

This is Not Your Parent's Internship

By

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Internships have been a long-standing opportunity for students to gain work experience before graduation. Increasingly, savvy companies have come to realize that because of experiential educational experiences like internships, vocationally oriented student organizations, and university programming many students are ready to contribute in a meaningful way to the firm at graduation and in many cases even before graduation. Hiring a student intern is a “win” for both the student and the hiring company. The student is commonly paid a wage and acquires work skills while the company can staff a position at a lower cost and without committing to a full-time employee. There is another deeper win-win within the internship as well. Hiring companies can evaluate potential full-time hires over an extended period and students can see if the work and company are a good fit for their long-term career goals.

Changing demographics, a new definition of work, and economic disruption has changed the market dynamics in hiring interns. This paper provides insights for companies on how students find internships, the percentage of students seeking internships, and what students are seeking in an internship.

The internship model has been in place for many years and operated in a state of status quo. Recently the market has begun to shift with aging workers, unfilled jobs, a booming economy, and a new generation of students with potentially different work-life goals. Adding to these market disruptions are the rapidly changing definition of work, new technologies, and types of jobs. Taken together the need becomes apparent for more information to aid companies in recruiting students for internships. The following paper presents the findings of a focus group and subsequent survey with students from the University of South Florida. The results of the research provide insights for companies on how students find internships, the percentage of students seeking internships, and what students are seeking in an internship.

Keywords: Internship, Sales, Marketing, Education, Recruiting

Internships are an integral part of the academic experience for both students and employers. Internship by the Numbers (2020) notes that estimates are in the range of 60% of students participate in at least one internship during their college experience. The article also notes that 70% of companies make full time offers to interns and 80% of offered interns accept the employment offer.

Internships have received significant interest from researchers. Researchers have explored the value and importance of internships across stakeholders along with the process of selecting an internship and even specific types of internships. While the academic literature is robust it is also somewhat dated having occurred in the late 1990s to early 2010s. Many environmental factors have changed over the past 10 years. Most notably, we have an entirely new generation on campus with Gen Z students. Second there are other factors to consider as well, including an aging workforce leaving the workplace, new ideas about where and how work is done, different types of jobs, technology options for students to find internships, student preparedness for work, and worker demand outpacing supply in some regions.

This brings us to three questions to research.

Research Question 1: What are the primary factors students consider when choosing an internship?

Research Question 2: What are the channels students leverage in learning about an internship?

Research Question 3: What suggestions do students have for companies to engage students in recruiting for an internship?

In the fall of 2021, the opportunity presented itself to conduct a focus group with a local company and students and then to survey marketing students to develop an updated perspective on the student decision process and the actions students suggest companies take in recruiting interns. The results of the research revealed that students are most interested with internships that produce the opportunity for learning and personal development and that they report being “maxed out” by social media requests from companies.

When it came to finding internships, students mentioned relying most on friends and family along with school channels (curricular, co-curricular, and university contacts) for internship opportunities. In a departure with past research students also noted web sites / applications as sources for internships.

Students participating in the research also offered suggestions to help companies break through the clutter and noise to gain their attention. Students suggested companies connect with student clubs, reduce friction in applying, provide a compelling salary, and share how the company is performing now.

Review of Research

Multiple academic articles have been written about internships focusing on varied topics including the importance of internships in pursuing a full-time career, how internships help with transitioning to work, how an internship can help establish realistic expectations about the business world, benefits and pitfalls, as well as student preconceptions (Dommeier et al 2016, Swanson & Tomkovick 2012, Maertz et al 2014, Hammond 2020). O’Neill (2010) differentiates an internship from other active learning by applying the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) standards. The author notes:

The CAS standards emphasize that an internship should be framed and developed as a learning activity. An internship should be “a deliberative form of learning” that involves “doing,” reflection, and “feedback for improvement” - all in support of “learning goals and objectives.” According to the CAS statement, this would happen whether the internship is part time or full time and whether it is for credit or not for credit.

Research has also examined the role of pay, what students are seeking in an internship, the challenges they face, and even the main channels students use to acquire an internship (Dommeier et al 2016, Swanson & Tomkovick 2012, Maertz et al 2014).

Dommeier et al (2016) conducted a survey of over 300 students at a large southwestern university to explore student perspectives concerning a marketing internship. The authors reported 97% of respondents found the internship to be a learning experience. The authors also noted the following about benefits and what students liked most and least about the internships:

The interns mentioned many benefits about their internship. The most popular benefits mentioned were learning about the business (27%), getting real work experience (17%), increasing my ability to work with others (15%), developing networking opportunities (10%), increasing my social media skills (5%), and increasing my time management skills (5%). When asked what they liked most about their internship, the students were most likely to indicate that they enjoyed the people they worked with (20%), liked getting real work experience (17%), liked learning how the business was run (12%), enjoyed the tasks they were assigned (11%), and appreciated the freedom and flexibility they were given (8%).

When asked about what they liked least about their internships, about 15% of the interns echoed the most frequent response to the previous question by stating, in essence, “nothing—all was good.” Moreover, 2% said that they enjoyed their internship and wished it were longer. Of those who did list com-

The Protocol

A combination of a focus group and a survey were employed in this research during the second half of 2021. The focus group was conducted with four (4) students and a local mid-sized business in the transportation industry. The survey data was collected from students who were enrolled in either the marketing internship or the online section of the Professional Sales course at the University of South Florida.

plaints, 15% complained about task boredom (i.e., being assigned menial, dull tasks that did not showcase their talents). Other complaints referred to the long commute to work (12%), the amount of time required to perform the internship (9%), the lack of pay (6%), the pressure to complete tasks on time (6%), having to deal with unhappy customers (4%), not being given enough guidance for completing tasks (4%), and not feeling comfortable about making sales calls (4%).

Swanson and Tomkovick (2012) surveyed both businesses and students to develop contrasting perspectives on internships. The authors reported, "Ratings of communication vehicles investigated in this study indicate that, overall, the most popular approaches are through career services, word of mouth, and career fairs". The authors also noted that a series of statistical tests found that:

the internship provider and marketing student ratings were significantly different on 17 of the 24 importance items measured in this study. In particular, internship providers rated the workplace environment, supervision of the intern, and having clear learning objectives for the internship as significantly more important than the student respondents. However, students gave a significantly higher rating to a series of items related to skill development, increased career opportunities, and issues related to the attractiveness of the internship offering than did internship providers.

Maertz et al (2014) noted 11 dimensions of internships that were mentioned or implied in the literature and identified benefits and pitfalls for interns, employers, and schools.

The 11 noted dimensions of internships from the Maertz et al paper (2014) were:

1. Paid vs unpaid.
2. Full-time work vs part-time summer work vs part-time work concurrent with coursework.
3. Graduate/professional school internship vs undergraduate internship vs non-academic (trade union apprenticeship or other internships for people out of school).
4. Academic course credit vs no academic course credit.

5. High formal academic requirements (e.g. assigned readings, written learning objectives, learning diaries) vs low/no formal academic requirements (i.e. learn by on-the-job experiences/*ad hoc* instruction/osmosis).
6. Internship arranged between intern-employer vs arranged through school (i.e. career services, faculty contacts).
7. Clarity and planning in internship duties vs "do whatever is needed or asked".
8. Project-based work format vs job-based work format.
9. Faculty sponsor/mentor vs no faculty sponsor/mentor.
10. Work sponsor/mentor vs no work sponsor/mentor.
11. Implied opportunity of future full-time employment vs no implication regarding future full-time employment.

While these studies and the studies they reference provide insights they are dated representing a different time of technology, economic performance, region, university, and in fact different generation of students. The sample referenced in the studies were Millennials (Gen Y) and today's students are Gen Z. Springer & Newton (2020) report Gen Zs (born 1997 – 2012) have qualities that resemble both Millennials and Baby Boomers. The authors note Gen Zs have lived their entire lives in war, watched their parents struggle through a stagnate economy and a difficult job market. Gen Zs have experienced budget cuts at all levels, have a strong work ethic like Baby Boomers and are resilient like their Gen X parents. They are also, "Technologically savvy than Millennials (Gen Y) and describe themselves as Loyal (85%), thoughtful (80%), compassionate (73%), open-minded (70%), responsible (90%)

Other environmental differences between past research and now are the role of technology acquiring internships, changing nature of work, and the economy in the region of interest. In addition to being fully immersed in technology, today's students also have new tools and applications to employ when researching internships. Technology also plays a role in the changing nature of work with a need for current skills / knowledge in digital marketing roles, desire to market to younger segments, and the number of remote work opportunities for both full-time work and internships. Collectively these differences demonstrate the need to revisit past research on internships.

Focus Group Data Collection

The goal of the focus group was to help the business partner identify elements of a successful internship program and provide input for a larger sample survey. The focus group participants were selected by convenience in that the business partner was seeking

guidance on designing a new internship program and students volunteered for the activity. The company was a large family-owned business in an industry not typically considered by students for a career after graduation. Students were recruited from the sales club, a sales class, and marketing internship course. Students in the classes were offered extra credit to attend the focus group. Seven (7) students committed to participate. Two students reported conflicts prior to the focus group date and one (1) student did not attend for an unknown reason. Four (4) students participated in the full set of focus group activities (2 male and 2 female).

The researcher conducted the focus group with the students and the business partner executive leadership which included the head of human resources, the head of sales, and the chief executive officer. The focus group was semi structured which included a set of initial questions, topics for exploration and the flexibility to allow for emergent exploration of the topics. The students were asked to respond to the initial questions and write down their answers before discussing to capture individual inputs in the group setting. Following the set questions the group was provided time to explore each topic more fully.

Key themes were developed from the focus group by comparing notes on comments from each participant against other participants to remove duplicates and group like insights. The report from the focus group was shared with participants (both students and business partner attendees) three days following the event to confirm the documented themes represented the intended thoughts and no significant items were omitted. The results of the focus group are reported in the Focus Group Report section of this paper's Findings.

Survey Data Collection

The focus group report was then leveraged to create a survey that was distributed to a sales class and an internship class at the university. Students in these two classes are in their junior or senior year of the program and most commonly seniors. The students

were offered extra credit for completing the surveys and approximately 90% of each class completed the survey. In total there were 121 valid responses to the survey.

The University of South Florida is a highly diverse large urban institution. From experience teaching at the university most students in the college of business work while going to school. The number of working students may be even higher in this sample given the sales course surveyed was an online course. Student gender at the university is relatively even with female students representing 55% of the total. The university is also ethnically diverse (51% White, 21% Hispanic, 11% Black, 6% Asian, 4% two or more races, 5% international, 1% unknown). 60% of the students who responded to the survey reported they had either participated in an internship previously or were presently engaged in an internship.

The survey data was analyzed using a combination of Excel and the statistics package JASP (JASP Team 2021). The first analysis was categorizing responses to the open-ended question, "How did you learn about the internship?" This was done by grouping like responses in Excel. Next, the mean, standard deviation, range, and frequency of responses associated with ranking eight (8) considerations in selecting an internship were calculated with the assistance of the statistics software program. The statistics software was also used to compare the responses to evaluate their uniqueness (T-Tests).

Findings

Focus Group Report

In the first three exercises during the focus group the student participants were given "sticky" notes and asked to write their answers to questions. The first question sought to explore the impact of the tour that had taken place before the focus group. Interest in pursuing an internship increased with each student following the tour. On average interest increased from 2.25 to 6.5 out of 10. Table 2 notes

Interest Before Tour	Interest After Tour	Compelling Item that Changed Perspective
2	3-4	Learned about traditional business roles in the company, not just "..."
0	7	The people need to work in this industry and there is a lot of opportunity for growth
5	9	Opportunities for innovation and growth Importance of the industry and also the stability Work environment
2	7	The stability of the company. Real chance to interact and grow as a businesswoman.

the individual student responses and the compelling item the student noted for changing their interest.

In the second exercise students were asked to share what surprised them about the day. Responses from the students fell into the following categories:

- Scope, scale, and diversity of business operations
- Opportunities for younger people, stability of the business
- Company's innovation in what appears to be mature industry
- Learning about the company's products
- Experience a well-planned and fun tour
- Learn about the logistics and technology of the industry

In the final written question response students were asked what the company could do to generate interest when meeting on campus with students who could not come to the location for a tour. Response categories included the following:

- Present opportunity for personal growth
- Market it like you need young people to be in the industry
- Highlight that the industry is evolving but is important and has longevity
- Have alumni panels for student clubs with employees
- Present in classes and with student organizations
- Create an experience on campus
- Have different representatives on campus (from technology all the way to financial)

After the three written responses and discussion on each question the focus group moved to open discussion. The first open question related to what students were seeking in an internship. Key comments from the discussion included:

- Opportunity to grow, potential to move to a full-time job, career path
- Industry growth, company growing, company staying power
- Know people will invest in me
- Training hands-on experience
- Go into similar role – hands on. Very attractive if we can be given an account and eventually you are account executive. Ride along and participate.
- Didn't really consider what could get out of it. First impression impact. Known company. Big corporate office.
- Interactive
- Constructive criticism, feel involved, not toxic environment, feel safe

Generally, student feedback centered on learning / personal growth, the industry, long term career goals, and the culture / work environment. Interestingly, the responses were quite diverse with support for the different inputs but lacking consensus on

common items.

Next, the discussion continued with how the students would like to experience an internship. Students felt that some structure was important but that flexibility in experiencing different parts of the company and roles would be valuable.

When asked to reflect on the strongest part of the day the students shared that the strongest points were that the day had been very interactive, they didn't feel stupid, and they felt like they had built a relationship. One student also specifically remarked that her first thought was that the industry would be male dominated and that it was great to have a women of color contact.

The final two items in the focus group focused on increasing interest. When asked how to attract students to the industry the students suggested to highlight the different personalities on the team, to not be superficial ("we are a family" is a turn-off), explain the growth opportunities, and build a personal relationship. To increase awareness of an internship students shared.

Challenges

- There is a lot of noise. Students receive emails every day on opportunities (emails, Zip Recruiter)
- The students are maxed out on social. Typically scroll through companies see who they recognize
- Career fairs – companies hiring all roles. Go to companies they already know
- Attracted to familiar brands – takes less work and lower risk
- Peer input impact. Other students vouch for the company (alumni, fraternity, sorority, ...)

Suggestions

- Partner with professors to be in class
- Connect with student organizations
- Reduce friction in applying
- Offer high starting salary
- Share how the company is performing now

There appears to be significant demand for student interns and the students are overwhelmed with opportunities. To mitigate the risk of a bad experience, students bias to known companies and with companies that someone they trust knows.

Survey Data

In total 121 students responded to the survey and of the 121 respondents 72 (60%) had internship experience. Table 2 provides a summary of survey respondents.

Consistent with prior research students reported value in internships. 93% (113/121) of survey respondents to the survey answered yes to the question, "Do you feel internships are an important

part of your education?”. This is a similar finding to Dommeyer et al (2016) that noted 97% of students found their internship to be a learning experience.

Three (3) of the eight (8) respondents that replied “No” to the question had participated or were participating in an internship. All eight (8) of the respondents were subsequently asked, “Why do you feel internships are not important?”. In reviewing the responses, it appears one (1) person answered the ini-

tial question incorrectly. The others shared insights relating to limited utility, not feeling valued, and pay. Table 3 lists the responses from the students who responded that internships were not an important part of a college education.

Next, students were asked to share how they found their internship. The categorization of the responses is listed in Table 4. The two job sites reported specifically by students were Indeed and LinkedIn. While

Count	Percent	Sample
121	100%	Analyzed Responses
38	31%	Internship Course
81	67%	Professional Selling Course
2	2%	Enrolled in Both
72	60%	Internship Experience
49	40%	No Internship Experience
113	93%	Internship is Important
8	7%	Internship is not Important

Internship	Respondent Commentary
Yes	Menial Tasks and don't learn anything about the job
Yes	Warm bodies: lowly respected, poorly compensated, largely unsupported roles
No	Better to take full time job if you can
No	Prefer to get paid for working
Yes	Current internship not teaching anything new. People have nothing to teach.
No	Beneficial but not crucial
No	They are important
No	Can be valuable but may not transfer between companies. Every job is different.

Count	Percent	Method
20	27%	Friend or Family Member
14	19%	University Tools
13	18%	Job Site / Internet
12	16%	Self-Pursued
3	4%	Classroom
3	4%	Professor
2	3%	Student Organization
1	1%	Recruited
5	7%	Answered with Skills

friend or family member was the most noted category engagement, the university becomes the most noted method if university affiliated channels are combined. Five (5) of the respondents responded to the question with individual skills they used in obtaining the internship rather than the channel.

In the next section of the survey the students were asked to rank eight (8) items in response to the direction, “Move the following items to rank them from the Most important to Least important related to an internship”. The eight items were: Pay, Company, Industry, Type of Work, Location, Learn / Personal Development, Culture / Environment, and Potential for Full-Time. Of the eight (8) items five (Pay, Company, Industry, Type of Work, and Potential for Full-Time) were found to be indistinguishable from each other (95% confidence level). Learn / Personal Development, Type of Work, and Location were statistically different. Ranking the eight items suggests the average priority would be:

- 1) Learn / Personal Development
- 2) Type of Work
- 3) Culture / Environment Pay, Potential for Full-Time, Company, Industry
- 4) Location

Although some items ranked higher than others statistically, there was great diversity in the responses. In fact, all eight (8) items ranked first and last with students. The mean, standard deviation, minimum

and maximum for each of the eight (8) categories are shown in Table 5.

Location being the least important may be related to the number of internships that have moved remote and the number of full-time roles that have moved to virtual. Another interesting observation is Pay and Full-Time being noted in the middle of the priority. This appears to be consistent with student primary interest being Learning and Personal Development and the Type of Work. The frequency of ranking for each of the items is shown in Table 6.

Discussion

Present and past research agree that students are interested in learning as part of an internship and that friends and family along with the university are important channels for connecting students with internships. University channels include all connection points and when aggregated, the university is the largest single channel reported by students in the research for finding an internship. New in the present research is the inclusion of web sites / applications like Indeed and LinkedIn as significant sources of internships.

Multiple environmental factors including the type of work, location of work, student readiness, and regional demand also likely impact the dynamics of recruiting students for internships. For instance,

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics

	Pay	Company	Industry	Type of Work	Location	Learn	Culture/ Environment	Potential Full Time
Mean	4.7	5.1	5.2	3.3	6.1	2.6	4.3	4.7
Std. Deviation	2.2	2.1	2.1	1.8	1.9	1.8	2.0	2.3
Minimum	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Maximum	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8

Table 6: Frequency of Responses

Ranking	Pay	Company	Industry	Type of Work	Location	Learn	Culture/ Environment	Potential Full Time
1	11	9	8	23	4	50	5	11
2	13	12	9	24	4	23	21	15
3	13	11	12	21	5	16	23	20
4	21	10	15	21	10	13	18	13
5	16	15	14	16	18	7	20	15
6	14	27	20	10	19	7	7	17
7	14	23	25	4	24	3	21	7
8	19	14	18	2	37	2	6	23
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	121	121	121	121	121	121	121	121

school programs like sales clubs and practice centers along with prior work experience are making students work ready on day 1. The Sales Education Foundation (2021) notes that students who graduate from sales programs “ramp-up” 50% faster, experience 30% less turnover, and may save hiring companies \$180,000 in training. Moreover, co-curricular engagement in sales competitions, specialized workshops in topics like prospecting and financial selling along with practice center projects in marketing are providing students the opportunity to develop and apply skills before entering the workplace. Collectively, the curriculum and co-curriculum learning is fueling a growing trend at this university of companies hiring interns for business development / prospecting roles as well as digital marketing.

The pandemic also shattered the long-held concept of working in the office and may have exacerbated the exit of older staff. These changes combined with booming regional economies have opened the door for more students and more roles while also making engagement more cluttered.

Students shared that they are “maxed out” on social media meaning they are receiving many inquiries about internship opportunities. The cluttered channel seems to lead students to rely on trusted sources of information like family and friends, their personal experiences (known brands), and the university / faculty / student organizations to filter and prioritize opportunities. Interestingly these channels are like prior research perhaps suggesting students are perpetually busy. The present research identified an interest in the staying power of the company. This may be in part due to the new generation of students (Gen Z) having had a remarkably unstable history with continual wars and budget cuts at all levels.

The information shared in this paper adds to the research by updating insights regarding the channels students leverage for finding an internship. Of eight (8) identified constructs Learning and Personal Development were the most important items reported by respondents. The Type of Work was the second most important construct and the least important was Location. The order of the middle five (5) constructs Pay, Company, Industry, Culture / Environment, and Potential for Full-time were statistically indistinguishable (95% Confidence). Most importantly is noting that all eight (8) constructs had ranges from 1 to 8 meaning that there were students who felt every construct was comparatively greater and lesser to every other construct.

While this research is exploratory and not intended to test a theory, a unifying lens that may lead to improved understanding and future predictions of student behavior is provided by the motivation theory Conservation of Resources. Halbesleben et al (2014) note, “COR theory is based on the tenet that individuals are motivated to protect their current resources

(conservation) and acquire new resources (acquisition). Resources are loosely defined as objects, states, conditions, and other things that people value.” The authors continue to explain, “The value of resources varies among individuals and is tied to their personal experiences and situations.” Among the student resources that may apply in this instance are time (leisure, work, academic), semesters remaining at the university, money, and future opportunity. Application of COR suggests students would protect their resources by minimizing risk in selecting an internship and thus leverage known reliable sources of information. The variation observed in the relative ranking of internship decision criteria might be explained by the theory’s recognition that resources vary by the individual. Future research to explore theory is needed to test the application of COR or other potentially more relevant conceptual schemes.

Conclusions

With 60% or more of students participating in student internships, past research predating the arrival of the Gen Z generation, and the combined effect of a multitude of structural changes in the internship process, it is worthwhile to revisit student activities in finding an internship.

Gen Z students are reportedly resilient like their Gen X parents and have a strong work ethic like Baby Boomers. Adding to the generational differences impacting the process there are various environmental factors to consider in today’s marketplace as well.

- Businesses are embracing remote work - opening opportunities for more students
 - Many students in marketing and sales are productive on day one performing real work due to co-curricular events like sales competitions, workshops, and practice centers – roles often recruited include digital marketing / social media, sales prospecting / business development
 - Students have greater access to information from employers through web sites and applications – Indeed / LinkedIn
 - The aging workforce exiting the workplace generally and in response to present conditions combined with booming regional economies – resource constraints
 - Students have significant work experience outside of college – paying for college, first generation college students, supporting family members
- Yet still with the differences in the environment there are similarities over time in the research. Notably, the research in this paper confirmed the primary goal for students in an internship remains Learning. The research also found the second priority was Type of Work and the last of eight (8) constructs was Location. Between the top two and last construct were five other constructs that could not be clearly separated from one another. The other five

constructs were Pay, Company, Industry, Culture / Environment, and Potential for Full-time. Most importantly was the finding that all eight (8) constructs were rated in all eight (8) positions by respondents.

A second similar finding to prior research was the highly rated use of the university and family / friends as the top channels for finding internships. Students in the current research noted that they were “maxed out” with social media and received emails every day about opportunities. This noise in the channel likely reinforces student reliance on trusted sources of information regarding internships and highlights the need for companies to build an internship brand and differentiate interactions. When grouping the university channels, the top three channels for student’s in finding an internship were the university (programs, student organizations, and classroom), friends / family, and job sites / applications. The two named job sites / applications were Indeed and LinkedIn.

Recommendations / Implications for Practice

The following recommendations are provided to companies seeking to hire interns based on the research.

- Incent employees for internship referrals like you would for full-time roles
- Engage to build your brand with student organizations and faculty that teach relevant senior courses at local universities
- Differentiate your engagement with students by facilitating experiential engagements and bringing different types of resources to meetings
- Offer internships during the fall and spring semester as well as summer. Students are often working while going to school and would prefer to gain work experience over a typical college job in hospitality or retail.
- Make full-time offers and extend internships for high performing students to secure full-time employees prior to graduation

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Review

This article was accepted under the **constructive peer review** option. For further details, see the descriptions at:

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