusch. 2010. *Managing the Millenials: Discover the Core Competencies for Managing Today’s Workforce*. Wiley, Hoboken, NJ.
6. Wile, R. (2013). Meet the ‘Echo Boom’: The 80 Million People Who Will Save the American Economy. *Business Insider*. Last Retrieved Jan 05, 2014.
7. National Association of Colleges and Employers. < <http://www.nacweb.org/internships/index.aspx>>.
8. McMyler, N., & Foste, E. (2013). Attracting the Next Generation. *Risk Management* (00355593), 60(9), 16.