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THE SUPERVISED MANAGEMENT INTERNSHIP: A JOB OR LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Robert D. Lynch, Rowan University

ABSTRACT

The role of the internship has become increasingly important in the career development of students interested in a career in business. This paper explores the increased emphasis being placed upon the internship by colleges, students and employers. Colleges are promoting the internship as an important feature of their curriculum. Students believe that it enhances their resumes and employers use internships to prescreen new hires. Guidelines for an internship program designed specifically for students interested in careers in management are presented. Details of the academic assignments that are required during the internship are provided along with results of student assessments of learning achieved during the internship.

Keywords: Internships, colleges, employers

INTRODUCTION

In the search for ways to provide students with a more meaningful education, business internships have gained increasing importance.

There are several reasons for this:

(1) *Employers, operating in a lean environment, are becoming more selective of entry-level new hires.* In one study of ad agencies, an internship was judged to be very important in the hiring decision by over 54% of the respondents. Less than 25% thought that the Dean's list, scholarship or college G.P.A. were very important (Scott and Frontczak, 1996). In another survey by NCAE (National Association of Colleges and Universities) 61% of the respondents hired summer interns and most of

these companies hired interns into full time positions (Employer Benchmarks, 1996). Cost cutting has reduced training departments and the number of middle managers requiring better prepared new hires. Other studies also have confirmed that new hires with internship backgrounds are better prepared for the workplace (King, 1997). Higher education has responded by including internships in their curriculum and by developing "closer relationships" with the business community (Johnson, 1996).

(2) *Hiring business students as interns allows the employer an opportunity to assess a student's skill and competence levels in many areas with no commitment to permanent employment.* The business student has become increasingly in demand by many employers as being well-prepared for business startups and expansions. A 1996 poll by Accountemps (Messmer, M. 1996) listed business administration majors as best prepared for future success in the workplace by 49% of the executives responding. In the same poll conducted in 1990 only 28% of the executives thought business students were best prepared.

(3) *Students are recognizing the need for some type of business experience to enhance their resumes.* They hope to improve their skills and knowledge and "know internship experiences make them more marketable." (Scott 1996). One employer reports, "In addition, students get a chance to determine whether our company is a good fit." (Frazee, 1997).

(4) *Employers look to the university as a resource for employees and may look for other ways to*

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strengthen relationships. Vickie Clift, president of Clift Associates, specialists in small business, has this advice for small businesses looking for interns, "Build relationships with professors and department heads. Both universities and community colleges offer valuable resources---." (Clift, 1996). However it is important, especially in dealing with small businesses, that the intern has reasonable assignments and good supervision (Maynard, 1997).

Many business schools are highlighting their successful internship programs as part of their marketing efforts. A few home pages are found at:

Penn State

(www.smeal.psu.edu/internl#ADVCO)

UMass

(www.umb.edu/)

Bryant College

(www.bryant.edulcareer/cs/internships.html)

Rowan University

(www.charlotte.rowan.edu/business/internhtm)

Trinity College

(www.trincoll.edulacademics/internships/intern.shtml)

Baylor University recently announced the receipt of a \$50,000 grant to develop internships for students in entrepreneurship-related fields (Hankamer, 1996).

INTERNSHIP A LEARNING EXPERIENCE?

The internship has many dimensions in respect to hours of work, credits given, parallel academic assignments or class work, grading and length of assignments. The internship can be part-time or full time but usually covers an academic period such as one semester. In our own university there are considerable variances from department to department.

Problems in Administration

Schools encounter many problems in administering internship programs. Such problems can be categorized as follows:

(1) The school as an employment agency - It is often necessary to hire a full time administrator to locate positions, arrange interviews, negotiate salaries and place students in suitable positions. In addition, if the position is part-time, hours must be arranged to satisfy both the employer and the classroom schedule of the student. The salary of a full time administrator will strain most budgets where faculty load is based upon student credit hours. For the program to be effective the internship must be supervised by a faculty member meeting regularly with a number of students. Concerns were previously raised by (Gentry et al, 1989) relative to a "structured" or "haphazard" approach to internship programs and what constitutes experiential learning. The credit hours allowed to the student usually would determine the number of students supervised at any one time by a faculty member. Either the administrator or faculty member may visit the student on the job during the internship period.

(2) Technical requirements of the job - It is generally considered necessary to match the student's academic specialization, i.e., accounting, human resources, management, marketing, finance, etc. to the type of position he or she obtained. In addition, the faculty supervisor must be matched to groups of students in particular specializations.

(3) Employer responsibility - The employer is frequently asked to provide close supervision and challenging learning experiences to the student. The employer is also asked to evaluate the student's performance, a responsibility often disliked by the employer, especially if it affects the student's grade.

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(4) Resumes and interviewing skills- If students applying for positions are unprepared, employers will very quickly look elsewhere.

(5) Job responsibilities- For the business student specializing in management, placement in an internship position raises the question of what does this type of student do in the workplace. Their long range career goals are certainly to enter into some type of supervisory or management position

A Program for Management Interns

To respond to many of these concerns we developed a supervised internship program for students in management. It is based upon a number of personal observations.

(1) In educating students for careers in management we are not training them for specific entry level positions such as can be done in accounting, programming, sales, etc. Students may start their careers in many different types of administrative or technical assignments.

(2) Students most commonly have a task oriented attitude toward their job rather than an orientation to the goals of the organization. This latter orientation is an essential ingredient of success.

(3) This task orientation frequently results in students ignoring the decision making activities and interpersonal environment which surrounds them as well as the external world environment so important to the success of their company.

(4) Skills in communication, interpersonal relationships, decision making and critical thinking are repeatedly at the top of the list of important skills employers expect in new hires.

The Internship Program was developed especially for students in management who cannot always apply their professional education or skills in an internship position as do other business students.

The program also works well for students who are at the early steps of their management career such as assistant managers or first level supervisors.

Following are the basic guidelines of the program:

(1) Don't be an employment agency - At a time in the student's life when she must start providing for her own needs, don't deprive her of the experience of locating a job on her own volition. True, many students have already had part-time jobs but these usually are jobs obtained through friends or through the answering of help-wanted ads for labor oriented positions where screening is minimal and education is irrelevant. There may be a need for a clearing house for employer requests. This should be limited to the posting of opportunities with contact information.

(2) Don't match the student to the job - Why must the student with an interest in HR have a HR position? Of course this may be desirable but the student may never again learn what goes on in a purchasing department, in production scheduling, in managing a fast food service, in inventory control etc.

(3) Don't ask the employer to do your job - Why must the employer be involved in the grading process? The employer should be expected to give the student meaningful assignments and close supervision. In addition the intern should be granted some time to complete class assignments related to the internship.

(4) Consider current employment- In many internships, the student may have been hired without the employer knowing the student would later enroll as an intern. In our program, 60% of our students already are working 15 hours or more a week and must continue to work to pay for education expenses. If the position satisfies requirements of the program it may be used as an internship.

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If these guidelines in the approach to the internship program are used, the school must only approve the student's position as suitable for the program. This approval may be given by the faculty member responsible for supervising the interns during their internship period.

Guidelines must, of course, be given to the student seeking a job. These guidelines can include a list of types of jobs suitable for the internship. Basic in the job requirement is that it includes administrative types of duties rather than labor-oriented or just skill oriented duties. The job should expose the student to the decision making process either as a result of his own responsibilities or as a result of relationships with co-workers, superiors, customers, or the public. Positions such as teachers, retail clerks, machinist, assembly line operator, janitors, etc. are specifically excluded. However, some clerical positions may expose the student to the operation of many organizational systems and corresponding management processes, where, if properly guided, useful learning experiences are encountered.

Necessarily, the focus of such an internship program must be on the environment of the management process. Few training programs in industry provide such a learning opportunity other than through experiences. But unless these experiences are identified and discussed, many such experiences are not recognized as part of the management process, even by experienced managers,

COURSE DESIGN

By attending a regularly scheduled class during her internship, the student has the opportunity to identify, describe and discuss openly many varied experiences. A class of 12 to 20 interns from varied types of positions works well. Classes meet once a week for 1 to 1 1/4 hours during the regular semester of 15 weeks and for 2 1/2 hours during the summer session of eight weeks. At the initial class

the students are given assignment details for the semester. Among these assignments are non-experience related items such as:

- (1) Prepare a written job description describing your duties.
- (2) Draw an organization chart from the top of your organization to where you are located.
- (3) Prepare a written report describing the products or services of your company or organization. In addition, describe the activities of the particular department or unit of the company where you work.
- (4) Plan and schedule an interview with a person at a level in your organization equivalent to or higher than the position of your immediate supervisor. This person should be in a functional activity that is different from yours but interfaces with your activity. For example, a person in accounting may interview someone in maintenance. The objectives are to obtain an idea of the varied responsibilities of an activity within your company outside of your own functional area and to find out how another activity may view your activity relative to theirs and how they feel about the interface with your activity. Include a section in which you have critically analyzed the information you received during the interview and have identified what you have specifically learned that will help you if your career goals were to remain with this company.
- (5) Review (in personal interviews) the ethical views or philosophies of at least three key managers or executives in different functions of your organization. The questions asked of each interviewee should be the same or similar. Critically analyze these views as to their impact on the behavior of the organization as a whole and relative to acceptable norms. Describe how their views compare to your views on ethics and

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whether your views of business ethics have been reinforced or changed. The paper should include a definition of business ethics obtained from a text or other resources and the questions you asked of each interviewee.

Surprisingly, especially to the student, these assignments are not always easy. However, items 1-3 should take very little of the student's time or effort and are requested during the first two or three weeks of the course. Job descriptions are frequently not available and part-time students who have full-time positions and have worked at these positions for several years may find themselves writing a job description for the first time.

Many companies, especially small businesses, do not have organization charts or are reluctant to release them for varied reasons. Most interns see where they are on the organization chart for the first time.

Although new employees may learn about the products of the division or plant where they are employed, they may not be exposed to the breadth and depth of products and services offered by many organizations and corporations.

Assignments 4 and 5 require much more effort on the part of the student and frequently are difficult to complete. Few managers refuse to be cooperative when a student requests an interview. but the hectic nature of many business activities does create difficult logistical problems and, sometimes, less than satisfactory interviews. On the plus side, many students will report learning experiences well beyond what might have been expected in their task environment. Some contacts have led to other opportunities within the same company.

The interviews on ethics are not readily enjoyed by the students but have been used to raise their consciousness levels about ethical behavior in the workplace. Frequently they are surprised to find out

that their managers have a very strong ethical orientation. One study (DuPont and Craig, 1996) showed that internships in retailing did not have an effect on the ethical perceptions of the students although retail managers were found to be more ethical than the students or alumni. No effort has been made to determine the impact of this exercise on ethical perceptions.

Students were asked to observe relationships between their particular company or product and the broader outside world. This assignment requires the student to bring to class, on alternate weeks, newspaper articles from current business newspapers or magazines. The student must summarize the article and discuss the relationships involved. As an alternative, students may find articles that relate to their particular career goals. These news articles form the basis for class discussions on current business events.

It is easily recognized that all of the class discussions, whether they concern news articles, job or company descriptions provide an excellent opportunity for all of the students to broaden their understanding of the business. However, the students became most involved in response to this assignment: Bring to class a one-paragraph description of an incident in which you were involved, or that occurred in your workplace. This incident should represent some aspect of the management process such as decision making, communication, control, etc. or be related to some principle of management

These incidents, as described by the student, invariably involve many aspects of human-relations problems, some very obvious, others more subtle. For example, a student working as a truck dispatcher related a telephone conversation with a trucker whose 'rig' was out of commission on the road. The dispatcher finally determined that water had to be added to the radiator. The trucker's response to these instructions was "that's not my

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job.” Not only did this represent a problem in how to reply to the trucker but it gave the class an excellent first hand look at the narrow “zone of indifference” claimed by many workers.

One student, responsible for the purchasing activities of a brick distributor, described problems relating to late shipments of a special customer order. As the student described the incident, the brick manufacturer was told that he had to pay the excessive shipping costs when trucks rather than rail service were used. The whole area of customer supplier relationships could be explored in this situation as well as legal and moral responsibilities of a vendor.

LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Students in two sections of the Supervised Management Internship course were asked to participate in a self assessment of related skills and knowledge gained during their internship period. Interest/Knowledge/Skills Checklists may be used for course specific assessments (Angelo and Cross, 1993). They are brief and may be easily administered and analyzed Although recommended for use at the beginning of the course and to be administered again later in the course, this assessment was administered only toward the end of the course. Students were asked to rate their perception of the knowledge or skill levels that they had at both the beginning and at the end of the internship. They rated each knowledge or skill area on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest level. The assessment covered the following areas

1. Understanding your workplace environment.
2. Understanding the decision making process in your work environment.
3. Communicating and making contributions in your work environment.
4. Knowing more about the structure and

product/services of your company.

5. Understanding your company objectives and roles of other individuals.
6. Understanding the business world as it relates to your work environment.
7. Learning about other work environments through in-class discussions.
8. Understanding ethical concerns and considerations in your workplace.

Differences between the levels indicated before and after the internship period are given in Table I. All differences were tested at the .01 level. The largest differences were found in areas 2-5. These were all related to understanding the company and the workplace environment. Lessor gains were made in the areas of ethics and the external world.

TABLE I

<u>Area</u>	<u>Mean of Differences</u>	<u>Std Dev</u>
1	1.19	0.69
2	1.47	0.80
3	1.44	1.01
4.	1.59	1.01
5.	1.47	0.98
6.	1.09	0.69
7.	1.06	0.76
8.	1.09	0.89

CONCLUSIONS

Although students may benefit from most experiences in the workplace, they respond well to related activities in a classroom structured setting. They are required to explore workplace areas which otherwise they would not see. Written papers and participation in the classroom are the basis for assigning grades. This provides academic integrity to the grading process and

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removes the supervisor from involvement. However the supervisor should provide some evaluation to assure that the intern has satisfactorily completed his internship.

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