A White Paper:
The Case For Virtual Internships

Intern Profits

Providing entrepreneurs and organizations the tools and resources to find, hire and manage interns to help grow and expand their business while creating educational opportunities for tomorrow's talent today.

About this White Paper

This new industry White Paper is the first official examination of the pros and cons of virtual internships for employers, interns and schools.

Whether you are a business owners, hiring manager, human resources professional, current or prospective intern, college or university career counselor or recruiting coordinators, you will gain important knowledge about virtual internships, how to prepare for a virtual internship, colleges and universities' roles in virtual internships, hiring virtual interns and virtual internships in general.

This White Paper will provide insight into virtual internships including:

- What is a virtual internship.

- Why virtual internships are important.

- The pros and cons of virtual internships.

- Which type of internships are most and least suited to be virtual.

- How to make a virtual internship effective for all parties.

- Tools and resources to effectively run and participate in a virtual internship program.

- The steps schools can provide students to better prepare them for virtual internships.

- How potential interns can best prepare for and take on a virtual internship.

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Peer Review Panel

Special thanks to our Peer Review Panel that provided feedback and consult as we crafted this White Paper.

∗   **Michael True,** Director, Internship Center, Messiah College

∗   **Internships.com**

∗   **Sarvesh Agrawal**, Founder, Internshala.com

∗   **Super Interns**

> *"Virtual internships are an innovative new approach to career development that benefit both employers and students trying to juggle school, an internship, and other obligations. This white paper offers, in detail, a look at the importance of virtual internships, and combined with other resources, presents a great background for employers looking to hire students to work virtually,"*
>
> -**Yair Riemer**, Vice President Global Marketing, Internships.com

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Introduction

As the debate over internships heightens, another important debate has been taking place on the sidelines about virtual internships and their usefulness and importance.

While academia worries their students may not receive "real world experience" if the students are not reporting to an office every day, employers worry they will not be able to manage interns effectively. Likewise, individuals fear that their virtual internship will not carry the weight of an onsite internship.

On the other hand, an increasing number of employers have telecommuting work environments and virtual, or rather, remote work arrangements with many of their employees, contractors and part-time help or assistants. And employers, from non-profits to governments, to the solopreneur all the way up to the Fortune 500 companies, have offices, employees and customers around the globe they may never see or meet face to face. For the intern, developing knowledge of self-management, learned through effective virtual internships, is paramount as society moves to a more "teleworking" environment in many white collar professional settings.

Therefore, the misconceptions about virtual internships must be resolved in order to utilize the benefits of effective virtual work arrangements which can be used to assist the expansion of a business and reward the intern with invaluable professional experience. In addition, virtual internships need to be better understood in that oftentimes work completed in a virtual internship is similar to the work done in traditional onsite internships.

The purpose of this White Paper is to explore the viability of the virtual internship as well as the pros and cons facing the intern, the employer and academia. Finally, the White Paper will also provide insight on how best to structure virtual internships and to prepare individuals to learn and grow during one.

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What is a Virtual Internship?

To understand what a virtual internship is one should first understand the definition of an internship. As noted, there has been an ongoing dialogue and debate over what defines an internship. For purposes of this White Paper internships shall be understood as the National Association of Colleges and Employers defined in their recent [Position Statement:](#)

> *"An internship is a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent."*[i]

For purposes of this White Paper, a "professional setting" shall be defined as the virtual environment in which the virtual intern works, including: email, Skype conversations and interviews, instant messaging, phone conversations, webinars, project management tools, sms (text) messaging, and all other manner of virtual communication.

A virtual internship is the opportunity for an intern to gain real world experience by integrating the knowledge learned in the classroom with on the job training and experience, while working in a remote professional setting.

Virtual internships can be offered by for profit businesses, non-profits and government agencies a like. Not only can students take on virtual internships but they can also be a resource for unemployed professionals of any age to further their skills, keep their resume from having large gaps of unemployment, make new contacts, and ultimately find paid work or a new career field.

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Why Virtual Internships?

The answer is two-fold: The economy and the global workforce, in which we all must now be able to excel. Let's first examine the economy.

The student and new worker in the new economy

The world economy, minus a few growing countries like China, is facing the worst job market in decades. Unemployment rates are at an all time high, especially for the new worker. As of September 2011, the United States Bureau of Labor reported that unemployment was at 9.1 percent overall; however, for the new worker or those aged 20-24, unemployment was at 14.3 percent. With a limited number of jobs available and a high level of unemployment, those with more experience quickly grab new jobs coming into the market before the new worker, with no experience, even has a chance.

It is nearly impossible for a new worker to get a job in today's economy without real world experience in his or her field of study, i.e., an internship. It is the old adage, "you can't get a job without any experience, but you can't get any experience if no one will give you a job."

Add to that the fact that the cost of college tuition continues to rise. In fact, college tuition has risen 37 percent in the last decade for public institutions and prices at private institutions has risen 25 percent, after adjustment for inflation.[ii]

According to a new report, Student Debt and the Class of 2010, two-thirds of college seniors from public and private four-year colleges graduated with loans in 2010, and they carried an average of $25,250 in debt.[iii] This number is up a staggering 63 percent since 2001 when the average graduating college senior's debt was $15,937. [iv]

Faced with a high unemployment rate and the largest student debt in history, it's unrealistic to think the average student can afford, or should afford, to add the additional cost and burden of relocation, as well as living and travel costs for an onsite internship.

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Additionally, the average student works full to part-time during the academic year just to make ends meet, while often-times working numerous jobs during academic breaks.

Virtual internships provide on-the-job experience, while taking into account the above mitigating circumstances. They also offer the flexibility needed into today's modern academic environment.

Finally, virtual internships afford students living or going to school in locations like rural Illinois, for example, to take an internship in a big city like Chicago, allowing for the same opportunities as their peers living in larger cities. Virtual internships give these students and individuals access to companies and opportunities not readily available to them onsite.

The employer in the new economy

While recent college graduates entering the workforce face an uphill battle in finding a job in their chosen field, given the high rate of unemployment, the employer too finds himself in hard economic times with an inability to grow.

Internships are often a solution to help employers grow by bringing on educated individuals who can bring value to their organization while also providing a potential pool of new employees. Virtual internships further provide an economic solution for the employer, which we will explore further in this White Paper.

These points are especially important during these trying economic times. Small businesses drive the U.S. economy. According to the Small Business Administration, small businesses represent 99.7 percent of all US employers and have generated 65 percent of net new jobs over the past 17 years.

If small businesses and organizations can grow using the power of interns they will in turn be able to create more jobs, thereby helping to turn the economy around and lowering the unemployment rate.

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The global economy

More and more employers are moving to a global marketplace. No longer is the salesman doing face to face selling but rather using the power of technology to close a deal in Japan while sitting in an office in Pennsylvania.

We must continue to adapt to different time zones, cultures, holidays, technology and local laws. A virtual internship allows for the new worker to understand these differences early on in their professional career versus learning over trial and error in the long term.

Currently, it's not uncommon for an employer or employee to spend years working with an individual in a different state or country without ever actually meeting the individual. Additionally, telecommuting and remote work situations are increasingly common around the globe. The transferable skills gained through a virtual internship can carry incredible value for an intern entering the workforce.

Let's now explore the pros and cons of virtual internships for both the employer and intern.

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Pros of Virtual Internships

Pros For the Intern

Flexibility: Virtual internships offer the flexibility that traditional onsite internships do not. No longer does the intern have to work nine to five. He can work around his school, work and social calendar. This flexibility allows those individuals, who may not have the time a traditional onsite internship requires, to find relevant work experience through a virtual internship arrangement. And finally, virtual internships allow those students who may want to intern for an international company or organization to work remotely, while still gaining some cross-cultural competencies.

Low Cost: Virtual internships do not require any additional costs for the intern in terms of relocation, commuting, wardrobe and cost of living expenses that a traditional onsite internship often requires. The intern, through a virtual internship, can work from his dorm room, home, school or coffee shop as long as he is equipped with the right technology, training and management. The low cost of the virtual internship also allows those interns who may not have been able to afford a traditional onsite internship to participate and gain valuable on the job training.

Less Hours: Generally virtual internships require less hours because there is no requirement to come into an office for a specific amount of time and the internship is around specific tasks or projects.   The faster the intern can complete a task, the less time he or she will have to work versus being required to come into an office for a certain amount of hours that can turn into down time when little to no work is completed and ultimately wastes the interns time.

Longer Term: Because the virtual internship does not require relocating or the daily hours required of traditional onsite internships, oftentimes they can be stretched out for longer periods of time. This affords the intern an opportunity to gain a better understanding of an organization and industry and to see a project to its completion. A longer internship may also allow the employer to gain a further understanding of the intern's abilities and fit within their organization, which increases the chances of a future position with the employer.

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Modern Technology: Virtual internships allow interns to learn modern business technology. This may include mastering utilization of email, Skype conversations and interviews, instant messaging, phone conversations, webinars, project management tools, sms (text) messaging, video and all other manner of virtual communication to stay in touch with other colleagues and managers.

Communication Skills: Virtual interns learn how to communicate in a global economy, and increasingly telecommuting professional environment, where face to face communication with ones colleagues is oftentimes rare.

Self- Management Skills: As businesses and organizations continue to grow internationally and move to a telecommuting environment, virtual internships empower the intern early on to gain the skills to be successful in these professional work environments through learned self-management skills.

No Geographical limitations: Virtual internships allow the individual to take on an internship in any city in the world, or with any company on the planet. This works well for an individual who may be considering moving to a new city but would like to begin to build a network and get to know a city more before moving there.

Increased Critical and Independent Thinking: Virtual internships require a level of independent and critical thinking because there is less hands-on direction given by the employer. As reported in the Economic Times in February 2011, a new study found that communications, critical thinking and writing skills are the three key qualities that most employers look for in a potential employee.[v]

Pros for the Employer

Flexibility: Some employers may not have enough work to support a full-time intern. A virtual internship makes it easier to utilize interns on a per-project basis, while also fulfilling the intern's hourly requirements over a specific period of time. The employer will not have interns sitting around in their office with nothing to do.

Low Cost and Overhead: The employer does not need to allocate office space or other office resources to the virtual intern and can oftentimes have more interns working simultaneously than an onsite internship setting would allow for.

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Larger Applicant Pool: Virtual internships allow the employer a larger pool of candidates to choose from. Because an intern can be hired to work remotely, employers are not limited to their local talent pool.

Longer Time Commitments: Because a virtual internship does not require an intern to relocate or travel to the employer, the intern often times is able to take on a longer internship and see projects to their completion versus a short internship (often 3 months in traditional, onsite internships).

Time Management: Less interruptions - all questions and tasking can be handled in email, phone calls, etc. versus multiple questions throughout the day.

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Cons of Virtual Internships

Cons for the Intern

Communication: In a remote work environment an intern may have a hard time learning professional communication skills like the ability to read body language and build rapport with his co-workers and colleagues face to face. Additionally, in a remote environment the intern may not be comfortable with asking his employer when he is having questions or concerns. Sometimes it is a lot easier to just walk down the hall and ask someone a question, as opposed to sending an email and waiting for a reply.

Management skills: Without appropriate self-discipline and management skills, the intern may not be successful in a virtual internship scenario. Many individuals need more face-to-face management in order to be successful.

Costs: The virtual intern must provide his own computer, internet connection, telephone and long distance provider (if necessary), and other tools, resources, office supplies and other services. However, cost is likely to be much lower in a virtual internship than an onsite internship.

Networking: In the virtual environment, interns have less opportunity for professional networking opportunities because they are not onsite to network with other professionals in their office or through professional events.

Corporate Culture: The virtual intern will find it more more difficult understanding and learning corporate culture in a virtual environment.

Cons for Employer

Management: If a strong manager is not in charge of the intern, the virtual internship will not be successful.   Clear processes, systems and understandings of the purpose and outcomes of intern tasks are important. If management is weak, then the virtual internship will not be successful.

Communication: Without constant and detailed attention to consistent and open communication, there may be a lack of team building and decreased ability to build rapport with the intern.

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Hands-On Projects: If the intern is unable to come into the employer's office he or she will be unable to help with some hands-on projects like event coordination or more technical projects and tasks that may require physically showing the intern how a task is completed.

Corporate Culture: The employer will find it difficult to convey to the intern the company's corporate culture in a virtual environment.

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Internships Most and Least
Suited For Virtual Internships

For some academic majors, virtual internships may not provide the needed face to face interaction and networking. For example, film and television internships often require being physically present, especially during the production phase.

Internships most suited for a virtual internship

While efforts can be made to make a majority of internships viable virtually, it is important to examine those disciplines that are most suited for a virtual internship.

The most common virtual internships are in the following areas:

- Information technology

- Software development

- Marketing

- Social Media

- Research

- Writing

- Journalism

- Media

- Pre and post event planning

- Video creation and editing

- Human Resources

- Graphic Design

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- Search Engine Optimization and Marketing

- Some non-profits and government internships

- Some political internships

- Some engineering internships

- Some public relations internships

In some cases these types of internships may need more onsite exposure. For example, the fields of public relations, journalism and media may require more direct, in-person contact. However, it is important to remember that for these types of internships, the intern is usually interacting directly with a manager on a day to day basis and learning the ropes, while focusing on the importance of creating a positive experience that will allow for a good recommendation and introduction into the professional world after the internship is over.

Internships least suited for a virtual internship

While many internships could be conducted virtually with proper management and adjustments, there are some industries where a virtual internship would not be as effective including:

- Health Related

- Education

- Art

- Music

- Film and TV

- Events

- Some non-profits and government internships

- Some political internship

- Some engineering internships

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- Some public relations internships

The main reason that these industries do not lend themselves directly to virtual internships is because they require hands on experience. The intern is learning under the close observation of a manager or "teacher" who is taking a "hands on" approach at showing the intern how to do a certain task.   For example, working with patients in a clinical setting requires physical presence.

An argument could be made that internships in these industries should be classified as apprenticeships. A recommendation from this White Paper would be that regulating bodies consider classifying "hands on" training in these industries as apprenticeships rather than internships.

However, it should be noted that an individual could intern in these industries doing tasks that are suited for a virtual internship and gain access and knowledge of the industry.

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How to make a virtual internship effective for all parties

If a virtual internship is to be successful, there are some important things to consider prior and during the internship for both the employer and intern. Academic institutions also need to consider how best to prepare their students for virtual internships.

Considerations for the employer

While each stakeholder has a role to play in ensuring the virtual internship is successful, the employer holds the most responsibility and leverage for creating a positive internship experience for everyone involved.

There are important considerations the employer should make prior to and during a virtual internship including:

- Providing clear and consistent communication on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis.

- Creating systems and processes to monitor the intern and the projects and tasks they are working on.

- Making accessible appropriate technology and information like: instant messenger, Skype, email, text messaging, forums, membership sites, intranets, project management software, etc.

- Clearly defining projects with communicated purpose and outcomes understood by both employer and intern.

- Clearly identifying a manager and team to whom the intern reports.

- Holding weekly phone and/or Skype calls with the intern(s) and anyone on the team the intern is working with.

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- Engaging interns in other important meetings or trainings that directly impact the work he or she is doing.

- Establishing an effective on-boarding process.

- Providing adequate training in the form of audio, video or written instructions in addition to conversations and virtual presentations provided by the employer through technology solutions (resources to provide virtual instruction can be found at the conclusion of this white paper).

- Inviting the intern to professional development opportunities such as virtual trainings, seminars or conferences the employer/manager is attending or deems important for the intern to attend in order to complete tasks or projects he is working on in addition to gaining more on the job education and training.

- Engaging the virtual intern in any employer morale or volunteer opportunities that can be participated in virtually to increase the interns' feelings of belonging and involvement with the employer.

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Consideration for the Intern

The virtual intern must be a self-starter, disciplined and able to take on tasks without hands on instruction. Some additional items the potential intern should consider before taking on a virtual internship are the following:

- Learning to utilize tools and resources that allow for a smoother virtual professional environment (a list of some of the more common solutions can be found in the Tools and Resources section of this White Paper).

- Practicing caution and awareness when on social media sites. The intern should be aware that, since it is a virtual arrangement, the employer may be checking more regularly what the intern is up to on social media, especially if tasks haven't been completed or the intern doesn't show up for an appointment, etc. The intern needs to be aware that his actions or inactions can easily be traced through his use of social media.

- Utilizing current technology to increase their chances during the virtual internship search including video resumes, online portfolios, Skype interviews, LinkedIn profiles, etc.

- Learning to ask questions to clearly understand tasks and projects assigned and follow up on tasks in a timely manner.

- Dedicating a workspace, time of day and days of the week that the intern works on their virtual internships is important given the lack of "hourly" structure of most virtual internships.

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Considerations for schools for preparing students for virtual internships

Schools can play a large role in helping students prepare for virtual internships. By providing training for the student, the schools will also be providing skills for the student to take on to the global and telecommuting workforce that is becoming ever more popular. Some considerations for schools include:

- Providing workshops or courses on virtual internships and how to be successful working remotely.

- Providing training and information on modern technology commonly used in the virtual workplace to better prepare students for virtual internships (a list of common tools can be found in the Tools and Resources section at the end of the White Paper).

- Providing guidance on proper use of social media and its impact on a student's professional career.

- Training and education on utilizing LinkedIn professionally.

- Creating opportunities for students to produce video resumes, professional photos, online portfolios, etc.

- Offering opportunities for students to practice virtual interviews using modern technology.

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Conclusion

As the economy continues to struggle, making the job market extremely competitive, completing an internship - virtual or not - is more and more important. Virtual internships, when done correctly, can be a solution for both the employer and intern.

As internships continue to be required by both school and employer before an individual can graduate or get a job, virtual internships provide a solution for interns who may not have previously been able to take an internship because of costs or lack of time. Because of the flexible nature of virtual internships, more students will have access to more internships, thereby helping to level the playing field in the world of the "have" and "have-nots" of internships.

In addition, as companies continue to try to find ways to reduce their costs, often times resulting in discontinuation of internship programs all together, virtual internships provide a low cost, but high return, option for the employer.

Virtual internships are a win-win for both employers and interns alike as long as the appropriate steps and actions are taken by both parties. Additionally, academia should take a larger role in preparing students for virtual internships and ultimately a more global and telecommuting/virtual workforce.

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Tools and Resources to
Make Virtual Internships More Effective

Phone Service:

Long distance phone service is a necessity for most virtual internships. Some interns may not have unlimited long distance calling plans or cell phones. Here are some services that can be used to alleviate any phone or long distance issues that may arise with virtual internships:

- MagicJack is a device that gives anyone with high speed internet free phone service and a free phone number with unlimited local and long distance calling. They have a free trial period and then there is an annual fee. They also provide a free conferencing service that employers may utilize if they have several interns.

- Skype allows anyone with an internet connection to make phone calls for free, and for $2/month you can make unlimited long distance calls. Also note that Skype is an effective tool for employers because you can do screen sharing, instant messaging and video calls with virtual interns.

Instant Messaging(IM) System:

Instant messaging is a form of real-time direct text-based communication between two or more people using shared clients. The text is conveyed via devices connected over the Internet. Google, Skype, Yahoo and MSN all have instant messaging capabilities.

Project Management Tools

Project management tools can be helpful in managing interns and the projects they are working on. Every project, communication and task is time and date stamped, and stored in a single, central place.

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- [Google docs](#) allows the employer and virtual intern to create and edit web-based documents, spreadsheets, and presentations; store documents online and access them from any computer for free.

- [Basecamp](#) is the leading web-based project collaboration tool. The employer and virtual intern can share files, schedule deadlines, assign tasks, and centralize feedback on specific projects.

- [Freshbooks](#) is a ticketing system that can also be used for invoicing. This is particularly helpful if the virtual intern is paid, or you want to track hours on a specific project or hour requirements set by the virtual intern's school.

- [Central Desktop](#) provides a complete SaaS (Software as a Service) solution for employers to collaborate, manage projects and connect employees, contractors and virtual interns.

- [ActiveCollab](#) is a project management and collaboration tool that the employer can set up on their own server or local network. It allows the employer to work with their team, clients and contractors in an easy to use environment, while keeping full control over data.

- [37Signals](#) allows the employer to manage projects and collaborate with teams and clients including: sharing files, meeting deadlines, assigning tasks and centralizing feedback.

- [Smartsheet](#) allows the employer to track projects, sales pipelines, or any other type of work with this online collaboration tool.

Recording Tools

The employer may want to have the ability to record trainings or information for the virtual intern to implement a task or project.

- [InstantTeleseminar](#) is a paid service that allows the employer to schedule calls and record those calls for later review.

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- **Google Voice** allows the employer or virtual intern to record phone calls for free.

- **Camtasia**, a paid service, allows the user to record completing a task on screen while talking, then save the recording as a video file. Screen capture is also a great way for interns to communicate with their employer and share information. Camtasia works for PC's only.

- **Screenflow** is a paid service, and is basically "Camtasia for Mac."

- **Jing** allows for free five minute screen capture videos to be created and shared.

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About Efficient Enterprises, Inc.

Intern Profits, a service of Efficient Enterprises, Inc., specializes in helping business owners and entrepreneurs find interns. They also provide businesses the tools and resources to effectively manage interns including their turn-key Easy Intern Assignments™ that help the business owner grow their business while also providing on the job training and education for the intern.

Efficient Enterprises, Inc. is located in San Diego, CA and serves small to medium sized business in multiple industries across the world.

To learn more about how Intern Profits can help you or someone you know set-up an internship program please visit, http://InternProfits.com.

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Sources

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