

# INTERNSHIPS AND OCCUPATIONAL SOCIALIZATION: WHAT ARE STUDENTS LEARNING?

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## ABSTRACT

*Internships provide rich environments where students can learn about their future careers by way of occupational socialization. Entering a career for the first time, however, can be a delicate matter. As active agents in their own socialization, interns have a lot at stake. So too, do the organizations and institutions of higher learning that sponsor them. Because of these interests, pre-placement assessment and periodic monitoring of interns is needed to ensure that internships are structured and beneficial to learning. Self determination theory (SDT) will be used to frame the argument that an intern's motivation to perform as an agent is increased as the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence are attained. Therefore, internships may be most effective when they maximize students' feelings in these component areas. The presentation to follow describes survey measures of two psychological variables that can serve as process feedback for interns. Depending on the resources available for the internship program, this feedback can be used for information, intervention, or as part of a more comprehensive approach, aimed at clarifying how we can maximize the positive outcomes of internships and the future careers of their participants.*

## INTRODUCTION

Internships represent an important step for students in higher education as they enter the world of work to practice what they have studied in the classroom. Different from other forms of employment, an internship is "any carefully monitored work or service experience in which an individual has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what he or she is learning throughout the experience" (Gilbert, p. 2, in Ryan & Krapels, 1997). Students may or may not continue to work for their specific employer after the internship, but these crucial experiences help prepare students for the occupations they will soon enter.

The benefits to interns include gaining new perspective on their occupations (Cullen, 2005), management styles

(Jauhari & Manaktola, 2006), coping skills (Gaitens, 2000), and resolving discrepancies between what was learned in the classroom and what is being practiced in the workplace (Melia, 1984). Internships are also of value to educators, as topics limited to cases and simulations in the classroom can be experientially learned in the workplace (Rehling, 2000). Sponsoring companies have a head start in recruiting much needed labor, and in socializing interns specifically for their organizational climates.

The aforementioned benefits assume that everything goes well, however. If interns do not find their experiences to be positive, they may be dissuaded not only from joining that organization, but the occupation as a whole: "without substantial or systematic data to the contrary, the... intern may generalize from the way one organization treats its employees in a specific career path to the way that career path is across organizations" (Feldman & Weitz, 1990). After the considerable investments made in students ready to enter certain occupations, it would be disappointing to lose them to other industries, to say the least.

One of the most common problems, however, is the lack of resources available to structure and monitor internships (Gentry & Giamartino, 1989). Programs need to know how interns are doing, and interns need feedback throughout the process, but we have few tools or systems that can provide this. If we are to support internships and leverage their experiential nature, we must have some feasible way of determining what students are learning and how they are acclimating to the occupational role of their future career.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on internship experiences themselves is extensive, especially in the fields of medicine (e.g., Holzberg, 1961), business (e.g., Blau, 1988; Feldman, Folks, & Turnley, 1998), and writing occupations (e.g., Gaitens, 2000; Larson, 1996). ABSEL research has addressed internships on several occasions, either by inclusion in discussions of active learning (e.g., Pittenger & Sears, 2002) or in works solely focused on internship experiences (e.g., Gentry & Giamartino, 1989; Giamartino

& van Aalst, 1986; Lynch, 1998). While concerns that haphazardly planned and executed internships may not qualify as experiential learning phenomena (for a review, see Gentry & Giamartino, 1989), the delineation of structured versus haphazard is less likely to be black and white in nature; rather, in reality it is more likely to vary in degree. For the purposes of this article, we focus on internships with structure and monitoring systems in place, which can be manipulated to maximize the positive outcomes related to interns.

Giamartino & van Aalst (1986) researched the content of what is learned during internships, using Kolb's theory of experiential learning (1984) to design a structured plan for interns. While the plan successfully met its goal of interns fully understanding and becoming sensitized to the world of work, it is not clear if this approach would gauge how successfully interns could fill real-world roles in it. Lynch's discussion of internships (1998) explores the importance of internships to students' future careers, problems in administration, and a proposed program for management interns. As in Giamartino & van Aalst's study, learning assessment focused on how much interns felt they understood features of the world of work, but not necessarily how well they could fill the occupational roles it entailed.

The role that socialization plays in internships has been of research interest for over forty five years (Seeman & Evans, 1962), originating in the sociological disciplines. This strand of literature focuses on the socialization process, whereby an intern "comes to appreciate the values, abilities, expected behaviors, and social knowledge essential for assuming an organizational role and for participating as an organizational member" (Louis, 1980, pp. 229-230). The way socialization happens has been philosophically debated for decades (see Frese, Garst, & Fay, 2007). One side of the debate claims that work characteristics are exogenous variables that determine an individual's behavior, attitude, and motivation (e.g., Hackman & Oldman, 1976; Van Maanen, 1976). The other side claims that newcomers are more active in shaping their own behavior, attitude and motivation (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Morrison, 1993), and that personal initiative is becoming an increasingly crucial element to master in the workplace.

Many individuals might say that both sides of the argument are right. In some ways, work affects an individual, but in others, the individual affects his or her work. Recent research (Frese, Fay & Garst, 2007) has shown that work characteristics are not strictly exogenous variables that influence occupational socialization (Van Maanen, 1976) and motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), but that interns actively shape them. Morrison (1993) noted how "socialization is a process affected not only by organizational initiatives, but also by newcomer initiatives" (in Frese, Fay & Garst, 2007). This interactionist stance (e.g., Frese, 1982; Louis, 1980; Pepper, 1995) is similar to the stance taken by Bandura (1997) in his conceptualization of reciprocal determinism, who states that individuals produce their social systems, but are also simultaneous products of them.

Much of what influences whether workers take their work by the reins or simply wear the saddle is determined by how they perceive the causes of success and failure in their lives – that is, their locus of control (e.g., Atkinson, 1964; Wolke & DuCette, 1973). Those with an internal locus of control are more likely to believe that the self is the cause, while those with an external locus of control are more likely attribute success and failure to external forces. This has been shown in the literature to influence motivation (e.g., Brosschot, Gebhardt & Godaert, 1994; Colquitt, LePine & Noe, 2000).

## MOTIVATION TO SOCIALIZE

To measure motivation, the authors suggest the use of self determination theory (SDT). SDT is a Baconian grounded, need-based theory which originated in the organizational behavior literature, and has been found to reliably and validly predict human motivation across various settings (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Here, it can be used to gauge interns motivation to socialize and assume new occupational roles, which in turn may predict their future contributions to the industry and their career success.

SDT has been used to explain a wide range of behaviors in several contexts (e.g., politics, healthcare, education, and sport; Deci & Ryan, 2000), through extensive empirical work and meta-analysis. Its basic premise is that all human motivation to choose certain behaviors is driven by three universal needs: the need for autonomy (deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1985), for relatedness (Reis, 1994), and for competence (Harter, 1978; White, 1963).

Interns need to feel in control of their decisions; to have personal initiative and to be agents who choose for themselves (deCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1985) – in essence, to have autonomy. Objects, places and people that are sensitive and responsive to those needs would, according to SDT, tend to increase intern motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2006).

Interns also need to feel they belong to a social entity (Ryan & Deci, 2000), allowing them to be close to others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Relatedness "describes a feeling of being "connected with and cared for by another" (LaGuardia et al., 2000, p. 368), whether that "other" is a person, object, place, or combination of the three" (McManus & McLeod, 2007, p. 3). The more interns perceive a workplace or occupation as sensitive or responsive to this need, the more motivation they will have to adapt to it.

In addition to these requirements, interns need to feel capable, or competent (e.g., Patrick, Knee & Caravello, 2007; White, 1959). Like any individuals in the workplace, interns need to believe they are able to advance closer to reaching their goals (Carver & Scheier, 1990). As newcomers learning about their occupations, interns may already feel less competent than their peers, a natural inhibitor to their socialization. Fostering high feelings of competence, then, may have inherent value in motivating interns.

Both in analysis and conceptualization, autonomy, relatedness, and competence cannot always be cleanly split (Thomson, 2006). As is seen in many cases, interns are motivated for mixed reasons. An intern that is invited to compose a major report with a well-liked and admired executive in the workplace may feel that could meet personal needs for relatedness and competence. If the executive gives the intern considerable leeway on how to compose the report, autonomy is tapped as well. In short, people are motivated to socialize for many different reasons, which are often intertwined. Because motivation is so complex, abstract, and powerful, it would make sense that it is one of the major reasons that internships succeed or fail in their learning objectives.

Previous ABSEL work has noted the two most common areas where internships fail: process and outcome feedback (Gentry & Giamartino, 1989). Many internships have a common written component, such as a final report, as the outcome feedback; and process feedback is usually provided by the intern's supervisor. As Gentry and Giamartino noted, in some internships, "the faculty member has no idea what the nature of feedback is that takes place in the workplace. It is often extremely difficult to monitor the student's learning as it takes place" (1989, p. 129).

The measures described in the section to follow are process feedback that can be explored with interns and/or their supervisors to improve the quality of their learning. Supervisors may not be aware that the intern's needs are not being met, or the intern's performance may have some influence on the way their work is designed. Patterns in survey results may also serve as red flags for internship sites that consistently show low scores in the self determination measures. Even if practical constraints prevent contact with interns whose needs are not being met, the information can still be used to help improve future experiences.

A practical way to gather this information is through parsimonious, yet theoretically strong, survey measures. These can be used in and of themselves, if resources are scarce; or if resources allow, as part of a more comprehensive approach to internship support. The section below explains the authors' developed measures and how they can be applied.

## MEASUREMENTS

Ideally, students should be aware of their locus of control before beginning the search for their internship site, and monitoring interns' loci of control can be easily accomplished. Given the time constraints on stakeholders responsible for making internships work, and the distance between interns and their sponsoring schools (Gentry & Giamartino, 1989), survey measures may offer the most practical way to conduct this assessment.

The example below shows locus of control as measured with Furnham's Occupational Attributional Style Questionnaire (OASQ; 1991). This domain-specific, multidimensional scale asks respondents questions about hypothetical situations in a work-related context. The ten sample scenarios, prefaced with the statement, "Imagine that...", are listed below in Table 1.

In the OASQ, respondents are prompted to visualize the event happening, then think of the single most likely cause. Then respondents rate the reason on nine separate scales, seven point Likert style in nature: importance, foreseeability, colleague control, personal control, chance, externality, probability, stability, and internality. The items, with their verbally explained scale anchors, are listed below in Table 2.

**TABLE 1**  
**OASQ Work Scenarios**

"Imagine that..."
<b>Positive Outcomes</b>
You apply for a promotion and get it
You solve a major problem that has occurred at work
You very successfully lead a group project with a positive outcome
You are voted as the most popular boss in your section
You are given a special performance reward at work
<b>Negative Outcomes</b>
You are turned down at a job interview
Your boss always acts aggressively toward you
You can't get all the work done that others expect of you
You gave an important talk in front of your colleagues and they react negatively
You are given a poor annual report by a superior

**Table 2:  
OASQ Item Measures**

<b>Internality</b>		
1. To what extent was the cause due to something about you?		
1 = "Totally due to me"	2 3 4 5 6	7 = "Not at all due to me"
<b>Probability</b>		
2. In the future, at work, will this cause again influence what happens?		
1 = "Will never again influence what happens"	2 3 4 5 6	7 = "Will always influence what happens"
<b>Stability</b>		
3. Is the cause something that just affects problem-solving or does it influence other areas of your life?		
1 = "Influences just this situation"	2 3 4 5 6	7 = "Influences all areas of my life"
<b>Externality</b>		
4. To what extent was the cause something to do with other people or circumstances?		
1 = "Totally due to other people or circumstances"	2 3 4 5 6	7 = "Not at all due to other people or circumstances"
<b>Chance</b>		
5. To what extent was the cause due to chance?		
1 = "Totally due to chance"	2 3 4 5 6	7 = "Not at all due to chance"
<b>Personal Control</b>		
6. To what extent was the cause controllable by you?		
1 = "Totally controllable by me"	2 3 4 5 6	7 = "Not at all controllable by me"
<b>Colleague Control</b>		
7. To what extent was the cause controllable by your colleagues?		
1 = "Totally controllable by my colleagues"	2 3 4 5 6	7 = "Totally controllable by my colleagues"
<b>Foreseeability</b>		
8. To what extent do you think you could have foreseen the cause?		
1 = "Totally foreseeable by me"	2 3 4 5 6	7 = "Not at all foreseeable by me"
<b>Importance</b>		
9. How important would the situation be if it happened to you?		
1 = "Not at all important"	2 3 4 5 6	7 = "Extremely important"

Once internship stakeholders know more about their interns' loci of control, they can more accurately determine which individuals may require intervention. While locus of control is a relatively stable trait, it increases chronologically from childhood into adulthood, and it can

still be improved. The most common prospects for this task are internship coordinators, professors, or mentors. Raising an intern's locus of control could be accomplished in several ways. For instance, Micklich and Vik (2000) conducted an ABSEL team workshop in which exercises to raise student

initiative were developed, based on activities developed by Herrman (1997). Other methods such as guided imagery (Stanton, 1982) and classroom-based cognitive training (Lam & Winter, 2000) have been found helpful in modifying locus of control in previous studies.

Monitoring interns' self determination related to the organization and the occupation, given truthful responses, can be relatively simple as well. Following the work of Thomson (2006), Sheldon and colleagues (2001) and LaGuardia and colleagues (2000), examples of survey measures for use with interns are shown below.

The first three measures in Table 1 for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, are prefaced with the statements, "When I see, hear, think about or work in my internship..." Similarly, the first three measures in Table 2 are prefaced with, "When I see, hear, think about or work in this occupation..." Both the organizational and the occupational contexts were included here because in interns' minds, it may sometimes be unclear whether what they feel about their internship applies to one organization or to the occupation as a whole. The items for each construct, with

seven point Likert style scales from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"), are shown below in Tables 3 and 4.

In visual terms, the process may unfold as follows (see Figure 1). When an intern's needs for autonomy, relatedness, and control are met to a high degree, this adds up to a high level of intern self determination. This self determination is a motivating force that, given a highly internal locus of control, leads to successful occupational socialization during internship.

Attempting to increase an intern's self determination may be more complicated than treatments for locus of control. While locus of control can be measured before internship begins, self determination cannot be measured until the student is actually placed and experiencing the world of work. This may mean increased distance between the intern and the person responsible for monitoring his or her progress, lack of contact between the two, or an overall lack of control by the two over work-related characteristics that cause low motivation. The section to follow explores four target areas on which to focus that may increase intern motivation and subsequent learning in the occupational socialization process.

**TABLE 3**  
**Internship Item Measures**

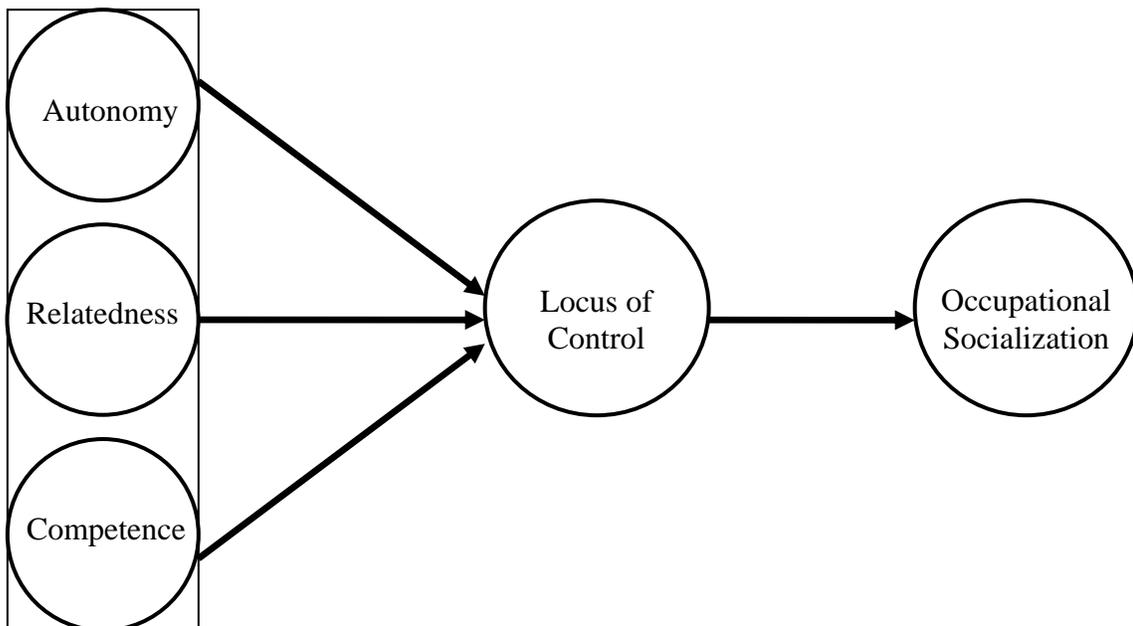
"When I see, hear, think about or work in my internship..."
<b>Autonomy</b>
1. I feel free to be who I am.
2. I have a say in what happens and can voice my opinion.
3. I feel controlled and pressured to be certain ways. (R)
<b>Relatedness</b>
1. I feel people at work care about me.
2. I often feel a lot of distance between me and the people I work with. (R)
3. I feel close to the people I work with.
<b>Competence</b>
1. I feel like a competent person.
2. I often feel inadequate or incompetent. (R)
3. I feel very capable and effective.
<b>Organizational Socialization</b>
1. I feel better if I am not away from my internship for long periods of time.
2. I miss my internship when I am not there. (R)
3. If I left my internship site permanently, I'd be upset.
4. Leaving my internship will be distressing to me.
<i>Note: R = the item is reverse scored</i>

**TABLE 4**  
**Occupation Item Measures**

“When I see, hear, think about or work in this occupation...”
<b>Autonomy</b>
1. I feel free to be who I am.
2. I have a say in what happens and can voice my opinion.
3. I feel controlled and pressured to be certain ways. (R)
<b>Relatedness</b>
1. I feel people at work care about me.
2. I often feel a lot of distance between me and the people I work with. (R)
3. I feel close to the people I work with.
<b>Competence</b>
1. I feel like a competent person.
2. I often feel inadequate or incompetent. (R)
3. I feel very capable and effective.
<b>Occupational Socialization</b>
1. I feel better if I am not away from this occupation for long periods of time.
2. I miss working in this occupation when I am not there. (R)
3. If I left this occupation permanently, I'd be upset.
4. Leaving this occupation would be distressing to me.
<i>Note: R = the item is reverse scored</i>

**FIGURE 1**  
**Proposed Path Model**

Self Determination Construct



## INTERVENTIONS FOR INTERNSHIP STAKEHOLDERS

In many cases, the internship environment responsible for an intern's low motivation is under the direct control of neither the intern nor the sponsoring college or university. Once it is determined how well interns' needs for self-determination are being met, there are specific steps they can take to increase the likelihood that successful learning will take place. Four areas are crucial: intentional learning, self-reflection, question generation, and metacognitive skills (Grabinger, 1996; Scardamalia et al., 1989).

To foster intentional learning, stakeholders first can encourage interns to mentally organize their work around goals, not topics. For example, an intern given an assignment to develop a powerpoint presentation on service training may sit down at the computer thinking, "Okay, first I'll find all the information I can on service and transfer it to the powerpoint slides. I'll add some graphics and items for visual interest, double check the slide show, and I'm finished. Then I'll look up some activities on service role playing and include them in my report to show my boss I've gone above and beyond on this task." Stakeholders should remind interns to think about the goal first. If the goal is to bring restaurant customer service from a casual dining to a fine dining level by teaching servers and bussers to add specific touches to their service and unlearn some ingrained service habits, this better contextualizes how the intern should design the presentation.

A second intentional learning component is to focus internship learning experiences in fewer areas and make the learning in depth in nature; rather than having interns skim the surface of several learning areas. It is common practice in many internships to rotate interns through a number of different departments, giving them an overview of the organization. This practice, however, has been found to prevent some learners from becoming skilled at solving problems (Scardamalia et al., 1989).

Self-reflection is a related best practice on the part of the intern. It "implies observing and putting an interpretation on one's own actions, for instance, considering one's own intentions and motives as objects of thought" (Von Wright, 1992, p. 61). There are two levels of self-reflection that stakeholders should promote during internships. The first involves learning to think about actions and their outcomes. The second involves thinking about oneself objectively, as both an agent of actions and receiver of outcomes. In this way, interns can see themselves as empowered to improve their performance cognitively (Ridley et al., 1992). For instance, interns can learn to examine their performance during tasks, instead of working straight through to the end and examining when they are finished. Stakeholders can foster intentional learning by occasionally interrupting an intern's work to see if he or she is learning to self-monitor, making revisions when necessary to improve the quality of their work.

While self-reflection and -monitoring can do a great deal to help interns learn and socialize successfully,

inevitably they will encounter obstacles that are unfamiliar. Even in times of need, interns often feel uncomfortable about asking questions. This is a common predicament that employers can address directly. Developing questioning skills gives interns more agency and control over how to construct their knowledge (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1991; Scardamalia et al., 1989). Coming from a classroom learning environment, where teachers ask students questions to guide their learning, to a rich active learning environment (REAL), where learners must ask their own questions and guide their own learning experiences, may take time. The return is well worth it, however; as interns become more independent and need less direction by gauging their own progress (Grabinger, 1996).

Last, stakeholders can, over the course of the internship, help interns develop metacognitive skills, a term describing "the steps that people take to regulate and modify the progress of their cognitive activity: to learn such skills is to acquire procedures which regulate cognitive processes" (Von Wright, 1992, p. 64). Increasing one's metacognitive skills is a gradual process that also takes time, but interns can benefit from the experience with their employer's help. Basic strategies that will help in an internship (Blakely & Spence, 1990), as in any rich environment for active learning, are explained by Grabinger (1996) as:

1. Students should be asked to identify consciously what they "know" as opposed to "what they don't know."
2. Students should keep journals or logs in which they reflect on their learning processes, thinking about what works and what doesn't.
3. Students should manage their own time and resources, including estimating time requirements, organizing materials, and scheduling the procedures necessary to complete an activity.
4. Students must participate in guided self-evaluation through individual conferences and checklists to help them focus on the thinking process. (p. 672)

For instance, suppose an employer assigns an intern the responsibility of closing a retail business at the end of the shift for the first time. Before the intern begins, he or she can sit down and write out what tasks have to be completed in closing, and how much time they are estimated to take. Next, any materials or help needed can be noted. After closing, the intern can reflect on what he or she learned by comparing the written plan with what actually happened, think about why certain outcomes occurred, and take note of what actions may have changed the outcomes. The next day, the stakeholder can meet with the intern to review the learning experience, providing guidance if needed to keep him or her asking questions, evaluating self-performance, and constructing new strategies for future responsibilities.

Internships can be challenging experiential learning environments to manage, and at times the task may seem overwhelming. However, all hope is not lost, as there are tools and methods to assist those wanting to improve what students are learning. How these tools and methods can be applied, and to what extent, will often depend on the resources available within an internship program. Some programs may only have the ability to administer the survey

and analyze the results. Others may be able to incorporate intentional learning, self-reflection, question generation, and metacognitive skills in web-based internship assignments. Those with ample resources may be able to go further, contacting interns or their supervisors and developing ways to improve their situation. Limitations will always exist to some degree, but even small improvements can make an impact on students in these learning environments.

## CONCLUSION

Internships are a key transition phase in the school-to-work process, and represent a significant opportunity to socialize newcomers into their chosen occupations. As important as they are, though, the internship coordinators, professors, and mentors responsible for their success often have little resources to monitor intern progress. Practical measures and interventions are needed to improve the current state of internships and move them from haphazard experiences to structured ones. The learning that takes place during internship involves occupational socialization, which is driven by an intern's locus of control and his or her motivation to engage in the socialization process – not only by the sponsoring organization (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Morrison, 1993). This motivation can be explained by self-determination theory (SDT), a needs-based motivation theory widely used in the social psychological disciplines.

Three universal human needs have been found that affect how people choose some behaviors over others: the need for autonomy (deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1985), the need for relatedness (Reis, 1994), and the need for competence (Harter, 1978; White, 1963). Once these needs are measured, as well as locus of control, interventions can be designed to maximize positive socialization outcomes. Examples of intervention abound, ranging from guided imagery and cognitive training to intentional learning and self reflection. With these tools, scholars and practitioners can greatly increase interns' chances of making their first foray into the workplace the start of a long, successful career.

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