

## TELECOMMUTING INTERNSHIPS – DO THEY WORK?

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### ABSTRACT

*Internships have played an increasingly important role in the academic and career development of college students. The hands-on learning experience provides students the opportunity to apply classroom concepts while exploring a variety of career interests. For the past few years, students at the author's college have participated in a telecommuting internship. Instead of physically reporting to an internship site, the students work much like telecommuters, with the college as their home base. This paper describes the internship experiences over several semesters. The pros and cons of the telecommuting internships then are presented. The conclusion is, although the telecommuting internship is not the regular model, it is worth doing.*

### INTRODUCTION

Although once questioned as a valid experiential learning experience (Gentry and Giamartino, 1989), internships have played an increasingly important role in the academic and career development of college students. The hands-on learning experience provides students the opportunity to apply classroom concepts while exploring a variety of career interests. Internships also help participants develop essential skills and professionalism, which greatly enhances their marketability to both employers and graduate schools (Lynch, 1998).

Business faculty, career counselors, and employers continue to encourage the completion of internships as part of the college experience. A survey by Vault.com indicates that students are paying attention. Eighty-six percent of recent graduates had completed at least one internship, and 69% had completed two or more internships (Vault.com, 2006). The financial benefits are also being realized by those students who complete internships. A survey by the Utah Foundation found that graduates who completed internships received higher starting salaries and were employed full-time at higher rates than their non-interning classmates (Muir, 2006).

Internships allow the employers to benefit as well. With higher recruiting costs and increased efforts at retention, internships let potential employers “try before they buy.” National firms like PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) and Merrill Lynch have established formal internship programs as recruiting tools. Merrill Lynch offers 12-week summer internships and 75% of the senior interns take jobs with them (Singh, 2006). PWCs program starts

with high school students and continues with college juniors and seniors. Eighty-five percent of the college senior interns are offered a position and 90% of those accept the offer (Singh, 2006).

Another significant outcome of internship programs is the relationship the college develops with the internship sponsors. The positive impact internship programs have on all parties involved has led to a significant increase in internship programs and students participating. A different type of internship opportunity is explored in this paper – the telecommuting internship.

For the past few years, students at the author's college have participated in a telecommuting internship. Instead of physically reporting to an internship site, the students work much like telecommuters, with the college as their home base. The internship sponsor has regular contact with the interns via phone and email and visits the campus a few times throughout the term of the internship. The remainder of this paper will discuss the design of the internship and relate the experiences of both the student and the faculty involved.

### TELECOMMUTING

Telecommuting is defined as “working at home or at an alternate location and communicating with the usual place of work using electronic or other means instead of physically traveling to a more distant work site” (Lundberg, 2005). Telecommuting has grown such that over 32 million people are considered part of a telecommuting workforce (Lundberg, 2005). As technology becomes less expensive and the cost to commute greater, organizations have increasingly looked to telecommuting as a means to gain a competitive edge.

Telecommuting is not for everyone, however. Both the organization and the employees involved need to carefully consider the benefits as well as the pitfalls of telecommuting before making a commitment. Studies have found that telecommuting can increase productivity and reduce overhead costs. Fewer employees on site may mean less office space required and less down-time because of office politics and illnesses (Abreu, 2000). Telecommuting can also provide a more flexible schedule; one which allows some people to work around other obligations such as family or classes. Little or no time commuting means more time to devote to family and friends, not to mention the savings of the commute itself. The “office environment” is under the control of the telecommuter. A telecommuter doesn't have to worry about that “always freezing” office

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building or the stress of office politics, possibly reducing the level of stress experienced. There may even be a savings on clothes if the home office is more casual than would be expected otherwise. For many, telecommuting can be a confidence builder as well. Knowing that you can set up your own office and be successful at your job without constant supervision can be a great feeling (Lomanno, 2006).

Some of the very things that make telecommuting attractive can also have a downside. A flexible schedule can be a good thing, but the distractions may be too much. There still needs to be scheduled work time and the telecommuter should stick to it or may end up being less productive. Having more time for other people and activities may mean being caught up by other obligations. Family and friends may see the telecommuter as available instead of “being at work.” Not having to deal with the every day office activities could also mean the telecommuter is out of the loop when it comes to office decisions, including promotions (Lomanno, 2006).

The same telecommuting issues that apply to the millions of people who earn their living in this manner also apply to the interns in this program. The author’s college carefully considered the organization, the tasks to be accomplished, and the students selected to participate in the telecommuting internship. Several key aspects will be discussed in the remainder of this paper.

### INTERNSHIP DESCRIPTIONS

The internship program at the author’s institution is an academic credit bearing program with GPA and credit hour requirements for participation. Students are interviewed and selected by the internship sponsors. The interns meet on a regular basis with a faculty director to discuss the internship work and related readings. Internship reports and a business presentation are required of each intern. Internship sponsors complete an evaluation of the intern, which is a component of the final grade.

In late 2002 an executive from Proctor & Gamble in Cincinnati, Ohio contacted his alma mater in western New York to discuss a project he wanted to have completed. Discussions with the Dean and Internship Director led to the conclusion that the students could perform the work despite the geographical separation. This was the beginning of the telecommuting internship experience.

Two students were selected to participate during the spring 2003 semester. The internship was in the marketing department of the Hot Beverage Division of P&G. Their job was to conduct market research in the out-of-home coffee market. The primary P&G products were Folgers and Millstones and the market consisted of restaurants, hotels, and convenience stores. A high customer turnover rate led P&G to want a better understanding of this market. The interns conducted secondary research to get a better understanding of the out-of-home market before pursuing more specific qualitative market data. Exploratory research,

consisting of one-on-one interviews with restaurants, hotels, and convenience stores in the area was completed by the interns. This part of the project provided P&G with a better idea of its target market. Then fifty phone interviews of customers who had stopped purchasing the P&G products were conducted. The data obtained was analyzed, resulting in a listing of the main reasons behind the turnover. P&G developed new strategies for customer retention based on the research report.

Throughout the internship, the students maintained contact with the internship sponsor and his employees through their faculty director on campus. Although the work was completed to everyone’s satisfaction, this was not a very effective means to communicate. The second team of interns completed a similar project during the fall 2003 semester. This time the interns focused on coffee consumption in the healthcare industry. One-on-one interviews, surveys, and phone interviews were conducted. The results were then presented to P&G. This team had more direct contact, as the internship sponsor visited campus and the interns contacted P&G people via phone and conference calls.

The spring 2004 interns were involved in a test market of a new coffee brewing system, which allowed customers to select the desired coffee strength, and Folgers coffee. After a pre-test was conducted to determine consumer opinion of the old coffee, the interns conducted a post-test survey. The interns conducted their research at 4 western New York convenience stores. Consumers were paid \$2 to participate in a survey about the cup of coffee they had just purchased. The interns also collected demographic data on the stores’ customers as well employee reactions to the new machine. Several recommendations were made to P&G based on the analysis of the surveys, including revisions to the methodology itself. Students interacted with the P&G people through campus visits by the sponsor, conference calls, and email on a regular basis.

The fourth experience for the telecommuting interns was quite different from the first three. This time a team of five interns was asked to develop both training materials and a training plan for introducing Six Sigma concepts to the P&G Commercial Products Group. A major concern was the distance between the interns and the people who would have to “buy-into” the Six Sigma concept. With this in mind, the team of interns developed a schedule that combined four visits by the sponsor and teleconferencing. The internship sponsor meet with the interns and their on-campus faculty supervisor at the beginning of the semester to provide background information on the structure of the division and the key players in its eight departments. The interns contacted each of the eight department managers by letter, explaining the project objective, and the benefits of Six Sigma. The department managers were then interviewed at length, providing the interns with the details of their operations and a look at the culture of each department. Common themes, perceptions, and attitudes were noted and

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presented to the sponsor in a confidential status report on his next visit to campus.

After benchmarking several successful implementations of Six Sigma concepts, the interns attended a workshop on Six Sigma. A Six Sigma expert conducted the event on the interns' campus. This provided the interns with the information needed to convince the P&G people of the benefits of adopting a Six Sigma approach. The final piece of the project was to develop the training materials for P&G. A PowerPoint presentation, which included the benchmarking data, addressed why to use Six Sigma, provided an explanation of its concepts, and the DMAIC approach. The presentation also listed selected tools for each step of the process, success factors, and an implementation plan. A laminated "cheat sheet" listing key statistical tools and a notebook with further detail were also developed by the interns.

Cleaning products was the focus of the latest telecommuting internship. P&G's Business-to-Business division wanted to gather some information about the buying habits of hotels and restaurants as they relate to cleaning products. The objective was to determine who makes the buying decision and what factors influence the buyer when purchasing cleaning supplies for their business. The interns researched consumer decision-making processes and brand name recognition at the start of the project. Both phone and one-on-one interviews of the decision makers at several restaurants and hotels were conducted. The somewhat surprising results produced several recommendations for P&G to improve this aspect of their business.

### DISCUSSION

While all of the projects were successfully completed and the internship sponsor pleased with the results, the telecommuting internships were not without some of the same pitfalls of full-time telecommuters. The initial experience demonstrated the need for the students to communicate more with the sponsor and the P&G employees involved in the project. Feedback was sometimes slow and the interns were unsure of the next step. At times it seemed that the sponsor was committed to the experience, but not all his staff had the same viewpoint. This was addressed for subsequent internships by more detailed objectives, shared with those involved, being developed at the start. More frequent contact via phone and email and additional visits to the campus by the sponsor were added to make sure the students were on the right track.

The lack of direct interaction with the employees was also a concern, especially with the Six Sigma project. The faculty director for this group of interns said, "we all had a clear picture of how the GM perceived the project, but we were extremely hesitant to go forward without exposure to all the functional managers who would have to accept and implement Six Sigma" (Wall, 2006). Letters, several phone calls and emails helped overcome the distance issue. Yet it

was sometimes hard for the interns to see where they "fit" in the organization.

On the positive side, several of the interns mentioned that they learned how to manage their time better. Although they liked the flexibility of the internship, they had to set their own schedule and make sure that they stuck to it. Project management skills were frequently listed by the interns as "unanticipated learning" that took place. The interns worked in teams of two to five members, so group dynamics came into play for many interns. Without exception, the interns all said they learned a great deal about communication skills. They had to be able to effectively communicate with the P&G people through a variety of methods, and many of the interns conducted one-on-one and phone interviews.

The telecommuting internship provided students with the chance to work independently on a task that had tangible results. Although the projects were challenging, the scope of the activity was within their ability. The interns gained self-confidence as they saw their deliverables put to use in a well-respected organization (Zuckerman).

Another benefit of the telecommuting internship experience was being able to work for a global corporation. The geographic location of the college limits on-site internships with large organizations and this opportunity broadened the options for the interns. It also meant that students without transportation could complete an internship.

### CONCLUSION

This author's experience with telecommuting internships has been generally positive. Project-oriented, consultant type activities have worked well for the interns. It is not clear that day-to day activities would lend themselves as well to the telecommuting aspect of the internship. The students gained valuable experience in real-world projects, while improving their organization, time-management, and communication skills.

The internship sponsor was able to use the information provided by the interns, sometimes to validate a previously held idea, but at times to modify the path originally planned. By solidifying the relationship with a Business Advisory Council member/alumnus the college benefited as well.

Although the telecommuting internship is not the regular model, it is worth doing. This year we are expanding the program to include a west coast firm that has an intern working on business development projects from campus.

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