Virtual Internships – A New Reality

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ABSTRACT

Virtual internships became a necessity for many businesses during the spring and summer of 2020 due to government regulations concerning the COVID-19 epidemic. The use of virtual internships, however, has been rising even before the pandemic. This paper shares the available literature on the use and design of virtual internships to invite academic research into their effectiveness in comparison to the traditional internships whose benefits are already well documented. The paper will be of use to enterprises, educational institutions, and researchers in the area of experiential learning.

INTRODUCTION

The use of virtual or remote internships has been on the rise much before COVID-19. The practitioners of online education (Marr, 2019) and some in the industry (Clemmons, 2015) have touted their advantages and necessity. Even some traditional educational institutions such as the University of Michigan were already building the infrastructure to support virtual internships (Jackson 2019). Regardless of anyone's position on the value of virtual internships, they became an absolute necessity in the COVID-19 environment (Maurer, 2020). If enterprises were to keep their interns employed in the spring or summer of 2020, remote internships were a must, regardless if they had used or advocated for them ever before. Companies like Microsoft were able to switch 92% of their summer interns to remote work, according to a University of Cincinnati (UC) webinar in June 2020. Businesses with technology and experience in remote-work had an advantage for such a conversion (Maurer, 2020). Others, such as Huntington Bank in Ohio that had never used or believed in virtual internships had to decipher their plan for summer interns in a few weeks, according to an April 2020 webinar by the Greater Cleveland Partnership (GCP, 2020). This paper seeks to address the issues revolving around virtual internships. Are there design elements that must be kept in mind for virtual internships? What are their unique advantages and challenges? In the spring and summer of 2020, what decisions did employers make related to their interns? The paper shares data from our school about the business response and includes information from the existing literature about these questions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The value of business internships for students, employers, and educational institutions is well established in the literature. Undergraduate business students value experiential education in general, and they specifically rank internships the highest for career-related outcomes (Burns, Chopra, Shelley, & Mosher, 2018). Internships are becoming an integral part of business curricula (Pittenger, 2018). Efforts to root the design of internships in learning theory are emerging (Cannon & Geddes, 2019). The focus of such literature, however, has mostly been on traditional on-location and in-person internships.

With the exponential rise of online education, the call for the greater acceptance and practice of virtual internships can now be found (Marr, 2019; Reed, Whitten, Swank, Gioia, Marr, Woods, Jeremiah, & Westerman, 2018). The availability of academic literature on virtual internships, however, is limited. Only two articles on virtual internships are found in the archives of the Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning (ABSEL) – an organization dedicated to experiential learning. The case is not much better elsewhere in the scholarly business journals. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) features prominently in the Google search for reliable online resources. The author also had access to two webinars, one by the University of Cincinnati (UC Webinar, 2020), and the other by the Greater Cleveland Partnership (GCP, 2020), aimed to help businesses pivot to virtual internships during COVID. A online Google search also shows the Society for Human Resources (SHRM) had created spring events for its partners to facilitate a transition to virtual internships. It would not be surprising if additional such resources for local or regional businesses were created by other trade organizations and exist online for their members only. The publications catering to practitioners have some short articles with expert opinions related to virtual internships. In light of the flood gates opening to virtual internships during the COVID environment, their increased use in the post COVID era is expected. However, limited peer-review published articles on the subject suggest the need for academic research. Articulating the issues is usually the first step to further serious examination. The themes found in the current literature are discussed in the following sections, and data from my school's internship program is shared.

TRENDS ON REMOTE WORK AND VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

The use of virtual internships has lagged the rise of remote work in the 21st century. Remote work has been prevalent for over a decade and is on the rise. Flexjob.com, a well-known website for remote work opportunities, has been in the business since 2007. Reed et al. (2018) cite surveys indicating that 75% of the companies had remote workers as early as 2010, and 85% of small businesses planned to hire up to 50% of their workforce as remote workers a decade ago. The advancement of collaborative technologies, the rise of non-hierarchical organizations, globalization and a dynamic environment requiring continuous adaptation

are the key reasons driving the trend towards greater use of remote workers. In such an environment, an increase in virtual internships would be logical. Surveys from the same time era quoted by Reed et al. (2018), however, show only 33% of employers hiring virtual interns while over 70% of the students were interested in these internships. My searches in Academic Search Complete and Business Source Complete databases did not yield much information on the use of virtual internships in recent years.

The reason for virtual internships not being as prevalent as full-time remote work is multifold. Even a technology company like Microsoft that employs thousands of employees worldwide, did not have virtual internships until the summer of 2020. Microsoft is not alone in such a discrepancy (Maurer, 2020). Employers such as Microsoft, Ford Motor Company (Digital Design Lab), Progressive Insurance, and Huntington Bank offered many reasons for having only onsite interns. Their reasons range from being able to showcase the company- culture, sell the geographical region, interns' need for mentorship, the expense of technology, the confidentiality of products and projects, past practices, and requirement of additional resources for virtual internships (UC Webinar, 2020; GCP Webinar, 2020). Also, global aerospace and defense firms like Northrop Grumman have the issue of security clearance (Maurer, 2020). These reasons suggest employers consider internships too critical a pipeline for vetting, hiring, and socializing future top talent to relegate them to being virtual.

COVID-19 & VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

Shelter-in-place orders worldwide in the spring of 2020 mandated employers' choices concerning their spring and summer interns. If businesses were to retain their interns, remote internships became a must regardless if they had used or advocated for them previously. Microsoft, Ford Motor Company (Digital Design Lab), Progressive Insurance, and Huntington Bank had to use virtual internships. In a survey of North East Ohio employers by the GCP in April 2020, 55.93% of employers planned to keep their interns. According to the NACE survey, only 22% of the employers were canceling internships entirely (Maurer, 2020).

At my university, where internships are mandatory for business students, thirty business students were registered for spring internship credit. Table 1 below records my March 27, 2020 survey results seeking what happened to these internships. Of the ninety percent of the students who responded, 48% turned into remote interns, and 11% had their internships suspended. Like our contemporaries, our university adopted several emergency measures. These included permitting students to drop classes very late into the semester, permitting the use of pass/fail grade category without restrictions, and the flexible use of "incomplete" grade for multiple semesters. These measures made it possible for 29 (97%) of the students to complete their internship credits. One intern dropped the internship class, and one required a unique accommodation to graduate in May 2020. No intern chose to convert the class to pass/fail option. Six interns (20%) chose to get an "Incomplete". Of these six interns, only one still has an "incomplete" in December 2020, and plans to finish his work by the end of spring 2021.

TABLE 1
Results of spring survey concerning spring internships at our university

Variable	Total Count	Percentage
Students registered for internship credit	30	100
Responses	27	90
Converted to virtual/remote internship	13	48
Furloughed to resume later	06	22
Suspended with no future plans	03	11
Terminated	05	18.5

ADVOCACY OF VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

The necessity for virtual internships has been there much before the 2020 pandemic. An accelerating growth of online education (Marr, 2019) and the remote work (Jackson, 2019) are among the reasons used by the supporters to advocate for virtual internships. Jackson (2019) cites a 2018 study documenting that 70% of the professionals work remotely at least one day per week while 53% do so for at least half of the week. Virtual internships are part of this broader trend and offer an advantage of cost-efficiency (no office space or housing issues), especially for start-ups, small or web-based companies (Clemmons, 2015). The use of virtual internships is now spreading to more traditional and larger employers such as Abbott, Liberty Mutual Insurance, Microsoft, and ServiceNow (Maurer, 2020). The President and CEO of Lincoln Financial Group recently expressed confidence in the value of virtual internships for the fortification of their talent pipeline, the building of the American talent pool for providing the best services to their consumer, and the growth of the American economy (Thompson, 2020). J.M. Smucker Company in its August, 2020 newsletter to its university partners also provided evidence for the effectiveness of virtual internships.

The success of virtual internships anecdotally noted by businesses during the pandemic will not surprise the practitioners of online education. With the growth of online education even at traditional schools, and among ever- decreasing ages, including

undergraduates and freshmen, student experience and confidence with remote work tools are increasing. Online students need virtual internships for the same reasons they need online education – accessibility (Marr, 2019).

ADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

Virtual internships bridge the gap of geographic separation and accessibility for the students and employers (Clemmons, 2015; Jackson, 2019). While more research is warranted, they seem to provide good career outcomes for the students and a larger talent pool to the employers. With virtual internships, employers are not limited by semester (e.g., hiring over the summer only when students are out of school and available for at location work), and the students are not limited by things such as availability of transportation, housing, or time off school or away from family. In the age of collaborative technologies and distributive work and workforce, global companies can benefit from virtual internships as much as start-ups, web-based or small companies with scarce resources. Virtual internships are advantageous to students and employers for their flexibility, cost-efficiency, and accessibility. These advantages can well serve another underserved population – students with disabilities. Kraft, Jeske, and Bayerlein (2019), build a strong case for virtual internships for employers with diversity initiatives. Virtual internships are a promising opportunity for these employers to recruit candidates with disabilities who could benefit from their diversity initiatives and contribute to them as well.

CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

As advantageous as virtual internships are, their acceptance has lagged student demand and the prevalence of remote work for multiple reasons. Acceptance among faculty and university leadership is a logical challenge, especially when traditional business internships as part of business curricula were not enthusiastically embraced initially (Pittenger, 2018). The concerns about the quality of experience, supervision, mentorship, peer-interaction, and exposure to business culture are to be expected. Among additional challenges is the lack of infrastructure. Just as the capacity for online education had to be built by traditional schools, a capacity for virtual internships is required. Jackson (2019) notes the efforts of the University of Michigan's College of Literature, Science and Art (LSA). They were hiring a person dedicated to virtual internships. The University of Cincinnati now has faculty dedicated to the study of remote work and the creation of a Remote Work Lab (UC Webinar, 2020).

Employers also need additional resources dedicated to virtual internships. The human resource departments need to provide for the students and managers virtual resources for onboarding, engagement, socialization, supervision, and mentoring of interns, in addition to the distribution and training in technology required for remote work (Thompson, 2020). Abbott created an app for peer-interaction among interns (Maurer, 2020). Acceptance of virtual internships as a pipeline for talent development and recruitment also requires a change in the corporate cultural perspective. As previously noted, many businesses believe in-person exposure to their corporate culture, and showcasing of their city/geographic area as critical to their recruitment. Other businesses, such as the design lab of Ford Motor Company (UC webinar, 2020), have physical limitations (models can be built and tested on-site only), and concern for confidentiality for their innovations in product design. Some businesses such as Microsoft (UC webinar, 2020) are also reluctant to place expensive software on interns' personal computers. The security of interns' computers would be another logical concern for many, especially defense contractors (Maurer, 2020).

DESIGN OF VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

The challenges of virtual internships can be mitigated through better design (Jackson, 2019). According to Eaton (2018), all well-designed internships need 4 Ps – Project, Place, Personnel, and Payment. All four present significant challenges. For the design of projects, innovative thinking would be helpful to get beyond the common use of virtual internships for marketing, social-media, or IT-related projects such as database management or web-design. Virtual internships are successfully expanding to business disciplines such as logistics, supply chain management, accounting, and even finance (Maurer, 2020; Thompson, 2020). Much advice is being offered recently in regard to the design of virtual internships, including suggestions for projects, by trade organizations such as NACE, SHRM, and chambers of commerce such as Greater Cleveland Partnership (GCP, 2020). The second P – the Place is among the hardest elements to manage in a virtual internship. As a substitute, perhaps for the casual and spontaneous in-office encounters, scheduled communication is the most emphasized and frequently suggested design element (Clemmons, 2015, Jackson, 2019, Mauer, 2020). Requiring interns to have a schedule is another technique being recommended (GCP, 2020). The third P- the Personnel has been mentioned previously in this paper as part of the virtual internship challenges, especially during difficult economic times. In addition to a supervisor, mentor, HR personnel traditionally required, employers need a triage person to help with general questions from interns working remotely. Individualization and personalization of interns' experiences are suggested by multiple sources, including Maurer (2020). This element also requires additional training of all involved and buy-in by the leadership of employers. A discussion of the preferred characteristics of interns for virtual internships is appropriate in the element of Personnel. Cannon and Geddes' (2019) advice on students' skill to "self-mentor" for internship effectiveness may be more critical for virtual internships. Interns' ability to work independently in a virtual environment is recommended by others also. The last P – the Payment is no different for virtual internships than traditional ones. The importance of fair wages for internships is well established in the previous literature (Pittenger, 2018), and is currently supported by organizations such as SHRM, even in the challenging COVID environment. The level of compensation, however, may be worth investigating. Wages can vary depending on the cost of living in the location of an employer, need for housing, or other amenities (subsidized cafeteria, gym, after-work entertainment). In virtual internships, interns have to provide their own workspace for sure, and many times the equipment (e.g., computer and cell phone). In light of these factors, should the compensation for virtual internships should be the same, higher or lower than the traditional internships? No such guidance is available in the current literature.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 required the use of virtual internships for the spring and summer of 2020 by many who had not considered the idea in the past. The advocacy for virtual internships, however, has been growing over the last decade. In the post-pandemic environment, virtual internships are likely to become mainstream and acceptable even if not all users retain them. The growth and acceptance of online education, advancement in remote-work technologies, and student experience with such technologies are the key reasons. Academic research related to virtual internships will need to catch up. Based on the literature and issues reviewed in this paper, the following questions can be a good starting point for future research in this realm:

1. What specific design elements are critical for effective virtual internships?
2. For student satisfaction and performance, are certain student characteristics such as self-mentorship, or independence better suited for virtual internships?
3. How does the size of an enterprise impact the effectiveness of a virtual internship program?
4. What variables potentially could impact the effectiveness of a virtual internship program?

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