



## The Improvement of Internship Programs in Small and Medium–Sized Enterprises

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### **Abstract**

Internships have become an increasingly popular component of higher education in companies, which provide many potential benefits to students. An internship can help students connect their studies and the business world. Thus, enabling valuable connections and networking opportunities to improve employment and career prospects. However, there are challenges that students face in securing internships, such as finding internships that align with their career goals. Successful completion of internships is a predominant factor in future career success. The research has shown that internships have an impact on the professional skills, personal growth, and capabilities of business students. To create successful internships, recommendations have been presented and discussed, including expanding and strengthening placements to include more external stakeholders and locations, and elucidating internship descriptions to meet stakeholders' expectations, particularly among interns, for such an experience will help develop marketable skills. Overall, internships are an essential element of higher education, which can provide many potential benefits to students, colleges, and employers. This article aims to provide recommendations to improve internships at Small and Medium–sized Enterprises (SMEs). It draws on research that highlights the impact of internships on professional and personal growth, and explores challenges that students face in meeting their expectations with their internship experiences. The recommendations provided in this article aim to help SMEs create successful internships that benefit both students and employers.

**Keywords:** *Small and Medium–Sized Enterprises (SMEs); CEO, Technological Innovation; Industry Placements; Internship; Company; Professional Growth; Marketable Skills; Predominant Factor*

### **Introduction**

To begin with, SMEs have specific needs to succeed, particularly: a) knowledge in different functions and activities, b) lack of finance, and c) weaknesses in strategic management and planning; to name, the most salient. An internship, therefore, can be regarded as an optimal solution.

There is a common belief that internships are an effective tool in preparing university graduates for real work settings. Internships usually last from three to six months and provide practical experience

for students. This statement is substantiated by Calloway and Beckstead, who concluded that internships help:

- a) To practice theoretical knowledge in a business setting,
- b) To build social bonds and relationships to improve interpersonal skills, personality, and
- c) To their learning experience (Calloway, D., & Beckstead, S.M., 1995). Research has shown that when a mentor is assigned to an intern, the intern has a much greater understanding towards meeting their own interests and professional goals (Chen, C.T., Hu, J.L., Wang, C.C., & Chen, C.F., 2011).

Understandingly, not only interns benefit from the experience, but also the host organization. For example, internships normally help enterprises to improve their selection and recruitment, for hiring interns is less expensive, and more expeditious to assess the candidate's values and skills (Hurst, J.L., Good, L.K., 2010). In other words, an internship experience is a potential venue to full time or part time employment, if both parties are happy with the relationship.

Such scenario is a win-win situation, for the enterprise can accommodate the intern's educational commitment with paid full or part-time employment, or it formalizes the labor relationship with the to-be graduate.

Additionally, the fact that interns are exposed to the latest trends in their majors, they become the ideal medium to disseminate fresh information and ideas to the host company, which may lead to technological innovation, and managerial creativity (Narayanan, V.K., Old, P.M., Fukami, C., 2010).

To achieve a mutually beneficial outcome, it is of paramount importance to get feedback from the interns. Such feedback will help enterprises to design an internship which will boost productivity and satisfaction of their interns, as well as to identify internship's areas of improvement. Therefore, as part of this article, the authors carried-out in-depth interviews among four undergraduates who interned in local SMEs.

Interviewees studied at a private university specializing in entrepreneurship, and were pursuing the equivalent to junior year in the US, or UK level five. All interviewees completed at least a three-month internship.

This paper firstly analyzes the literature; including benefits to interns, to the enterprise, as well as the internship design. The second part analyses the internship experiences of the four undergraduate students which will serve as a base for recommendations on how to improve the internships.

### ***Literature Review***

The literature review defines internship as "work experience that is controlled or supervised". In other words, interns are not allowed to work independently and fall under the purview of a specific person (McMahon, U., & Quinn, U., 1995).

The internship is a useful experience for students and enterprises alike. For the former, it integrates both thinking and doing (Davies, 1990), while for the latter, is a way to screen out potential employees and a source of new ideas.

Specifically, research shows that an internship can be a beneficial recruitment tool specially for small and medium companies, which view the internship to recruit human power for the long haul at relatively low cost. Moreover, interns are usually very ambitious, creative and action oriented. This means that interns bring innovation and novelty to the company, despite the fact that their risks might be not always minimized. Students bring analytical and creative thinking whereas some may see internship as another formal assignment (Degraev, 2011).

In one research, interns reported that they had a better understanding of their study materials while doing the internship (Martin, D.R., & Wilkerson, J.E., 2006). Another five-year-longitudinal study of business students revealed that when a company communicated tasks and expectations in detail, and provided interns with challenging tasks, the internship program was productive and beneficial for both parties (Rothman, 2007). The same research concluded that for interns, an internship is similar to trying the job before officially choosing that company to work for a long period of time.

Paulins states that variety in tasks, feedback as well as autonomy provided to interns made workers more satisfied with work. While money was not the most important factor, communication with colleagues played a positive role (Paulins, 2008). Similarly, characteristics and conditions of the work improved happiness from work among interns. Apart from feedback, feeling of contributing to business growth was a satisfaction factor as well (D'Abate, C. P., Youndt, M.A., & Wenzel, K. E., 2009).

A survey from Taiwan that studied 543 leisure management students found out a very low dissatisfaction level from their internships. The respondents identified their internship positively, and felt that their contributions were appreciated, which made their experience more satisfactory (Chen, C.T., Hu, J.L., Wang, C.C., & Chen, C.F., 2011). In terms of accountancy students, 150 interns replied that their internship expectations were not met. An interesting research trend showed that a 10 to 12-month internship might not have been enough. Nevertheless, the internship still helped interns to have a better understanding of their field, and to have a wider spectrum of career choices upon graduation (Muhamad, R., Yahya, Y., Shahimi, S., & Mahzan, N., 2009).

Overall, research suggests that there are a number of benefits internships have both for host organization and interns. On one hand, companies benefit financially, from both recruitment and business development. On the other hand, interns gain work experience, practice their skills, have a sense of belonging to a professional community, and have a greater understanding to plan their future careers.

As part of this research paper, the authors in-depth interviewed four interns, from a local, private university.

### ***Material and Methods***

Collected primary data via in-depth interviews with four students studying entrepreneurship at Uzbekistan's TEAM University in Tashkent. Three interviewees had a one-year internship while the fourth interviewee had a three-month internship in Tashkent city. The internships' length lasted from January 2021 – January 2023 and happened at SMEs.

All interviews took place on campus in accordance to research ethics. Interns were notified about the confidentiality of their personal information and of their host organizations. The interviewees consented to have their interviews recorded. The interviews lasted around 30–45 minutes each in May 2023. The names of the participants are changed to participant A, B, C and D respectively. Table 1 shows the interns' industry placements.

Table 1. Interns' industry placements

<b>The pseudonym of participants</b>	<b>Industry</b>
<b>Intern A</b>	Consultancy
<b>Intern B</b>	Education
<b>Intern C</b>	IT
<b>Intern D</b>	Education

## ***Results and Discussion***

Intern A. Intern A had a one-year paid internship in a consultancy where he did market research and assisted the CEO, who also acted as his mentor. He chose it specifically, because he met the CEO at his university when she was a guest lecturer, and was impressed by her entrepreneurial background. The intern had mixed feelings as the CEO was too busy with her schedule, and the company lacked experience in managing interns. However, the company acted very formally, which gave the intern a feeling of trust. The company perceived the intern as a source of new thinking, and potentially, save the enterprise time and money by having a future employee ready to contribute from day one. The intern felt that the internship might have been more beneficial with a fixed schedule, set objectives, and a mentor.

Intern B. Intern B did a paid, six-month internship in the field of education which was offered by the owner of the university he attended. He became interested, because it included assisting the Director. His initial internship helped him a lot in subsequent internships. During this time, he built rapport with everyone, developed a mentorship, and improved his soft skills. Based upon the positive experience by both parties, the university offered him a position at the conclusion of the internship, which he accepted and worked there for another six months. He left the company for personal reasons and work overload. The university had a preference for hiring interns, for it could easily recruit them. Moreover, it saved money by allocating executive responsibilities, normally assigned to full time professionals, to interns. This action had an added benefit by which the trainee immediately felt valued. Key takes: Mentors play a significant role in guiding interns. Companies should offer internships with identified objectives. Paid internships can attract better talent. Internships offer valuable work experience, fulfill college requirements, and help form personal career goals.

Intern C. Intern C did a 14-month paid IT internship at his university and got a pay raise. For him location was the most important factor to minimize commuting. He had no expectations about the internship. His tasks included, among others, to get price quotations and authorize them without any training. The internship lacked any technical training. He wished there could have been a mentor and some IT courses to enhance his knowledge in the subject. However, he felt that he developed his communication and observational skills. This experience will help him to launch his own IT company. He liked the fact that it was easy to approach everyone and got some feedback from colleagues, but not from HR, or the CEO. He felt additional feedback was needed. He stated that he would recommend the internship for its flexibility.

Intern D. Intern D did a four-month, flexible, unpaid marketing internship at his lecturer's small learning center. Expectations were not met due to the limited resources, particularly cash. Owner mentored him and had good communication with staff and students. His highlight was to do a social media plan. He felt the experience should help him in his career goals. He appreciated timely constructive feedback. However, he felt the company should have provided training to motivate staff and held parties to develop a network, as well as to have participated in intercompany football tournaments, along with trips to relax for all staff. He answered "yes" in recommending the internship, because in his own word, "in a small company you can make mistakes, which are manageable due to the open communication versus a large company where communication may be slow".

## ***Conclusion and Recommendations***

Provide specific instructions and responsibility. Intern A did not get a fixed schedule, nor specific objectives. When interns are not given specific tasks and responsibilities, they feel undervalued and lost. Their confidence decreases by doing simple and boring tasks. When asked to share their opinions, they felt engaged, because they bring innovation and novelty, which aligns with the findings of (Degraev, 2011). Interns want to be treated like other employees not just interns; interns need training/mentorship. Most interns seek learning opportunities as a main objective of doing an internship. All interviewees

agreed that there was no training at their placements. Interns have theoretical background, but practical learning, and development of job-related skills enhances the experience. Doing menial tasks, reported by an interviewee, dampens enthusiasm and commitment. Mentorship and training boost morale among interns, for they feel appreciated and perceive they learn and contribute simultaneously to the enterprise. Additionally, rotating interns through the various company departments would also enrich the experience for both parties in terms of development; money is not always the solution. While money was an important factor when choosing an internship, interns believed it was not a determinant factor to continue there. For example, interns A and B were paid relatively well during their placements. It was, however, lack of opportunities for personal development, which led them to go elsewhere.

### ***Limitations***

Interviewed only male students from a private university in Tashkent, capital city of Uzbekistan. Such demographics and socio-economic status do create a bias in the kind of experience reported.

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