Creating a successful virtual internship opportunity

A virtual or remote internship is a unique opportunity for an organization to hire a student to support their career and professional development, and your office goals. Virtual internships require increased planning and consideration by both the intern and supervisor, but they can still be a great way to help you meet the same needs as in-person internships.

Use appropriate online collaboration tools even before your intern starts

Test different communication methods including video chats, instant messaging, email or phone calls. Using productivity tools like Slack, Google Drive or SharePoint makes it easier to work collaboratively on projects. Indicate any specific preferences for how you would like the intern to communicate with you (e.g., chat service, email, phone, etc.) and if specific times of the day are best.

On-boarding is challenging when someone is working virtually, so think of additional ways to ensure that your intern feels connected and understands your expectations for them. Schedule additional meetings for them with colleagues that you might otherwise have them do on their own since they don't have the option of "popping by" a colleague's desk or joining team members for lunch to learn the culture.

Set clear expectations and schedule on-going check-ins

Goals, instructions and deadlines should be communicated clearly and concisely. Encourage interns to ask questions since they may be hesitant for fear of bothering anyone. Set a regular check-in with interns, and ask them to have an agenda with a list of topics to discuss ready.

Encourage your intern to prioritize time-sensitive topics and to share them ahead of the meeting so you are prepared to address their concerns. Ask your intern to create professional development goals for themselves and be sure that you communicate project goals with your intern that help move tasks forward. And be sure to share your goals too - this will help them get to you know better.

A more formal mid-point check-in and end-of-summer evaluation will also ensure they are on track and meeting your expectations. It's easier to course correct in the first few days or weeks than to realize in the end that this experience wasn't meaningful for you or for them.

Explain the office culture and expectations

Although the intern will not be working in the office, it is still important for them to understand the written and unwritten rules to be successful. To support this, have a point person for the intern to discuss ideas and challenges. This might be a recent graduate or a colleague working on similar projects who can offer timely and relevant feedback.

Incorporate real-world activities to build practical experience

It's easy for virtual interns to feel isolated from the work environment. Offering interns the opportunity to participate in simulations, case studies and online training examples give virtual interns experiential opportunities that allow them to apply what they've already learned. Virtual interns don't have the opportunity to shadow an employee in the workplace but these types of activities can help them to feel more connected to the work and to learn valuable skills.

Online training activities immerse them in experiences that allow them to put what they learned into practice. You might consider finding ways for the intern to present virtually to the team to provide a capstone experience that in-person interns often get. It may be helpful for interns to have virtual social gatherings or lunch-and-learns to stay connected to the team and to each other.

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Supervisor Checklist

- ☐ Choose the right online tools to make it easier to connect with your intern

- ☐ Be clear and direct on the expectations for the internship - write them down and share them with your intern before they start

- ☐ Share some of the written and unwritten rules of the office to help your intern learn the culture

- ☐ Incorporate tangible projects, gatherings and training sessions into the experience to help the intern stay connected

- ☐ Schedule time to evaluate the intern at the middle and end of the internship

- ☐ Provide a capstone project or presentation opportunity for the intern

Helpful Resources for Employers

8 Tips To Develop A Successful Virtual Internship Program

10 Remote Workers Weigh in On What Makes Them Successful

Virtual Internships are Helping Students get Experience Anywhere from the Comfort of their Dorm Room

23 Essential Tips for Working Remotely

Considerations for Remote Internships

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