VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

A Collection of Ideas to Guide You

THE COUNCIL
foundation SM

In a recent Axios report, a College Reaction poll found that three in four college students who secured internships or post-graduate work have seen those plans thrown into flux by the coronavirus pandemic, with half of those cancelled altogether.

Fulfilling your company's commitment to these students by allowing them to participate in some capacity virtually creates an opportunity for your firm to stand out as resilient, positive, and forward thinking. While working remotely, interns will gain important exposure and experience to the insurance brokerage industry, not to mention the benefits they'll receive economically and psychologically.

The Council has assembled this collection of ideas and strategies to offer practical advice for hosting young professionals *virtually* as interns this summer.

Two important things to focus on as you pivot your existing program to a virtual environment:

1. A clear and robust schedule and

2. Consistent communication

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Setting Expectations Before Starting

Remember that for some of the interns this is their first professional work experience and without a physical office environment to observe and learn from their surroundings, it will be more challenging to not only learn the job but also learn how to work in a professional manner.

The success of this novel summer experience will require effort and accountability on both sides. It is important to communicate with your soon-to-be virtual interns prior to their start date.

In your email to interns provide the below items:

DETAILED SCHEDULE FOR WEEK 1

Send out a detailed schedule (hour by hour) of what the interns will be doing their first week to ease uncertainty leading up to first day. This schedule should include access links to join any video meetings or calls taking place. Remember this is the official orientation to the company and first impressions are so critical.

WHAT TECHNOLOGY WILL THEY USE?

It is important to specify what computer requirements the interns will need every day for work and how their devices should securely connect to your company's systems.

Device? Will they be provided a computer? Or should they use a personal computer?

Access Credentials? Send all of the necessary access information to email, company VPN, etc.

GUIDANCE ON SETTING UP A HOME OFFICE

Help your interns work effectively by providing them tips on how to set up their workspace. This can include:
- Identifying a Dedicated Quiet Space to Work
- Testing Wi-Fi Connection
- Testing Camera to be able to Participate in Video Calls
- Explaining Computer Workstation Ergonomics – See UC Berkley's Guide
- Having supplies on hand – pen, pad of paper for note taking, etc.

VIDEO CONFERENCING ETIQUETTE

Since video conferencing will be used frequently and immediately beginning Day One, it is a good idea to send the interns some guidance on proper etiquette in advance. Some helpful tips from Inc. Magazine include:

Be courteous to other participants
Be punctual and introduce yourself before speaking so that everyone knows who is talking and can address you by name. Take note of the other speakers so that you can also address them by name. Lastly, turn off sounds on your smart phone and absolutely no texting.

Speak clearly
An audio check should be done before the virtual meeting begins to ensure that everyone can hear you. Know your material - uncertainty will cause you to mumble. Speak naturally but slowly and articulate each word.

Keep body movements minimal
If you're someone that talks with your hands, practice keeping them put. Hand movements can distract your audience. Also, keep head movements to a minimum as well as jerky movements forward or back.

Maintain eye contact by looking into the camera
Keep your focus on the camera. The worst thing is having your audience look at the top of your head because you're typing or looking down at notes.

Dress appropriately
Striped shirts or shirts with intricate patterns do not transmit well on camera, because they are visually distracting. Red, white and black are also poor choices. Go for a pastel or other light colored shirt.

Don't make distracting sounds
Your focus should always be on the person or people at the other end of your video conference. Avoid typing on your keyboard, turn off all sounds on your phone, and close yourself into a room with no or minimal background noise.

TIPS FOR WORKING REMOTELY

Help your interns understand the pitfalls and tips for working remotely.

Set boundaries
While working remotely you can often find yourself working beyond your scheduled hours. Start each morning with identifying three priorities for the day, so at the end of the day you can stop working on time and feel good about what you accomplished that day.

Dress for the job
You may not be going into the office every day; however, it is important to establish a routine. Get up and get ready as you normally would.

Avoid distractions
Not being in an office with others observing you makes it easy to get distracted in your home environment. Turn off the TV and put down your phone while you're working.

Take scheduled breaks
Getting up from your workstation is good for your physical and mental health. Be sure to work breaks into your day to stretch and reset your brain.

This type of information up front will help calm the interns' uncertainty about how all of this will work logistically, what will be expected of them, and how they can be well-prepared for Day One. Be sure to be available and responsive to their questions.

Utilizing Technology

Technology is essential to keeping remote interns connected to the organization, their manager, and fellow interns. Without it, their internship would not be possible.

HOW AND WHAT ACCESS?

It is helpful to review the department and project assignments as you are deciding what systems to give interns access. What tools and logins will they need to get their tasks done efficiently?

Tools such as, Microsoft Teams, Slack, GoogleDocs, and Zoom are great ways to foster teams and encourage ongoing communications. Interns will be accustomed to using platforms such as these and may even have suggestions of their own to help in the virtual environment. If you're looking for a tool that doesn't require a subscription WeTransfer, is great for file transfers, particularly if interns do not have access to shared company drives.

Be sure to share **best practices for virtual communication**s with interns, reviewing appropriate use of systems such as company email, chat, and video conferencing tools. If your organization does not have a policy on appropriate use of technology, SHRM provides a template here.

SHARE ADVICE FOR IMPORTANCE OF CYBERSECURITY

Cybersecurity risks are high in the current environment, particularly if interns are working on personal devices accessing company information and systems. In addition to your company's existing guidelines, consider sharing these five signs from Cofense's Phishing Defense System to spot a coronavirus-related phishing email:

Plays on Fear and Urgency.
Any legit source will speak in a calm, credible voice. The email subject line won't be, "New Coronavirus Cases Confirmed in Your City," and the email won't ask you to click to learn about nearby "high-risk" areas.

Asks for Credentials, Personal or Financial Information.
Think about it. Why would a public-health message send you to a webpage that wants your credit card number? It wouldn't. Major red flag.

Uses an Unfamiliar Greeting.
One recent Coronavirus phish began with "Sir/Madam"—a salutation that's weirdly formal for today's business emails. Again, it doesn't exactly scream trusted source.

Has a Sketchy Email Address.
Another phish was supposedly from the International Civil Aviation Association. It contained no fewer than 5 links, letting you view Coronavirus impact stats or travel advisories. Yet this email had an aol.com email address. Um, no.

Emphasis on Onboarding

When onboarding is done virtually, it is even more critical to get the experience right. It is important to make the interns feel incorporated into their assigned team and the organization.

Modify your existing onboarding materials to digital format.

Think about what the interns will miss out on by not being in the office and be sure to cover in other ways during their first week. Be sure to share information on:
- Professional expectations
- Corporate culture
- Office etiquette

Consider scheduling the following events over video conference:
- 1-1 manager meeting
- Individual introductions to each of their teammates
- Team virtual lunch
- Introduction to leaders in their team/cross-functional teams

A detailed written schedule is essential to ensure the first week goes smoothly. This should include all of the things you normally would do. Just be sure meetings with team members, other departments, and training sessions are scheduled in advance. Focus on how to give the interns networking opportunities with other employees in the company, as this likely will not happen naturally.

Here are a few ideas to incorporate as part of the onboarding:
- A virtual scavenger hunt with clues to learn about company values, business initiatives, fellow colleagues.
- Assigning 2-3 tasks that will require interns to reach out to another staff member.
- Order lunch to deliver to their homes for an intern team lunch.
- Mail a welcome letter from the CEO.
- Virtual coffees first thing in the morning.
- Introduce an intern a day (or multiple a day depending on numbers) by featuring them in a spotlight to staff.

Continuous & Planned Communication

Embrace the fact that you cannot possibly over communicate to your new interns. Ultimately, the secret to an effective virtual internship is opening up the lines of communication and staying actively involved.

- Make sure the interns meet their primary **point of contact for questions**. It would also be helpful if the interns know that person's preferred method of communication. Reiterate as often as possible that interns are free to ask questions whenever necessary.

- Have **directory of contact information** for each intern on hand. Create group chats or distribution lists to make it easy for you to communicate with all interns at once.

- This is likely the first time the intern has ever worked remotely, so be as **detailed as possible** with instructions for project assignments.

- Establish a **daily communication schedule** to allow you to monitor productivity proactively. This will also create a sense of accountability for the interns. Be sure to respond to every email with acknowledgement that you've received their update. No response can leave interns feeling angst or unimportant.

    Example:
    - Every morning (by a designated time) each intern will send an email update to inform the manager (and anyone else for whom they are working) of what they are working on for the day and to ask clarifying questions.
    - At the end of the day, each intern will send a progress update email that includes the following:
        - What the intern worked on from 9:00am - 4:00pm, along with a time log breaking out how long was spent on each task.
        - What the intern plans to work on the next day.
        - A request for more work if appropriate.

- Weekly video check-ins give interns, managers, and coordinators a chance to touch base. Here you can discuss the intern's progress and create a plan to help them improve. If you're working with a group of virtual interns, these videoconferences allow them to interact with each other and share experiences.

Remote interns run the risk of being forgotten since they are less incorporated into work flow and organizational priorities. Remind your interns that to be successful they must be proactive in communicating with an employer and soliciting feedback.

Fostering Collaboration & Engagement

With employees and interns all physically apart from each other, staying connected and collaborative can seem impossible. It is important to remember that your company may be looking to hire some of your summer intern class. Focusing on intern engagement with the organization improves their productivity and fosters positive experiences.

VIDEO (!!!!!!)

The use of video for virtual discussions will enhance the relationship of those involved and increase the level of engagement in conversation. The Council's Guide for Running an Effective Virtual Meeting provides helpful information for virtual meeting facilitators ensure that participants actively engage.

ENGAGEMENT WITH STAFF

Be sure to include interns whenever possible in company and department calls, even if it is only for them to listen in. Notetaking is always a good task for interns. Not only does this help keep interns busy and engaged, but also helps them learn more about the company's core functions.

A FEW OTHER IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Video Chat with Executives
- Virtual Lunches/15 minute virtual Coffees
- Virtual happy hours
- 15 minute virtual "Water Cooler" calls
- Discussion board for interns to engage with employees who are recent graduates/new hires

ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHER INTERNS

Shared experiences tend to be more positive. Encourage interns to share and convene with each other and when possible help foster these relationships by building group components into projects, discussions, and training.

Virtual Book Club
is a great way to keep the interns engaged as a group outside of specific project work.

Group chats or threads
where interns can communicate openly as a group is a great way not only for them to get to know each other but also share experiences and questions with each other.

Group Projects
can help bring interns together. They are certainly used to this method from their schoolwork.

Robust Internship Curriculum

If you have had interns before, you know that they always seem to complete projects faster than anticipated. It is critical to have a steady stream of projects and learning opportunities available – to be safe, let's say twice the amount you think they'll need.

- Continue to break up large projects and schedule interim check-ins to review project segments. This can also be done during your weekly video meetings with the interns as a group.
- Incorporate professional development activities in addition to regularly assigned projects. Providing your interns with access to learning opportunities and training is a tangible way to show you are invested in their growth.
  - This summer The Council Foundation will be offering a series of online self-paced courses designed to help your interns develop and enhance their professional skills and knowledge of the industry. Learn More
- Create a repository of projects for you to access in times of need. It can be quite difficult to stop your normal work to try to think of a project for an intern. Having detailed written instructions ready for each project will also save time later on. Additional project ideas can be found here.

Additional Considerations

If you are apprehensive about your organization's capacity to fully commit to investing in virtual internships, you may consider running a condensed or modified version of your existing program.

- Perhaps you could host interns for 4-6 weeks instead of 8 weeks or 30 hours per week instead of 37.5 hours.
- You might consider enlisting the help of additional staff to keep in touch with the interns, possibly employees who were interns in previous years.

QUESTIONS?

Julia Ruiz

The Council of Insurance Agents & Brokers

Julia.Ruiz@ciab.com