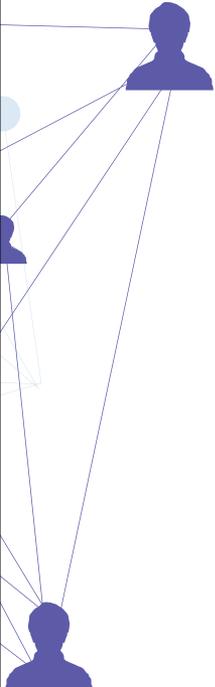


# CREATING MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL EXPERIENCES – THE 3PS TO EFFECTIVE INTERNSHIPS

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Let's face it; not all internships turn out the way the intern or the intern supervisor may have hoped. It seems that the two most important stakeholders in an internship, the intern and the intern supervisor, often enter the relationship with differing goals, occasionally leading to a less than beneficial experience on the part of both stakeholders. But wait; it doesn't have to be that way! As a college professor who has facilitated business internships for over 20 years, I wanted to find ways to help stakeholders create mutually beneficial internship experiences. To guide me in this process, I conducted a 3-year internship satisfaction study that has led me to offering the 3Ps of effective internships. >>



This article will share the results of this study and provide recommendations for internship best practices as companies develop, enhance, and implement mutually beneficial intern experiences for both the intern and the organization.

## METHODOLOGY

The three year Internship Satisfaction Study took place from 2012-2015 and involved 300 supervisors and their business interns from a private, liberal arts university ranked among the 2017 top 15 Regional West Best Colleges according to U.S. News & World Report Rankings. The main focus of the study was twofold (1) to better understand what determined internship satisfaction from the student perspective and (2) to better understand what determined internship satisfaction from the employer perspective.

The subjects of this study included intern supervisors primarily from mid to small businesses in the south-central region of the U.S., and their junior or senior level university business intern(s), majoring in one of eight business areas: business administration, finance, international business, digital media management, marketing, management, accounting, or entrepreneurship. This study took place year round and included fall, spring, and summer internships.

While the interns and the supervisors took part in an on-line survey at mid point in the internship and at the end of the internship, interns also participated in a general survey that was given prior to the start of their internship. During the initial period interns were asked to rank their level of preparedness as it applied to the level of knowledge, skills, and attributes they possessed in order to be successful in the workplace.

At mid point in the internship and at the end of the internship, interns were asked about their satisfaction levels in the following areas:

- Opportunities to develop soft skills, for example, oral and written communication skills, team skills, problem solving skills, decision making skills, critical and creative thinking skills, conflict resolution skills and professional etiquette skills
- Opportunities to gain knowledge in their field of interest
- Opportunities to be engaged in what they considered meaningful work as it related to their field of study
- Opportunities to develop network systems
- Opportunities to apply classroom learning
- Training, supervision, mentorship, and feedback provided during the internship.

At mid point in the internship and at the end of the internship, supervisors were asked about their satisfaction levels in five major areas. They were asked about their levels of satisfaction in:

- The intern's preparedness for the internship (e.g. business knowledge, skills, and attributes)
- The intern's ability to receive feedback and make the necessary corrections
- The quality of the intern's overall performance
- The contribution the intern made to the organization, and
- The value of the intern program

## RESULTS

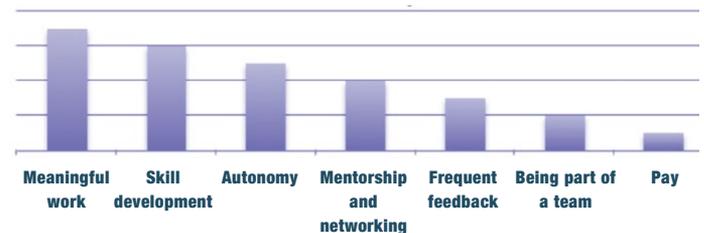
Supporting previous research (D'Abate, Youndt, & Wenzel, 2008; Narayanan, Okl, & Fukami, 2010), the results of the 2012-2015 Internship Satisfaction study indicate that there is a correlation between internship effectiveness and internship satisfaction. The results of the Internship Satisfaction study not only answered the question, "What determines internship satisfaction," but more importantly perhaps, it revealed the answers to "What makes internships effective?" In reviewing the results of previous studies (D'Abate, Youndt, & Wenzel, 2008; Narayanan, Okl, & Fukami, 2010) and of the 2012-2015 Internship Satisfaction study, it

became evident that two significant stakeholders are involved in determining internship satisfaction, and subsequently, internship effectiveness: the intern and the intern employer. Each stakeholder enters the internship with specific goals, and the extent to which these goals are aligned influences overall internship satisfaction and effectiveness.

## The Intern

The 2012-2015 Internship Satisfaction study revealed the following seven factors that determined internship effectiveness from the intern perspective.

Factors determining positive internship outcomes as rank ordered by interns



Meaningful and challenging work was overwhelmingly the most important factor in determining internship satisfaction for interns. Work that is meaningful to interns was defined as having significance to the organization, a variety of challenging tasks that comfortably stretches interns outside their comfort zone, has a clearly defined scope and expectations, and is relevant to their academic learning experiences.

The second most important factor, skill development, is of particular interest in light of the interns' self-reported skill preparedness levels at the onset of the internship. Prior to commencing their internships 80% of the students reported they felt they possessed the necessary skills to do well in their internship. In addition, 70% of the respondents reported that they felt confident in their ability to communicate effectively with supervisors, co-workers, and customers. However, at mid point in the internship, 66% of the interns said they were NOT as prepared as they felt at the onset of the internship and DID NOT possess the skills they needed to be successful in the workplace. Specifically, they pointed to deficiencies in soft skills like written and oral communication, professional workplace etiquette, problem solving and critical thinking skills, and team skills. This concept was summed up well when one student said, "I did not know what I did not know until I entered the workplace."

These results echo similar findings (Harris-Chegg Foundation, 2013; Zimmer, 2014; Valenter, 2015; Hart Research Association, 2015) that indicate students tend to feel more confident in their abilities prior to engaging in the workplace. Once recognizing this limitation, it is understandable that the opportunity

to develop such critical skills is highly valued in an internship.

Autonomy, the third factor determining a positive outcome for interns, did not necessarily mean working independently. Instead, autonomy was described as having a project or task of significance for which the intern had complete responsibility and a defined deliverable.

The fourth factor impacting a positive intern outcome was the degree to which interns were mentored and had the opportunity for professional networking. Given the fact that the Millennial generation has been coached their entire lives (Howe & Strauss, 2007), it was not surprising to see this factor ranked so highly among this stakeholder group. Interns commented on how grateful they were for opportunities to shadow professionals in various positions within a company and for a mentor with whom they could confide in, ask questions of, and count on for guidance. Without guidance, Millennials report that work doesn't seem fulfilling, purposeful, or on track in helping them reach their career objectives (Wells, 2015).

The fifth and sixth factors are also indicative of what research tells us about this generation of interns. Similar to the findings of Millennial generation researchers Howe & Strauss, (2007) and Jones (2012),

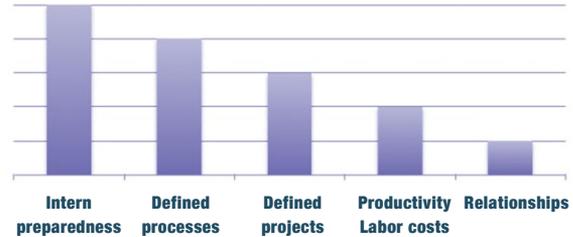
the results of this study indicate the importance of supportive feedback to assist interns on their learning path as well as their preference to work on teams in a collaborative structure that promotes creativity. A common theme among the respondents was well summarized when one student said, “I appreciate being asked for my input, and the opportunity to offer ideas that may impact a project or even a management decision.”

While the number of working students has grown as college enrollment and tuition has increased (Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010), the need to repay college loan debt is a looming nightmare for many students. Despite facing an average loan debt of \$37,000 (Elvery, 2016; Josuweit, 2016) students rank internship pay, the final factor, as important, but not as important as the other factors previously discussed. Intern respondents who were paid noted they could be more flexible with intern hours than non-paid interns who often were limited in the number of hours they could devote to the internship.

### **The Intern Employer (Supervisor)**

Factors determining internship satisfaction from the employer’s perspective centered around intern preparedness, increased productivity and reduced labor costs, as well as clearly defined intern processes and projects.

**Factors determining positive internship outcomes ranked by intern employers**



First and foremost, employers wanted interns who were not only academically prepared for the internship, but who were also job ready and possessed the soft skills needed to be effective in the workplace. It is interesting to note that of the supervisors surveyed, those who were most satisfied with the overall performance of their intern also ranked their intern as strongly to very strongly “job ready.” Additional factors determining positive outcomes for employers included:

1. Having clearly defined hiring, training, supervising, evaluating, and mentoring processes in place, and
2. Having clearly defined intern projects outlined prior to selecting an intern.

Having these clearly defined processes and projects in place allowed the company to effectively articulate expectations in a well-written intern job description. Those internships that provided clearly articulated internship opportunities and expectations were more likely to ensure a good match

for both the intern and the company. A good match also seemed to relieve supervisors and other company personnel of less demanding duties and responsibilities that could readily be taken on by capable interns. This resulted in increased productivity at lower labor costs.

The final factor determining a positive outcome for the employer was the ability to establish and maintain a relationship with university's internship program directors and facilitators. Not only does this relationship ensure a steady flow of well prepared interns, but it also provides a partner who can help turn a challenging situation into a learning opportunity for both parties. Such partnerships may yield an overall improvement in the intern program.

### **THE 3P'S TO EFFECTIVE INTERNSHIPS**

The results of this and previous studies lead to offering an internship program model based on best practices centered on program development, promotion, and pay.

#### **Program Development**

The Internship Satisfaction study revealed that clearly defined processes and projects are key components in setting up the structure of an effective internship. While this begins with the employer, university career center staff or faculty intern facilitators can aid in

this process. Universities can provide employer-training resources at the company site, through webinars, or through employer summits held on university campuses.

Program development includes having a structure in place that answers a variety of questions; however, the following specific questions stem from both intern and supervisor survey responses from the Internship Satisfaction study.

1. Why does the company want or need an intern? What is the objective of having an intern?
2. What will the intern's daily responsibilities be?
3. What short and long-term projects will the intern participate in or be responsible for?
4. How will company orientation and training be set up for the intern program? How will employees within the company learn about the intern program and the onboarding of interns each semester?
5. Who will supervise the intern? Does this person have the time, resources, and personality to manage a college intern, provide mentorship, and offer frequent feedback?
6. How will the intern be evaluated?
7. Who will serve as the liaison between the organization and the university?

8. What exit strategy will be put in place should a need arise to abort the program?

Fully addressing these questions *before* writing the internship job description, announcing the opportunity on college campuses, and interviewing candidates, will ensure that a well-defined internship structure is in place and the right candidate will be chosen.

### Promotion

Meaningful and challenging work is overwhelming the biggest draw for potential interns. Interns who tend to make the most important contributions to companies choose what *they* consider to be the most quality internship programs. This concept may lead to the following question: “How will interns know which internship programs are top notch and ones students would consider quality opportunities?”

The answer lies with the intern posting, often found on university career center websites.

Internship job descriptions and postings shed light on what students can expect from the internship. When crafting intern job descriptions, consider that an intern’s primary objective is to be engaged in meaningful work that will provide learning opportunities and the forum to acquire specific skills necessary to be effective in today’s workplace.

A program without meaningful work is rendered meaningless to the intern.

The internship job description should be exciting, informative, and help future interns better understand what they will gain as a result of working with an organization, what skills they will hone or develop, how their work will impact company stakeholders, and what they will be working on. In a nutshell, internship job descriptions should sell the company, sell the internship, and highlight requirements.

Equally important to effectively promoting the internship to potential interns, is promoting internships inside the company. This will help ensure a smooth transition for not only the intern, but for employees who may benefit by the intern.

Managers, department leaders, and other employees should be informed about the presence of interns and the objectives of the intern program. Interns want to feel part of a team and having employees welcome them and include them in conversation and even projects will help ensure an effective internship for all stakeholders.

Being recognized by others in the organization helps interns feel more comfortable if assistance is needed. Ultimately, it lessens the intern’s learning curve, increasing productivity rapidly.

## Pay and Other Benefits

Companies need to give some thought to how they might attract qualified interns with some incentives. Interns have said, “it’s not about the pay; it’s about the meaningful work experience.”

More than may be imagined, extras like monthly intern lunches, free donuts or breakfast tacos, or designer coffee drinks in the company lounge, can be seen as appreciated perks. Bonuses such as these can boost morale by communicating to interns their value to the company.

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It is important to note that pay is not always in the form of a direct paycheck. There are ways a company can help students develop the critical soft skills that are important to success in today’s workplace. Interns want the opportunity to contribute their ideas orally and in writing. They want to help solve problems and hone their critical and creative thinking skills. Employers can invite interns to make presentations to management teams

or contribute through company newsletters, blogs, or periodic written reports. Millennials are craving, screaming, and downright begging for professional development opportunities at work!

## CONCLUSION

Whether paid or not, the bottom line is to make the internship mutually beneficial. While pay is important and appreciated, it is not the primary factor that determines internship satisfaction or internship effectiveness for the intern; it is the valuable work experience that matters the most. As students near graduation and seek full-time employment, they understand the importance of gaining experience and the skills critical to workplace success and in demand by so many employers. It is through clearly defined internship projects that provide opportunities to apply classroom theory, build soft skills, and navigate challenging, real-world business problems that determine meaningful internship experiences and give soon-to-be graduates an edge over their competition. Meaningful internships provide an insider’s view to a career path and opportunities to develop a professional network system as students move from the classroom to the boardroom.

Likewise, clearly defined internship projects and processes allow the organization to find the “just right”

intern and reap the benefits of a well-facilitated intern program. Employers commented on the opportunity to “test-drive” future employees, take advantage of short-term support that freed up employees to accomplish higher level tasks, and the company exposure gained in colleges and universities. Perhaps mentioned most were the fresh, innovative ideas, and knowledge in all the latest technology, apps, and specialized computer software that comes so easily to this generation.

While both stakeholders contribute to the creation of a mutually beneficial internship experience, it seems that the process starts with the company. Once an organization has determined its internship goals, it can move forward with a well-defined internship structure that will support interns as well as employees working with interns. These elements provide the foundation for clearly articulating meaningful intern projects, tasks, and expectations to potential interns. This information will allow potential interns to align with organizations that share their goals and provide a pathway to a destination that will be beneficial to both parties.

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