

What to do about internships in light of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Employer Guide to Frequently Asked Questions

Resource adapted from the following sources:

The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions; University of Wisconsin – Madison

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)

California State Fullerton's
"Proposed Remote/Virtual Internship Guidelines"



Table of Contents

What are online, remote, virtual, or "micro" internships?	3
What are the benefits of an online internship given the current situation?	4
What are some drawbacks of an online internship?	5
Am I required to pay a virtual intern?	5
Can my virtual intern receive academic credit?	6
What does academic credit mean for the student?	6
What are the work terms and how many hours will my virtual intern need to complete?	6
How do I set up a virtual internship?	7
What should my virtual experience entail?	7
Best practices for employers considering delivering a virtual internship program	9
Resources for delivering a virtual internship experience	9



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What are online, remote, virtual, or "micro" internships?

Before we answer this question, it is important to consider the definition of an in-person internship. In the FSU College of Business, we see internships as *“a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent.”* (National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)).

To ensure that an experience - *whether it is a traditional internship or one conducted virtually* - is educational, and thus eligible to be considered a legitimate internship by the NACE definition, all the following criteria must be met:

- The experience must be an extension of the classroom: a learning experience that provides for applying the knowledge gained in the classroom. It must not be simply to advance the operations of the employer or be the work that a regular employee would routinely perform.
- The skills or knowledge learned must be transferable to other employment settings.
- The experience has a defined beginning and end, and a job description with desired qualifications.
- There are clearly defined learning objectives/goals related to the professional goals of the student's academic coursework.
- There is supervision by a professional with expertise and educational and/or professional background in the field of the experience.
- There is routine feedback by the experienced supervisor.
- There are resources, equipment, and facilities provided by the host employer that support learning objectives/goals.

For more information about the NACE Internship Statement please go to http://www.naceweb.org/connections/advocacy/internship_position_paper/

Internships provide many benefits. A few of those employer benefits include:

- Short-term support without a long-term commitment
- Management experience for supervisors/mentors who direct the intern's work activities
- Opportunity to evaluate student job candidates before offering permanent employment
- Best source of new permanent employees
- Higher retention rates for employees with company internship experience
- Source of new ideas and fresh approach to problem solving, critical thinking, communications, etc.
- Highly enthusiastic, capable, and motivated students
- Company name recognition and increased visibility on-campus

Furthermore, we also consider the following features to be elements of an effective internship:

- Sustained engagement with the physical, socio-cultural and institutional features of an actual workplace
- Supervision by staff at the internship host organization who are trained in mentorship
- Cultivation of both cultural (i.e., skills, knowledge, professional norms) and social (i.e., professional networks) capital that are valued by a profession and/or discipline

What are online, remote, virtual, or "micro" internships?

Consequently, our position on virtual internships is that by definition they cannot provide many of the important features of an in-person work-based learning experience, including the development and appreciation of workplace norms, the performance of certain tasks, and certain aspects of mentorship and relationship building. As such, we see these as a complement to the traditional internship experience that provides additional opportunities for engagement between students and professional organizations.

That said, here are some definitions of online, micro- or virtual internships:

Virtual internships are performed online or remotely anytime of the year. This allows the student to work on a global scale, but stay local. They are placed with a company and report to a supervisor. They are also in regular contact with the supervisor/team via virtual methods such as video call, phone call, email, and instant messenger. (<https://virtualinternships.com/faqs/>)

"Micro" Internships are short-term, paid, professional assignments similar to those given to new hires or interns. These projects enable college students, graduate students, and recent college graduates to demonstrate skills, explore career paths, and build their networks as they seek a full-time role. Unlike traditional internships, "Micro" Internships can take place year-round, typically range from five to 40 hours of work, and projects are due between one week and one month after the start date. "Micro" Internships are used by companies ranging from those in the Fortune 100 to emerging start-ups, and go across departments including accounting, finance, HR Management, Management, Management Information Systems, Marketing, Professional Sales, Risk Management/Insurance, Real Estate and Retail Management. (<https://www.parkerdewey.com/faq>)

What are the benefits of an online internship given the current situation?

The primary benefit of an online internship now is it can provide students with a safe, work-based learning experience that is grounded in an authentic task or project for a firm or organization. Depending on the nature of the project, students can also develop skills – either technical, inter-personal or intra-personal – by successfully completing one or more professional assignments on behalf of a professional organization. Additionally, an online internship can provide students experience with engaging in online project management and communications, which are common modes of project- and task-performance in many organizations. Last, an online internship includes no travel or housing costs, and thus may be a solution for those who cannot afford to relocate to expensive cities for extended periods.

Depending on the quality and character of the experience, an online internship may also provide some of the benefits outlined above, including new professional contacts, introduction to professional norms, and so on. But for these benefits to be experienced in an online setting, employers need to carefully design an experience that is more than a mere short- term project out-sourced to college students.

What are some of the drawbacks of an online internship?

The drawbacks of online internships include the lack of in-person relationship building, immersion in the physical and cultural spaces of a firm or organization, and fewer opportunities to engage in the ad hoc interaction that typically arise during an on-site experience.

In addition, while many companies are using these online internships as pathways to hire prospective full-time employees and students are using them to find the right job fit, both need to be sensitive to risk of “normalizing” this type of relationship. In particular, the professional development, relationship building, and other benefits of an employee/employer relationship are especially meaningful for early career professionals, so both parties need to be sensitive to viewing these models as a replacement.

Furthermore, as highlighted in critiques of the gig economy (e.g., Uber or Lyft drivers), these positions do not have the job security or benefits that full-time employees in a firm or organization often enjoy. As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, these workers often lack healthcare and paid sick leave, leading many to show up to work while ill and/or unable to pay their bills given the lack of a steady paycheck.

For considerations of the “gig” aspects of online internships, this essay by Julia Freeland Fisher of the Christensen Institute is a good introduction. <https://www.christenseninstitute.org/blog/micro-internships-just-a-gig-or-a-promising-gateway/>

Am I required to pay a virtual intern?

Our position in the FSU College of Business is that internships, regardless of format, should be paid. The reason for this is threefold: (1) unpaid internships are often only accessible and feasible for privileged and wealthy students, which can reproduce social inequalities since internships are known to have positive impacts on grades and employment prospects, (2) if the work is truly meaningful for the organization then it is likely to be worth compensating the student employee for their work, and (3) exploitation of student interns has been documented around the world, where unpaid students perform important duties for an organization. Paying student interns avoids this problem. Compensation can come in many forms including hourly rates, stipends, and commission, to name a few. For guidance on salary, visit the FSU Career Center’s Salary and Hiring Data found at <https://career.fsu.edu/stats>.

However, if your organization has a quality internship opportunity and you are not able to provide compensation, please ensure your position meets the criteria set forth by the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). This information can be found at the following link - <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/71-flsa-internships>

Can my virtual intern receive academic credit?

Yes, a student can receive academic credit for an approved internship experience. However, receiving credit while interning is not a requirement for all students. The student will decide based on his/her major and contact the College of Business Internships & Career Services Office for further instruction on how to apply. Receiving internship credit does not require additional work from you and only necessitates completion of a few verifying documents that we will provide (e.g. internship confirmation and evaluation). Additionally, students can receive both academic credit and financial compensation for the same internship experience. The two are neither mutually exclusive nor conflicting.

What does academic credit mean for the student?

Some students may choose to count the internship toward their scholarship in practice requirement, as a major requirement, or as an elective credit toward graduation hours. Once the experience is approved, the student is enrolled in an online internship course that will accompany their actual internship experience. Essentially, the college's instructor monitors the experience by providing reflective assignments and feedback. To receive academic credit, the student must successfully complete the course assignments, fulfill the employer internship requirements, and obtain a satisfactory final evaluation of their work performance.

What are the work terms and how many hours will my virtual intern need to complete?

Internships that coincide with the academic calendar typically fall within the following time frames:

Fall Semester (September - December)

Spring Semester (January- April)

Summer Semester (May- August)

On average, students receiving academic credit should work at least 150 hours during the semester. Students can work more or fewer hours, but 150 is the minimum number of hours needed to receive at least three academic credits.

How do I set up a virtual internship?

The process for an online internship can vary depending on situation and company. However, the details below will assist you in developing a meaningful experience that works well for both you and the student.

- 1. Identify projects.** Identify a real project(s) within your organization that will allow a student to expand his/her skills. For a sample list of internship assignments/projects by major, visit the following website - <https://business.fsu.edu/industry/hire-an-intern>. (Note this list is not all inclusive and only provides a sample of assignments). Consider your organization's current needs and develop your projects around those areas.
- 2. Develop Learning Goals.** What will the student gain from this learning experience? The learning goals could incorporate desired industry-related knowledge, skills, and abilities required for successful career advancement.
- 3. Advertise.** If you have not already identified a student or students to undertake your project, let us help. Post your description to the College of Business Job Board found at business.fsu.edu/submitjob. Once submitted, students will be able to view and apply based on the information that you provide. In addition, our office will promote your opportunity on our social media pages and in our weekly internship e-newsletter.

What should my virtual experience entail?

- 1. Access.** It is important that you, the supervisor, ensure the student has the technical capability to complete projects, maintain frequent contact with you to address questions, and to submit assignments. Lack of access should not be a barrier for any student.
- 2. Thorough onboarding and orientation.** For the intern to become oriented and established in their virtual work environment, supervisors should plan for the intern's first day on the job to be focused on orientation and training. A virtual orientation can consist of testing the technology, meeting other interns/staff members (as appropriate), learning about the organization, reviewing organization-wide communication standards and workplace expectations (including taking required legal breaks, lunches, and a system of tracking hours). Also review the learning goals with the student. Work with your intern to develop a plan to ensure that the established goals are met and check in regularly throughout the internship to see if the intern is on track to meet those goals.

What should my virtual experience entail?

3. Timely Feedback. Like online learning environments, supervisors should review intern deliverables and provide timely feedback to students on a regular basis. Supervisors can schedule feedback meetings for a minimum of thirty minutes each week to engage in direct mentorship with the student regarding their progress towards learning outcomes and areas of professional development. Pre-planned training topics should also be discussed during these sessions. Meeting platforms can vary and might include video conferencing or telephone. Email and messaging platforms are not recommended for these sessions.

4. Consistent Communication. Summative feedback should also be provided. This includes an update on expected work activities for the week, outcomes from prior work submissions, and other relevant announcements pertaining to the organization. A good practice is to schedule a regular email report around or on the same day each week. Student interns benefit from tasks being contextualized. Rather than just assigning “to do” deliverables, communicate why the work is important. What is it contributing towards or connected to? How will this task contribute to the greater good of the project/department/organization?

5. Pre-arranged Schedules. Although a key feature of remote internships is the flexibility of the work schedule, supervisors and interns should agree upon a definitive time allotment per week and per day for internship activities. Shift caps – defining the amount of accrued time allotted for any given task - are strongly recommended to avoid unreasonable work demands on the student and any conflict with reported internship hours. If a defined work schedule and/or shift cap is not established, disputes may result as to how long tasks took the student to perform.

6. Organizational Involvement. In addition to facilitating a remote or virtual internship, supervisors should make a good faith effort to integrate the intern into the organization’s work culture. After initial onboarding orientation, this may include attendance at select virtual team or client meetings, use of company tools and resources, participation in online trainings, and any other forms of access to other staff members.

7. Reimbursement of Expenses. Students engaged in virtual internships should not incur any personal expenses as a result of the internships “virtual” status. Any such costs, including the purchase of software and hardware for the purposes of the internship, should be covered by the internship host, or alternative arrangements provided to the student prior to starting the internship.

8. Written Contract or Agreement. Your organization may want to consider developing some sort of contract or written agreement about the arrangement between the student and the company. Such an agreement can address issues such as expectations, compensation, nature of supervision, and so on.

9. Final Evaluation. At the conclusion of the experience, all parties should evaluate one another and provide feedback on challenges and successes with the online internship. This feedback can be used to improve program operations and assist interns in their continued professional development.

Best practices for employers considering delivering a virtual internship program

Virtual internships, when properly delivered can be a rewarding experience for both the student and the employer. For companies and organizations that are considering hosting virtual internships for the summer of 2020, here are some additional considerations:

- Allocate enough time before the start of the virtual internship to:
 - Select and test the right software for managing work
 - Provide staff training to use the new software/systems (if students are expected to use new software or information technology, it should be provided free-of-charge)
 - Develop a work plan for the intern, training materials, activities and tools the intern will need to be successful in the role
 - Clearly define expectations for both the intern and the supervisor/mentor. These need to be agreed upon before the start of the internship. Goals and expectations should be reinforced on a regular basis
- It is essential that all tasks and projects are carefully prepared and planned for the virtual intern to manage the work effectively by themselves. The creation of a written workplan that covers the entirety of the experience is suggested
- Because the intern will not have the opportunity for the everyday interactions of the workplace, the materials, instructions and task descriptions need to be well prepared and available online so that they have access to that information when it is needed
- For the supervisor, it is suggested that you engage the rest of your team in the delivery of the virtual internship experience. By doing this the intern will have the opportunity to interact with several individuals throughout the course of the experience. Team members need to be committed and available to engage with virtual interns daily and sometimes multiple times a day
- Create and deliver a well-balanced experience for your intern that includes the opportunity for the intern to:
 - Learn about your organization
 - Focus on professional development
 - Engage in meaningful projects and work that will help to develop their overall ability to become a valuable team member in the future

Resources for delivering a virtual internship experience:

- Face-to-Face Communication – [GoToMeeting](#), [Zoom](#), FaceTime, [WebEx](#), [Zoho Meetings](#), etc.
- Other communication tools – [Slack](#), Email, Instant Messenger, etc.
- Free Project Management Tools – [Asana](#), [OpenProject](#), [nTask](#), [Monday](#), etc.
- Online file sharing – [DropBox](#), [Box](#), [GoFile](#), etc

For additional assistance, feel free to contact the FSU College of Business Internships & Career Services Office at internships@business.fsu.edu or 850-644-8495.