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E-INTERNSHIP PREVALENCE, CHARACTERISTICS, AND RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

Debora Jeske¹ and Carolyn Axtell²

¹*Jacobs University Bremen, Campus Ring 1, 28759 Bremen, Germany*

²*Institute of Work Psychology & Management School, University of Sheffield, S10 2TN, United Kingdom*

ABSTRACT

The following paper examines a new form of internship as we know little about the prevalence and characteristics of e-internships to date. 187 e-internships were examined as part of a qualitative review of internet postings. The results demonstrate that postings for e-internships can be found in numerous countries and are posted online in various languages, with marketing postings making up the majority of cases. The remuneration, hours, and duration of e-internships vary widely. Further attention is given to exploring the particular challenges of and research gaps associated with such virtual work placements for the interns, the supervisors, and organizations alike. A number of research recommendations are outlined to address these issues.

KEYWORDS

e-internship, virtual internship, virtual work placements, internet

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of technology mediated communication enable virtual workers to keep in touch with their main offices and collaborate with others colleagues across space and time zones. Using technology to track and monitor employees are becoming acceptable means for supervisors to track progress made by their employees (Shellenbarger, 2012). A more recent evolution of virtual working is the emergence of new, computer-mediated internships which are also called ‘virtual’ or e-internships (van Dorp, 2008). In the present context, we use the term e-internship to describe such internship arrangements. Such internships, or work placements, are temporary, often part-time positions. Many students and graduates complete such internships as part of their studies (e.g., for dissertations or more formal placements as part of their degree program, e.g. Cheney, 2008; Franks & Oliver, 2011; Vriens & van Petegem, 2012). E-internships allow students and graduates to work with organizations at distant locations via computer mediated technology without having to relocate (Loretto, 2012). This is an advantage when such opportunities are short term or part time. For organizations it offers an opportunity to access fresh talent and ideas, irrespective of their location, at relatively little cost to themselves.

The current paper examines preliminary internet research data about the emergence of new forms of internships, that is, those that are heavily computer-mediated. These e-internships share a number of important characteristics with traditional internships and virtual work. In addition, we discuss some of the repercussions of greater computer-mediation for recruitment, development and training initiatives run by organizations offering computer-mediated internship.

2. SEARCH PROCEDURE AND CRITERIA

A good example of a particularly successful transition to these new modes of work and internships has been observed in the USA. In response to the need for work experience and the technological advances, the USA has seen a slight change in the way that internships are being made available to students. The number of online or virtual internships (as e-internships are commonly referred to) have increased exponentially

(Damast, 2012). Numerous websites and blogs have cropped up over the past five years that publish e-internship positions and give advice about how to select them (for an overview, see Patterson, 2011; Schuman, 2012; Teggart, 2011). The change to e-internships in the United States is particularly interesting as the number of traditional paid internships continues to decline in line with the most recent recession (EON, 2010). At the same time, U.S. companies reach out to identify any talented future employees anywhere (see US cases published by MacGregor & Torres-Coronas, 2007). We also see increasing success of such e-internships resulting in offers of employment being made, often as a result of new internship schemes run jointly by universities and private as well as public organizations (e.g. Columbia University). In addition, the U.S. State Department recently launched a Virtual Student Foreign Service (Groux, 2012; Damast, 2012), which provides support for students wishing to find online internships in domestic and diplomatic posts.

Fewer press articles and reports about e-internships are available outside the USA, possibly because e-internship opportunities are known under different names, such as 'telework' or 'work from home' internships. In the United Kingdom, Cornelius et al. (2008) wrote an article about case studies of virtual placements replacing traditional work placements in geographical sciences. The publication preceded articles in the popular press such as *The Guardian* (Thomas-Bailey, 2010) and *The Times* (Whateley, 2010) on graduate opportunities. UK graduate and student recruitment sites have also only recently taken up the topic of e-internships. On a wider European level, a number of research examples demonstrate the interest in e-internships. An early article about the benefits of virtual internships in education was put together by Kristensen, Källström, and Svenkerud (2002). In addition, van Dorp (2008) provided a useful overview of a European platform for clearing e-internships called Cross Sector Virtual Mobility, a platform which is still operational at this point, providing a matchmaking service for students seeking internship offers, connecting them to various organizations seeking interns. Virtual mobility in the form of virtual work placements (e-internships) has recently also been discussed and examined by Rintala and Schrader (2010) and Vriens and van Petegem (2012).

In view of these reports, our first goal was to examine the prevalence of e-internships across different countries, in Europe and North America as well as beyond. This resulted in a qualitative overview of the different types and forms of such internships presented next. The search was conducted with Google chrome and Mozilla. The search engines utilized include: google.com, google.fr, google.co.uk, google.md, google.ro, google.ru, rambler.ru and yandex.ru. We focused on e-internship postings that were published in Europe, Asia, North Africa and North America in English and French. We further searched for e-internships in Eastern Europe using additional three languages, Russian, Ukrainian, and Romanian. Keywords across the countries are as follows: in Australia (work from home internships/virtual internship Australia), Canada (stage teletravail/ stage en ligne, internships telework/, virtual internship); France (stage pour étudiants teletravail); India (work from home internships); Malaysia (virtual internship/telecommute); Morocco (stage teletravail, internship telework); Romania and Moldova (stagii de practica studenti la domiciliu, locuri de munca practica la domiciliu); Russia (стажировка студент на дому); UK (work from home internship, Freelance internships, Work remotely internship , internships at home, virtual assistant); Ukraine (стажировка студент удаленная работа) and US (virtual internships).

We conducted internet searches for postings published online between autumn 2010 to spring 2012. We compiled a listing of internship postings across 13 countries that we classified as e-internships, computer-mediated or 'virtual' internships. We focused primarily on e-internships in the United States of America and the United Kingdom in our search. Our key search terms (translated into several different languages) were: e-internships, telework internships and home internships. Each posting was checked to ensure that the posting satisfied the criteria of e-internships. The position in the posting met the characteristics of an e-internship (work from home, work requiring only occasional visits to the office). Second, the e-internships had to be temporary to distinguish it from regular virtual working arrangements (less than 18 months maximum). Third, the e-internships online needed to be differentiated from volunteering opportunities. This meant that postings were checked to see if they mentioned at least one of the following: that the position was remunerated, or aimed at graduates or students, or offered working experience for individuals interested in a career in this area.

2.1 General Results and Internship Characteristics

Most of the internships were posted on job portals, official companies' websites and job search engines. In the UK and USA, most internship postings were located on company's websites. Many of these internships required applicants to be currently enrolled students. The large majority do not provide any age limitations for applicants.

Table 1. Prevalence of e-Internships Following Preliminary Internet Searches

Specific countries	Total	Specific countries	Total
United Kingdom	54	Australia	5
USA	54	Canada	3
India	25	Morocco	3
France	13	Russia	2
Romania	12	Thailand	2
Ukraine	12	Malaysia	1
		Moldova	1
	170		17

Note. For an additional list of e-internship case studies see Vriens and van Petegem (2012). These authors include reports of e-internships in Finland, Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Italy, The Netherlands, and Poland).

V.I. postings were categorized into 9 major categories (Table 2). Generally, 90% (rounded figures) of all postings focused on three areas: Marketing related internships (40%); IT-related (web design, programming, graphic design) (24%) and journalistic/writing (18%). The remaining 10% involved a variety of multi-media and specialty internships that required specific skills or backgrounds unlikely to be widely found in the population.

Table 2. Job Types Listed In e-Internship Postings

Internship postings	Total postings (percent)
1. Marketing positions (e.g. advertising, PR, marketing, market research, sales, insurances)	74 (39.6%)
2. Journalist, web content writer, articles editor	31 (16.6%)
3. Web designer, web developer	24 (12.8%)
4. Researcher/writer of papers	21 (11.2%)
5. Programmer (computer programs)	11 (5.9%)
6. Designer, graphic work/artist	10 (5.3%)
7. Entertainment (radio producer/ music or film specialist)	9 (4.8%)
8. Public Policy Researcher, Law Researcher	7 (3.7%)
9. Other jobs:	5 (2.7%)

Note. Other jobs included: virtual traders, consultants, web translators, psychologist, intern office personal assistant, professor.

We also wanted to find out in which sectors the internships are most likely to be found. The postings were categorized into ten major fields (Table 3). The dominance of certain technology-dependent job types is not surprising, as not all work placements can be successfully turned into e-internships due to the important of social and interpersonal aspects (e.g., in the nursing professions).

Table 3. Sectors Associated With e-Internships

Sector	Total
1. Software/IT/ web sites	41 (21.9%)
2. Marketing media, advertising, PR, market analysis, copywriting	39 (20.8%)
3. Show business/ Media	21 (11.2%)
4. Edition/publication/magazines	20 (10.7%)
5. Business services, entrepreneurship	13 (6.9%)
6. Sales, customer services	13 (6.9%)
7. Research	9 (4.8%)
8. Consultancy	6 (3.2%)
9. Education	4 (2.1%)
10. Charity	4 (2.1%)
Other:	20 (10.6%)

Note. Other includes: Financial services (3; 1.6%), sport industry/ entertainment (3; 1.6%), fashion and art (3; 1.6%), real estate companies (3; 1.6%), insurance (3; 1.6%), tourism (2; 1.1%), medical assistance (1; 0.5%), virtual assistant (1; 0.5%), leisure (1; 0.5%).

Many internship postings provided little information about the lengths of the internships, which suggests that these might be more flexible than common traditional internships (Franks & Oliver, 2011; Loretto, 2012). The majority of those postings we located referred to e-internships of up to 3 months' duration, with a few up to 6 and even 12 months (see Table 4 for details). This also places the burden of enquiry onto the shoulders of the applicants and potentially successful interns to negotiate the length of their internship with the respective company/organization in question.

Table 4. Information (Length) Provided in Postings

Duration	USA	UK	East Europ.	France	India
N/A	16	37*	27	5	-
Flexible	18	-	-	-	-
> 3 mths	18	14	-	6	6
> 6 mths	1	1	-	1	14
> 12 mths	1	2	-	1	5
Total (n=173)	54	54	27	13	25

Note. * Not available, presumably flexible all year round. Eastern European countries include Ukraine, Romania, Moldova, and Russia. Table excludes results (n=16) for Morocco, Canada, Australia, Malaysia and Thailand.

The large majority of internship postings provided limited information about working hours. Information regarding the duration and the workload per week of the posts (specifically, internship hours and length of the internship) was noted for over half of the postings (55.1%, 103 out of 187 postings). However, many internship postings did not specify the number of hours to be worked in their internship postings (only a handful of companies listed these explicitly, Table 5). The situation was a little different for the UK and the USA. Here most of the Internships specified at least some hours. However most of them encouraged a flexible working experience and allowed students to design their own work patterns per week.

Table 5. Information (Hours/Week) Provided In Postings

Duration	USA*	UK	France	Canada	Ukraine
N/A	28	31	12	2	10
> 10 hrs	8	4	1	-	1
> 20 hrs	14	5	-	1	-
> 30 hours	2	7	-	-	-
Unclear hrs (up to 5 days a week)	2	4	-	-	1
Total	54	54	13	3	12

Note. * Numerous N/A included flexible hours. Only includes countries that provided information about hours/week.

We also investigated the extent to which these e-internships were paid, focusing on the 170 postings from six countries for which we were able to locate more than 10 postings. 39% of e-internships were unpaid while 35.3% of e-internship postings provided no information about remuneration. Only about a quarter of internships provided details about remuneration (31%). Focusing on all countries for which we located at

least 10 postings (USA, UK, India, France, Ukraine and Romania), we noted the highest number of such paid positions was found in France (77% of postings), India (72% of postings), and the Ukraine (42% of postings). In contrast, the UK only provided remuneration for 11% of postings, and the US only for 9% of e-internships.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 Summary and Implications

At present, we know little about the prevalence, awareness, and functioning of e-internships. Our internet research confirms that e-internships (also known as virtual internships) are cropping up in numerous countries and in numerous languages. Such e-internships can be found in numerous countries such as the US (Loretto, 2012), several European countries (see case studies by Vriens & van Petegem, 2012) and New Zealand (Franks & Oliver, 2011). The reviewed postings indicate that e-internships are now available in various sectors, with a strong dominance noted in the customer service jobs (marketing, sales), technical areas (IT-related) and journalism. This is not surprising since all these jobs rely on technology. We might expect the number and variety of such postings to increase with time as globalization via technology increases opportunities and means to work from home. At the present time, the burden of enquiry seems to rest on the applicants (Loretto, 2012). Many important pieces of information need to be requested by interested applicants themselves from potential internship providers, despite calls that internship providers should have a clear socialization and orientation strategies in place to successfully introduce new e-interns to other colleagues and incorporate them effectively in team efforts (see proposed strategies put forward by Vriens & van Petegem, 2012). It also becomes clear that such internships are becoming more popular in specific industrial sectors that are technology driven (such as marketing and computing), offering new opportunities to students and organizations alike to collaborate electronically.

The benefits of internships generally, and virtual positions in particular, have been reported in the press, in various blogs, and on university websites. E-internships are unique in that both employers and interns benefit in different ways: such internships reduce the expenses for both significantly and allow smaller and larger employers to offer (unpaid as well as paid) internships that are mutually beneficial. Employers can identify potential hires early on, while students are able to work from their respective university locations without having to travel significant distances (a benefit especially embraced by American companies and students alike due to the geographical size of the country). In addition, companies try to identify and retain talent as early as possible.

3.2 Limitations

It could be argued that our internet research was not sufficiently international and multi-lingual. The search used only certain words and search engines and languages which is likely to limit the validity of the findings. However, please note that our purpose was to demonstrate that e-internships, or computer-mediated, internships indeed exist across numerous countries. We did not intend to provide a complete overview of all possible internships available, as this would have required a more systematic, multi-lingual search.

One variable not included in the internet review of e-internship postings concerns the size of the firm offering the e-internship. This is important “in that larger firms are more likely to participate” in internship programs, as in the case of the university scheme outlined by Bailey, Hughes, and Barr (2000, pg. 58). Firm size may influence HR practices, selection criteria for e-interns, and potential provisions made available to e-interns. Future analyses of postings might also want to consider the extent to which the frequency with which certain job types are more likely to be offered by larger firms and specific sectors.

3.3 Implications and Future Research Avenues

A number of authors have reviewed internship experiences, made recommendations on how interns should be supported via technological tools, managerial support and training and how they should be selected for their internships (Vriens & van Petegem, 2012; Ostmann, 2011). There is further work that examines the importance and relevance of such internship experiences for interns' professional future and their career decision making (Beenen & Rousseau, 2010; Callanan & Benzing, 2004; Coco, 2000; Eyler, 1995; Feldman, Folks, & Turnley, 1999; Johari & Bradshaw, 2008; Mangione et al., 2006). These guidelines and conclusions may also be worthwhile adapting to e-internships to ensure that the e-internship is an arrangement that is mutually beneficial to both e-interns and their organizations.

Recruitment may represent a specific challenge for organizations interested in offering e-internships. Boswell and colleagues (2003) examined how individuals make job choices and how this was influenced by recruitment practices. The authors identified three practices as important, that is, the opportunity to meet with numerous and senior organizational representatives, site visits and regular follow-up. The first two options are not readily available to companies offering e-internships. The last aspect is particularly important, as it presents a way to build relationships between the organization and applicants (Boswell et al., 2003). However, technology is quickly helping to remedy this. Organizations wishing to diversify their traditional internship schemes by offering e-internships should consider offering interested internship applicants virtual tours and access to testimonials from previous interns. This might prove a useful way to anticipate potentially negative expectations about e-internships and to address potential concerns that individuals might have.

Recruiting e-interns may be particularly challenging in terms of how to effectively screen applicants. Several organizations utilize online tests to ensure that applicants have the necessary skills (e.g., Lim & Morris, 2006). Vriens and van Petegem (2012) suggest that it is important to consider the role and development of intercultural competencies in virtual settings. There is some research available that may provide useful starting points for assessing cultural self-awareness (Roysircar, 2004; Canady et al., 2011) and multicultural competency (Manese, Wu, & Nepomuceno, 2001). We generally recommend that many traditional recruitment practices can be adapted for e-internships, including the utilization of interviews and setting clear guidelines for interns (Ostmann, 2011) so as to give them a realistic preview of what is provided and expected of them.

Another important aspect to consider is the extent to which certain training opportunities will be made available to e-interns compared to traditional interns. Past reports show that one of the reasons why companies may drop internship opportunities are the indirect costs of organizing training for their interns, even more so than the costs associated with the remuneration for internships (see survey report by Bailey, Hughes, & Barr, 2000). This circumstance may be associated with the fear that interns will leave the organization once trained. However, in the case of e-interns, it is more likely that they will not necessarily continue as regular employees. We do not know at this stage if this makes it even less likely for training or mentoring to be offered, or that training is no longer be considered a cost given that e-internships may also result in less costs for the e-internship providers (e.g., in terms of providing office or parking space, InternMatters, 2010; Barkhausen, 2012). Since levels of learning and mentoring have been associated with intern job satisfaction, affective commitment and positive attitude toward the industrial sector (Liu, Xu, & Weitz, 2011), providing some sort of training seems beneficial to the company and the industry overall. No matter what stance individual e-internship providers take, it is important to conduct training needs analysis with e-interns that have a more diverse skills set and educational background to ensure successful e-internship performance.

An additional issue to be clarified in future research pertains to the provisions made available by and expectations of e-internship providers. Bailey et al. (2000, pg. 58) noted that "there is also evidence that firms tend to provide higher quality programs [in terms of training and mentoring] when they expect the interns to stay at the firm" (Bailey et al, 2000). We have no information about the intentions of the e-internship providers whose postings we located online as to whether or not it is their practice to recruit employees from their e-internship pool. This would be a worthwhile issue to explore in surveys conducted with previous e-interns to assess the career prospects available to these e-interns.

We also need to learn about the extent to which e-internship will result in future employment in a similar fashion as for traditional internship experience (Taylor, 1988). Taylor (1988) did not examine the mechanisms by which this occurs, however, she suggests that interns may improve their technical, social and

thus interviewing skills during the internship. Due to the computer-mediated nature of e-internships, e-interns may not have the same opportunity to improve a variety of skills. This is actually in line with the suggestion that some employees may be more likely to receive training as part of their job role than others, resulting in potential skill gaps (see Spell, 2001), a concern that may also be relevant for e-interns due to fewer training opportunities (e.g., interpersonal skills training) being made available to them compared to more regular traditional interns. However, at the other end, e-interns may be more likely to improve their technical skills above and beyond the skill level that may be obtained in more traditional internships. This is, however, pure speculation at this point and merits further attention.

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