

THE CLIENT SIDE OF INTERNSHIPS: HOW VALUABLE ARE THEY?

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INTRODUCTION

Opportunities for students to gain experience and expertise through interactions outside the classroom offer a positive and exciting addition to classroom activity. Students typically welcome such opportunities and generally report high levels of satisfaction with the experiences. Outside classroom activities can include extra curricular activities such as membership in student clubs and professional societies, case study and research projects, and even part-time employment that is discipline related. An additional type of outside the classroom activity that has generated considerable interest is the internship.

WHAT IS AN INTERNSHIP?

The term internship has been loosely used to refer to many different types of activities. A common thread running through all is the placement of a student into a position with a company or organization for a finite period of time with the goal being, at a minimum, exposure for the student to some or all aspects of the organization. Beyond this commonality, internship programs vary considerably hence providing significant diversity in their scopes and the nature of the experience provided to the student participant.

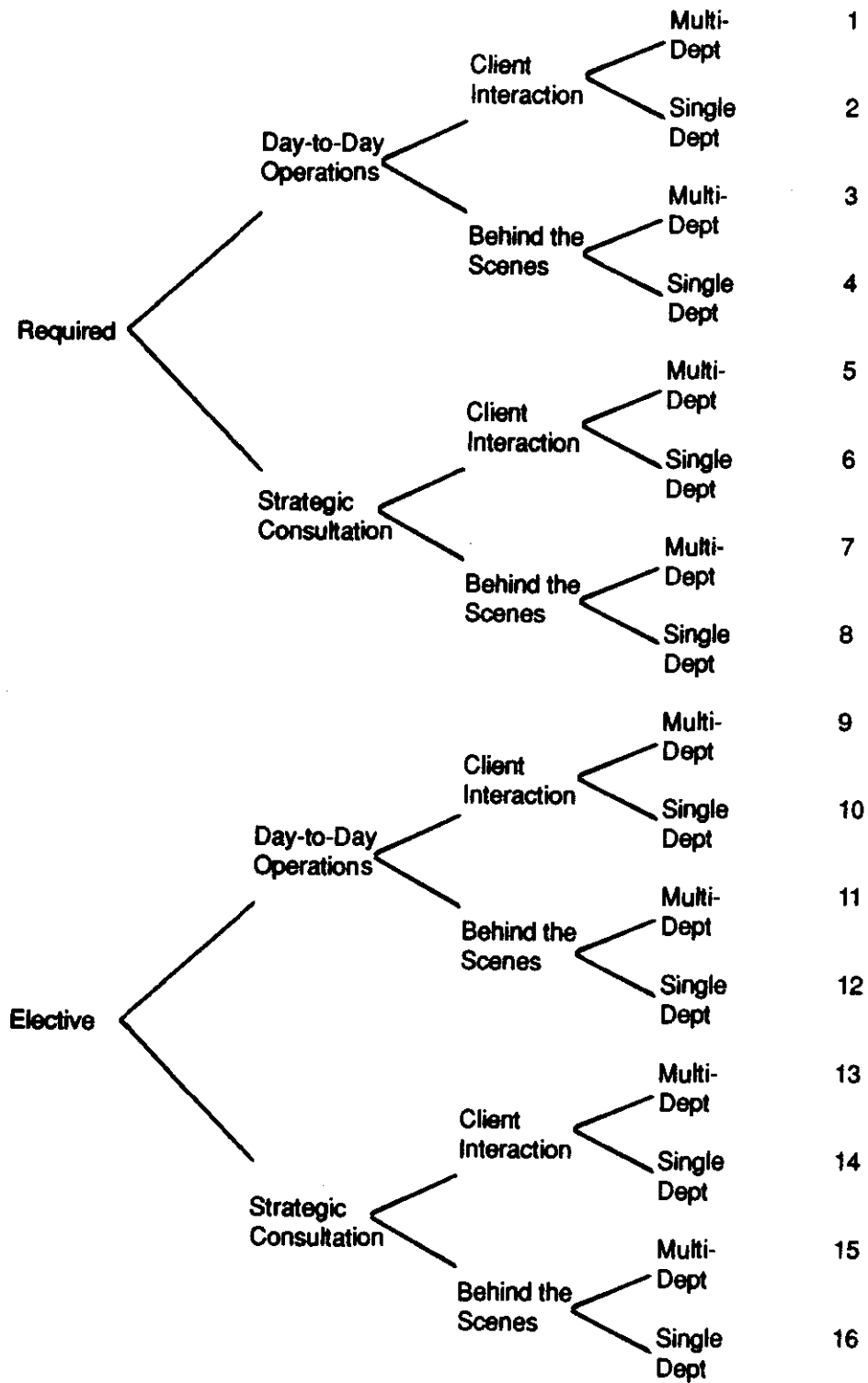
Internships can be sponsored by a participating organization or company or by an academic institution. They may or may not involve financial compensation to the student. They may or may not be undertaken for academic credit. Some academic institutions and disciplines require students to complete an internship as a part of their degree requirements. The nature of the internship itself also may vary significantly between programs. Some internships provide exposure primarily to day-to-day operational activities while others focus on more strategic level, consultation activities. Internships may involve direct interaction with the organization's customers or clients or may relegate the intern to more "behind the scenes" activities. An intern may make many departmental moves during their tenure hence receiving exposure to the entire organization or they may focus on a single department or area. Figure One identifies some of these numerous factors on which internship program diversity lies. It is not meant to be comprehensive with respect to the potential variation in internship types.

The number of internship types (sixteen) generated by considering only these four variables emphasizes the diversity of experiences possible under the general term internship. (See Figure 1.)

Internships in Marketing are likely to provide almost as much variation within this single discipline as is possible across all fields as suggested above. Many firms, for example, sponsor compensated summer internships in sales as a means of introducing students to career opportunities in this field (preferably with their company). Other Marketing interns might find themselves assisting in the Marketing Research department, gaining valuable experience in the processes of collecting, coding, and analyzing data. Because of the vast range of differences in such programs, it is difficult to generalize as to the value of an internship program to its participants. While student participants generally report favorable reactions to their experiences, they may not be in a position to accurately evaluate the impact on their learning and their career until many months or even years after the experience culminates. Tracking students for such a period is difficult at best.

Additionally, since there are two participants to an internship exchange, evaluators should give consideration to both students and organizations in assessing the value of the programs. Organizational participants may have a variety of motives for participating. As suggested previously, they may hope to attract new employees. Conversely, the organization may be seeking help in carrying out operational activities. Provision of expert (albeit fledgling) aid in areas where the organization is weak is another potential motive. It is possible that an organization may feel a sense of responsibility to provide opportunities for students, even if they believe their own opportunity to benefit from the experience is limited. Such variation in motivation makes assessment of organizational benefit nearly as challenging as tracking former student participants in order to measure benefit. Control measures are critical, however, despite the challenge in obtaining them, if the on-going value of internship programs is to be fairly assessed. This paper reports the results of an effort to assess the longitudinal value of an internship program to organizational participants.

FIGURE 1
Internship Diversity Variables



THE PROGRAM

The internship in question was an academically sponsored program that matched senior level, undergraduate Marketing students with local not-for-profit organizations. The student participants received academic credit in the form of a Marketing elective. Students did not receive financial compensation. From Figure One, the internship program would be viewed as a type sixteen. The program was initially funded through a seed grant provided by state lottery funds but evolved over a three year period into a self-sustaining program. Initial financial assistance provided for student assistance aid with administrative matters and release time for the faculty administrator. Student interest over the duration of the program subsequently provided sufficient FTE to maintain the internship. Student interns were matched, one-on-one, with not-for-profit organizations in a consultant/client type relationship. The objective, for the intern, was to produce a one year Marketing plan for their client organization. The plan typically focused on either client services or fundraising but not both. While many organizations required assistance in both areas, it was deemed beyond the scope of a one semester, undergraduate project to accomplish this. Organizations were asked to prioritize their needs in the two areas.

Organizational participants were schooled in the objective and focus of the program prior to a match being made. It was emphasized to the organizations that the interns would not be providing clerical or day-to-day administrative task aid. Furthermore, it was emphasized to participating organizations that interns would present them with a plan but would not be responsible for implementation. Implementation was the responsibility of the organization, following the intern's tenure. As much as was possible then, organizations were screened for similarity in their motives for participating. By agreeing to participate in the program, as it was designed, the organizations were acknowledging that they sought outside expertise in an area (Marketing) that they recognized as important but in which they did not have adequate internal expertise. Most participating organizations were small, inadequately staffed, and with limited budgets. It was emphasized to student interns repeatedly throughout the program that their Marketing plan must be realistic and implementable given the constraints faced by their organizational client.

ASSESSING SUCCESS

Student participants evaluated the program via an extensive instrument within two weeks of their plan presentation to their organization. Students generally found the program to be educational, worthwhile, interesting, and challenging. These assessments did not change significantly over the three student groups that participated in the program between 1989 and 1991.

The focus of this report, however, is on the assessed value of the program to the organizational participants. Organizational participants evaluated the program within two weeks after being presented (both verbally and in written form) with their Marketing plan. In two of the three years that the program was administered, follow-up evaluations were also done by organizational participants six months after they received their plan.

Table One reports the results of client assessments of the program immediately (i.e. within two weeks) following program participation.

TABLE 1
Organizational Assessment, Two Week After

	1989	1990	1991
Response Rate	79%	87%	83%
How clearly did you understand the role and purpose of your intern?	1.8*	1.3*	1.2*
How valuable was your intern, overall, to your organization	1.5**	1.8**	1.3**
The time spent with the intern was fair, considering the value.	88% Yes	77% Yes	100% Yes
All things considered, would you do it again?	00% Yes	84% Yes	100% Yes

*Scale was: 1=very clear; 2=somewhat clear; 3=somewhat unclear; 4=very unclear

**Scale was: 1=very valuable; 2=somewhat valuable; 3=slightly valuable; 4=not valuable at all

Table Two reports the results of the follow-up assessment that was completed six months after the program was completed. While sample sizes did not lend themselves to statistical comparisons of the groups, several interesting observations can be made.

TABLE TWO
Organizational Assessment, Six Months After

	1989	1990	1991
Response Rate	50%	No	60%
Has the plan, or any part of it, been implemented?	75% Yes	Data	50% Yes
Have the objectives of the plan been met through implementation?	65% Yes	For	100% Yes
Was the plan realistic?	95% Yes	1990	83% Yes
Was the plan useful?	75% Very or somewhat useful		100% Very or somewhat useful
Would you do it again	100% Yes		100% Yes

From Table One it can be seen that organizational participants clarity of understanding regarding the role and purpose of the program improved over the three years. This is no doubt attributable to the program administrator's ability to better explain the program to potential participants as experience with it was acquired. In general, organizational participants, immediately following the conclusion of the program, felt that their intern had been valuable and that the organization's time with the intern had been well spent. With only a single exception over the three years, the clients "would do it again".

Table Two considers the situation half a year later. Six months after receipt of their Marketing plans, an average of sixty-three percent of the organizations had implemented at least some of the plan with which they were presented. Considering the inadequate staffs and miniscule budgets of most of the organizations, this appears to be a considerable success! Of this sixty-three percent, eighty-three percent reported that the objectives of the plan were being achieved as a result of implementation. This figure speaks well to the quality of the plans developed by the student interns. The plans were generally viewed as realistic and useful by the clients. They still believed they "would do it again" if given the opportunity. These results would appear to support the thesis that clients,

as well as students, benefit in a tangible way from participation in internship programs.

It is interesting to note some differences between the 1989 group and the 1991 group. Although the two week after assessment of the value of the intern improved (albeit not with statistical significance) from 1989 to 1991, the percent of participants that had implemented any part of the program after six months declined. It may be that the slow economy has cut into organizational resources significantly enough over the past two years that the 1991 group is less able to expend the time or money needed to implement their plans. This result might, however, be altered in a one year follow-up to the 1991 group. An additional thirty-three percent of the 1991, six month respondents had plans to begin implementation in the following six months.

CONCLUSIONS

Did the internship program described here really represent a mutually beneficial exchange process? Based on the results of client assessments both immediately and six months following the program, the answer appears to be yes. In order to address this important issue for an internship program, an on-going control and feedback system must be in place. Follow-ups with clients should be done not only at the immediate conclusion of the relationship but also six months after the fact. Ideally, a one year follow-up should also be completed. Organizational participants would be in a better position, at this point, to assess what, if any, long term effects the intern's presence is likely to have on the organization.

Although time-consuming and labor-intensive to administrate, internships do appear to provide a valuable experience for not only student participants but for client participants as well. This result ultimately benefits the university by not only aiding in the advancement of their educational mission, but also through increased visibility and goodwill in the community.