

Virtual Working Group: Internships Upended due to COVID-19

May 2020

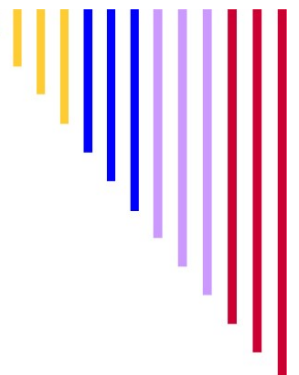
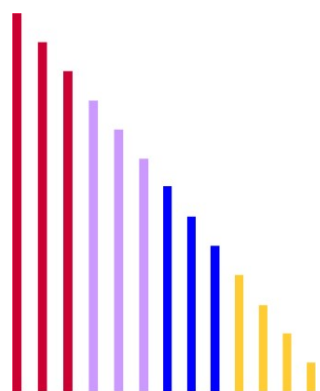
Key Takeaways

1. Most companies are taking the long view and have honored their internship offers, although the vast majority will be working virtually this Summer.
2. The role of the intern manager, while always important, is even more critical this year and companies are taking extra steps to upskill them.
3. The biggest concern for companies is how to showcase their company cultures to interns working remotely. The good news is that there are many creative ways to do this using technology.
4. A lot of work has been put into redesigning the intern programs, but more thought needs to be given to how to measure performance this summer and recruit in the Fall.

Last Fall, it was business as usual when companies planned for Summer 2020 interns. Since then, the impact of Coronavirus has changed the way companies need to approach this. To help Partner Companies think through these challenges and to learn from one another, Beth Flynn-Ferry, Executive Director of CAHRS, hosted two virtual working groups with 20 participants from 19 different CAHRS companies. Below is a summary of the key themes and best practices from the working groups.

Participating Companies

American Express
Bloomberg
Cargill
Cigna
Daiichi Sankyo
Dell
Ecolab
General Electric
General Mills
HP Inc.
IBM
Johnson & Johnson
Medtronic
Merck
Microsoft
R1 RCM
SC Johnson
Shell
Terex



The Impact of COVID-19 on Companies' Summer 2020 Intern Programs

The CAHRS companies who participated in this series of working groups have almost all gone 100% virtual for their interns. The exceptions are for those in essential positions, like engineering internships at a plant. About half of the companies have shortened the length of their internships – usually from 12 - to 8- or 10 weeks. For those companies that changed the length, most honored the original financial commitment either by increasing weekly pay, offering a relocation lump sum even when an intern did not relocate, or providing a stipend to support technology needed to work remotely for the summer. Several companies are only paying interns for the time worked, due to company financial concerns. Those interning in leadership development programs were most likely to maintain the longer, eight- to 10- week experiences. For other interns, companies implemented micro-internships of two to four weeks. CAHRS companies who offered a more decentralized intern experience faced the most difficulty in convincing managers to maintain offers to interns and in those cases, about 50% canceled their programs. The good news here is that the vast majority of CAHRS employers are taking the long view on honoring their commitments and understand that while it may be difficult to offer a traditional internship this year, it's in their best interests for future talent needs, to continue their programs.

Building a Rich and Engaging Intern Experience in a Virtual Environment

Companies have revamped both what an intern assignment entails as well as how to deliver all the surrounding events and meetings that are part of introducing the interns to other employees and your company culture. Many of the roles are more project based than they were in the past and some include group/cohort projects. Several companies have maintained or added rotational roles – exposing interns to a variety of businesses or functions. Beyond the actual work assignment, companies are moving many of the regular intern events that build relationships and highlight culture to virtual delivery. Using technology to deliver these programs has had a positive side effect: a larger number of interns can attend more of these events and meetings as they are not capacity, travel or cost constrained. This breaks down internal silos and allows interns to see executives from across the organization as well as get exposure to additional businesses and functions – aligning well with this generation's preference for broader learning. One company is even live streaming from their research center to allow interns to get a feel for the environment remotely.

Intern Managers - More Critical Than Ever

The intern manager always plays an important role during the summer, but this year will be even more critical – they will be the main conduit to the intern for not only their work, but also connections to other interns and employees and ensuring they understand and can navigate company culture. Managers view interns as either a burden or useful added resource. For the former, anything HR and talent teams can do to make managing an internship easier this summer is very welcome. While most companies have offered some kind of intern manager training in the past, this year it is a crucial tool and should allocate time to managing the virtual aspects of the internship.

One new approach to managing interns mentioned by two companies is restructuring the manager role to have them supervise four to eight interns versus the more common 1:1 relationship. This will increase the importance to that manager of ensuring a good experience and enable the interns to build peer relationships through group projects, meetings, fun events, etc.



Some companies are being very prescriptive with tools, events, etc., to ensure a good experience. Several companies mentioned developing specific curriculum and content for interns for their managers to leverage during the summer. Examples of content include inspirational podcasts or videos (some light, some formal), introductions to different processes, career information sessions, learning and development sessions, how to network virtually, daily polls, remote simulations, allowing full access to learning management systems (LMS), etc.

Other tips for managers:

- Encourage managers to be as active as possible with interns from onboarding through decision.
- Remind managers not to wait for interns to reach out to them as they may hesitate to do so and know very other few people for support.
- Set up weekly intern office hours or 1:1 calls.
- Be prescriptive on how to use self-service and when/who to go to for help.
- Connect the intern with the university recruiting team and HR for support.
- Arrange for a “buddy” or personal contact, preferably a full-time employee, for a once a week touchpoint for the intern – for questions about culture, tech tools, etc.
- Set up Slack channels for interns to make important group connections.
- Connect interns with Employee Resource Groups (Early Career, Diversity, etc.).

Showcasing Your Culture

Showcasing company culture in a virtual work environment is the biggest concern for companies as they welcome summer interns. Although most interns will not be able to walk the halls of their workplaces, culture can still be felt in the way managers interact with their interns, the exposure the interns get to the overall organization, the nature of the work and events, and the relationships they build. In the past, many companies have held centralized interns events and these transfer well to virtual. In prior years, perhaps only a few were for cross-enterprise interns, with businesses/functions offering things specific to their areas or work. There is an advantage to moving these events virtually – no travel or capacity limits. These could include weekly events like a Speaker Series or Lunch-and-Learns. Several companies are building events around their values. For example, companies can leverage their foundations for virtual philanthropic events to emphasize volunteerism. Another is designing an engagement event with their Employee Resource Groups – and having intern breakouts with ones they are interested in. Another company is building a daily event schedule but being clear about what is mandatory and what is optional, as people may desire different levels of contact. One consideration for global companies with interns in a variety of time zones is to establish some core hours during which they would hold these events to make them work for most. This also creates some consistency for interns but allows flexibility for managers.



The "normal" fun events for Summer interns will still happen, albeit differently. Companies shared that they are planning to make it the best Summer they can are through virtual events such as:

- Book Clubs – send all interns the same book and discuss in virtual meetings
- Remote Bingo
- Trivia Night
- Zoom Happy Hours
- Online Talent Show
- Virtual 5k
- Painting over Zoom
- Virtual Scavenger Hunt
- Weekly Yoga
- Cooking Class
- Puzzle Days
- Communal dining by ordering same food through Grub Hub

Measuring Performance and Making Offers

At this time, most of the companies have not made definitive plans on how to measure performance and make offer decisions this Summer. Some companies are maintaining their traditional practices such as calibrating intern performance, designing group or cohort projects, holding formal check-ins and evaluations over the Summer, etc. However, many are paring back performance expectations given the situation. One reminder is that the interns you hired likely went through an extensive screening process with multiple people to obtain their positions. Companies may need to place more weight on those interactions in addition to the intern's performance when making the offer decision. About half the companies we spoke with were holding out hope that they would be able to give their interns an in-person experience before Summer's end, by holding an event for at the firm's headquarters. None would require it if an intern was uncomfortable traveling or had other concerns. The other half had already decided they will not be bringing interns into the workplace at all.

Fall Recruiting Questions

At this date, it is not clear what the options for recruiting will be this Fall. Most universities have not announced their plans, travel is still restricted publicly and many employees are working remotely.



Recruiting teams are not sure if national conferences will be held or if students will feel safe attending them. If they are held virtually, companies are concerned that this approach may not be worth the cost to participate. Universities may be open, but companies facing financial stress may deprioritize travel. It is not too late to start contingency planning for the Fall.

Leveraging Learnings from the 2020 Summer Interns

Interns are starting in unique circumstances. We do not know, however, how long the current workplace restrictions will last or what practices companies will want to retain in the future. There is an opportunity to leverage the interns as a “test group” for some of your newer practices. How successful is virtual onboarding? How does your company culture translate to hires who have not physically worked at your locations? Which technologies work best in different work situations? You may want to decide what those areas could be for your company and survey interns at the start of their summer and again at the end of their experience to see how successful the company efforts are. Some areas to measure are engagement levels, intern conversion to full-time, etc. Collaborate with your analytics teams to build your learnings for the future.





This Summary Report was prepared by Beth Flynn-Ferry for participants of the Internships Upended due to COVID -19 Working Group.

The Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) is an international center serving corporate human resources leaders and their companies by providing critical tools for building and leading high performing HR organizations. CAHRS' mission is to bring together Partners and the ILR School's world-renowned HR Studies faculty to investigate, translate and apply the latest HR research into practice excellence.