



GUIDE TO ONLINE INTERNSHIPS FOR INTERNSHIP HOSTS

Introduction

In the last few months, the working world has changed to become more reliant on technology; nowhere has this shift been more dramatic than in Washington, DC—a place that relies on personal contacts and interaction to get things done. As the government, organizations, and businesses have all had to adjust, normal operations have changed dramatically, and that includes a distinctive and often indispensable component of DC working life: the internship. We are here to help you determine and then create online internships that are valuable to you, the intern, and your organization.

Why You Should *Still* Have Interns—but Online

- Projects *still* need to be completed
- Students *still* want to learn professional skills from you
- Interns *still* can be productive and easily managed and mentored
- Your organization *still* needs to build a talent pipeline
- Your organization *still* needs to spread the message about its work
- Online internships will likely *still* be around in the future

How to Mentor Interns Online Successfully and Efficiently

Set the same kinds of goals

- The purpose of an internship, whether in person or online, is to build skills, knowledge, and confidence, while providing mentorship and networking opportunities. In the end, students want to come away with tangible products and experience to be applied to their resumes and professional growth and feel like they made major contributions to a team.
- Give interns a sense of what success looks like as well as ways to track progress, so everyone is on the same page.
- **Our students set learning goals for the internship with you from the very start, so everyone is on the same page.**

Use an online internship to innovate and explore

- Most of us had our world flipped upside down trying to take our work and productivity online. However, as many of us found out, there are a lot of tools to help in that transition. Online platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Slack, Go to Meeting, Zoom, FaceTime, etc. allow us to stay connected with colleagues, clients, and especially new interns—and communicate differently.
- This adjustment to new ways of working together can inspire creativity and provide the opportunity to introduce online tools and media to your regular work sphere. **In fact, driven and innovative students versed in the digital world are likely to encourage new ways to approach remote work and teach new digital skills and strategy.**

Emphasize projects and tasks

- To move an internship online, reach out to staff and colleagues and identify projects and tasks that are most accessible for remote work and outline a catalog of projects to distribute to interns based on their strengths and interests.
- Tasks and responsibilities that follow strict stages and result in final products are most suitable to remote work.
- Tangible, structured projects help promote clear goals and expectations in completing the work.
- Adapting projects that are part of a larger initiative are also likely to make the intern feel engaged and see exactly how they are contributing to the team's efforts *and* engage the rest of your team in the intern's success.

Onboard interns thoughtfully and completely

Without the initial meet and greet in person, onboarding interns might require some initial extra organization and planning.

- Compile and share organizational information and resources in advance, so interns can learn about the mission, focus, and projects they will become a part of.
- Supervisors or mentors can even record a welcome video with bios and an outline of the goals and expectations to get students excited.
- Provide access to technological solutions as early as possible along with training materials: while this generation of interns is tech-savvy, do not assume they know everything.
- Creating a handbook or guidelines in advance describing rules and norms for communication can be valuable in the long run. This handbook might outline preferred communication methods (email versus texting, online chat platform, scheduled calls, etc.), as well as regular hours.
- Establish expectations for when interns should “clock in/clock out” and provide a detailed schedule with timelines and deadlines for project-based work to reduce confusion and establish consistency for an intern working at home alone.

Create structure

- Create a project calendar or schedule with deadlines and regular check-ins to manage interns' responsibilities.
- Instituting “living” documents or spreadsheets to track progress and introduce new tasks is a simple method for keeping up to date on intern and team progress. These documents can also act as a forum for questions and relevant resources, reducing the need for additional meetings/calls.

Communicate clearly and frequently

One of our students who completed an online internship noted that "constant communication via email, text, and Google docs was imperative," so it is clear communication in this new context is vital.

- Regular check-ins and inclusion in staff meetings will instill camaraderie and clarity. You want your interns to feel included as valued team members, which means providing opportunities to ask questions and learn about larger organizational directives.
- Video chat is the new normal for everyone to stay in touch and can be a useful tool to introduce colleagues and mentors, check in on project status, and overall just stay engaged. However, that doesn't mean you need to schedule 20 video calls a week. Studies show that 2-3 check-ins per week create a productive environment.
- Consider frequent check-ins at the beginning of the internship (even hourly) to build trust and camaraderie.
- Consider designating a second supervisor to provide the intern with another source of information and guidance.

Engage the intern with your team and your organization

Right now, interns cannot just pop into offices or run into people in the break room to ask questions and get to know you, your team, or your organization. One of our students who completed an online internship noted that online interactions with fellow interns and other colleagues were important: "having that extra support helps in developing a professional network and a personal support system." As much as feasible, it is important to engage interns as much as possible using some of these opportunities:

- **Staff and department meetings** allow the intern to engage with other colleagues and learn about organization projects, initiatives, and goals. Here, interns can see how their work and tasks fit into the larger picture of the organization.
- **Virtual lunches, coffee breaks, and happy hours** provide the chance to get to know staff and interns in a less formal context and on a more personal level. While these interactions might have developed more organically in an office setting, proposing casual online meetups takes pressure off of the interns as they learn to navigate the new networking world.
- **Optional or extra-departmental meetings** are opportunities for interns to learn more about the organization and its activities. When in the office, interns are likely to identify additional projects and departments they want to learn more about, yet that is not as simple from their home desks. Supervisors can encourage or recruit interns to attend non-mandatory meetings to take notes or just sit in on meetings that interest them. Participation would not only provide greater organizational interaction for the intern, but might also save the supervisor from yet another muted Zoom meeting.

Managing an online internship is not an exact science, but it is an excellent opportunity for mentors, managers, and interns to learn together

The massive transition to remote work created an unexpected learning curve. Since we're all going through the same thing, remember to be kind to yourself, your team, and the interns who are eager to learn and contribute. This is a unique opportunity to adapt and build your organization's capacity in terms of digital tools, internal/external communication strategies, and finding ways to innovate.

As you transition to online internships, we recommend that you take a moment to review guidance from the Department of Labor about the Fair Labor Standards Act and paid versus unpaid internships on its [website](#).