PLANNING VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

Shared learnings from NAF Virtual High School Internships 2020

As the global pandemic swelled and threatened summer internship experiences for youth, NAF and its partners and academies launched a coordinated effort to shift paid internships and other career-readiness programming to virtual settings. During summer 2020, NAF academies and partners hosted more than 350 virtual high school interns, a scale at which they had not attempted previously due to COVID-19. These internships provided work experiences for youth that ranged in duration from 80–180 hours and represented a variety of internship program types – including group and individual internships, as well as task-, project-, and training-focused experiences.

To guide planning for future internship experiences for youth, NAF conducted 27 interviews of lead staff for high school virtual internship programs hosted during summer 2020. NAF examined program planning, implementation, and participant feedback data (internship surveys) to extract key learnings -- contributing to the limited knowledge base for this emerging platform.

VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP PRIORITIES

Make the virtual experience interactive, engaging, and fun

Create an internship environment reflective of the workplace

Connect interns to others and help them experience the culture of the organization

Identify technologies that work well for interns and hosts

Plan and host virtual internships with equity in mind

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT PLANNING VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

Successful internships are rewarding for both the interns and the host employers. Nearly all the interns participating in post-internship surveys reported being satisfied with the 2020 virtual internship experiences (96%). Learnings from summer 2020 fall into three categories. Shared practices relating to each category have been compiled.

Building Intentional Connections

Creating Effective Program Structures & Materials

Addressing Barriers to Full Participation

Click on each category to learn more.

Building Intentional Connections

Plan intentional workplace connections to help interns gain experience working and communicating with professionals across the organization. These connections help interns better understand the complexity and interconnectedness of the host organization's work and help them develop a personal perspective of the organization's culture. A multi-layered approach to supporting connections for interns can help address the isolating effects that the virtual workplace can sometimes create while also capitalizing on the benefits of increased accessibility, diversity, and personalization available in a virtual internship. Summer 2020 virtual internship hosts reported having progress and wellness check-ins via video calls, digital chats, and texts.

Create a plan for interns to stay connected and be integrated into the overall workplace community. Supervisors and mentors are uniquely positioned to coordinate positive one-on-one experiences and encourage the development of meaningful connections for both the interns and employer staff in the virtual setting. It is essential that mentors and supervisors understand their roles and are prepared to manage and support the professional and social-emotional development of young interns remotely.

Set networking or engagement goals with interns to help them see the virtual internship as a gateway to broader access to people and areas of the organization that are not traditionally available during on-site internships. Arranging multiple networking opportunities helped interns appreciate the value that virtual interactions can offer – whether with peers, staff, leaders, or teams across various departments, locations, and/or time zones. These opportunities further established that proximity does not necessarily limit shared experiences, relationship development, and collaboration.

Ensure virtual interns have appropriate and viable access to the host organization's communication tools and platforms including email, chat groups, shared clouds, and calendars.

Results from NAF's post-internship surveys reinforce the importance of program elements that promote engagement and relationship-building in a remote workplace.
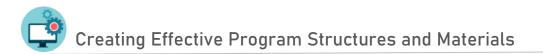
What did interns say?

This experience helped me understand that networking and branding myself professionally are … keys to being successful. With networking I can be exposed to new opportunities.

If I could improve one thing about this experience it would be meeting my professional mentor earlier.

NAF 2020 Interns

Building Intentional Connections. The table below highlights activities for building intentional connections between interns and their peers and colleagues and with internship host organizations.

Intern-to-Intern

☐ Set regular meetings, workshops, and special activities for the intern group

☐ Incorporate team-building activities into group meetings to help interns get to know each other

☐ Establish chat groups or team spaces that enable peer-to-peer collaboration and prompt them to engage around work, internship goals, and other topics of shared interest

☐ Set norms for engagement and collaboration, such as having cameras and microphones "on" when appropriate; regularly check for messages and be responsive

☐ Incorporate self-assessments or inventories to help interns learn more about and be able to articulate their strengths, areas for growth, and work styles and learning preferences

☐ Assign interns to pairs or small groups to encourage peer interaction and collaboration for work and social tasks/activities - as they tend to learn from each other

Intern-to-Professionals

☐ Ensure supervisors and/or mentors are prepared to engage with and support the interns with pre-planned activities, timelines, and clear expectations for their roles

☐ Invite interns to meetings with other professionals to gain perspectives or insights on organizational projects; encourage them to participate in virtual activities such as socials or game nights; help interns set learning and networking goals like committing to a minimum number of informational interviews with colleagues during the internship

☐ Schedule interactive sessions with interns and top leaders in the organization such as the president, CEO, or board members

Intern-to-Organization

☐ Share information about the host organization and the department hosting the internships before the interns' first day

☐ Welcome the interns using organization-wide communication tools. (e.g., emails, daily announcements, newsletters)

☐ Schedule virtual tours of the facilities, showing interns where key activities take place or where team offices are located

☐ Include interns in community service days, project promotion days, and team-building activities and ensured that they have the appropriate marketing items, company T-shirts, etc.

☐ Facilitate introduction of the interns to affinity or special interest groups in the organization; invite representatives to join interns for meetings or lunch

☐ Present interns with the opportunity to maintain a relationship with the organization and access to future internship and/or job opportunities

The 2020 virtual internships included in this report were based on proven internship designs and were modified to a virtual platform in spring 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions. The shift to a fully remote setting was new for the interns – and in most situations – was new to host organizations, their project teams, supervisors, and support services. The data from these 350 high school interns highlighted key structural components needed for successful virtual internships.

Provide clear details and materials about the internship in advance. Remote work environments can be challenging for interns to navigate. Successful virtual internships provided participants with detailed program and project materials prior to or on day one of the internship and conditioned interns to anticipate clarity and access to information they need about project specifications and tools, scheduled speakers, workshop topics, and/or deliverables.

Assign real work and have interns use tools that replicate a workplace, not a classroom, experience. Successful hosts embraced practices and/or tools that were clearly identifiable in the workplace and less reminiscent of school or classroom work (e.g., avoiding required daily work assignments that may feel like classwork to interns).

Model and teach interns how to organize their workday. Supervisors and mentors helped interns understand how projects are managed, how employees engage with their colleagues or supervisors, and how problems or challenges are addressed in a remote work environment.

Internship satisfaction is highest when interns are performing meaningful and valuable work in the virtual setting. Host teams worked to ensure that internship assignments and project deliverables addressed real needs of the organization.

What did interns say?

The most significant part of this experience was working on the project for me. It allowed me to get creative while remaining within guidelines. Also, I learned how to manage my time and plan because I would sometimes layoff assignments to get the project done however, I learned that with correct planning, everything can get done.

NAF 2020 Intern

Creating Program Structures and Materials. The list below presents suggested practices and structures host organizations may incorporate into internship programs to better support virtual high school interns.

☐ Examine all facets of the internship in the planning phase to determine how best to mitigate potential challenges the virtual setting may present and to ensure the modified plan still aligns with the goals of the program

☐ Develop detailed internship materials to provide to interns prior to or at the beginning of the internship

☐ Set up accounts and shared spaces for the interns where they can access work resources and ask questions about the internship

☐ Establish daily or regularly scheduled team and one-on-one check-ins to lend structure to the remote work environment for interns and support effective teamwork

☐ Plan work sessions, training, meetings, and other group activities in ways to combat online video conference fatigue and unhealthy physical inactivity

☐ Guide interns on structuring their workday, including taking mental and physical health breaks

☐ Incorporate a daily time log and/or timesheets to track internship work hours

☐ Provide frameworks for team meetings and opportunities for interns to contribute items to meeting agendas

☐ Establish expectations for interns to use shared workspaces and calendars, and communicate with their peers, supervisors, and other employees using the preferred tools

Addressing Barriers to Full Participation

Traditional onsite internships allow host organizations to control most technology, workspace, and workday variables. In the remote workplace, these variables have the potential to become significant barriers to the full participation of interns and the success of their virtual internships. Transitioning to a remote work setting led employers to abandon many traditional internship practices and seek innovative solutions to support the virtual internships. These solutions challenged the status quo, encouraged an equity mindset, and stand to influence the way high school internships are designed in the future.

Technology   Workspace   Individual Considerations

Ensure interns have access to computers and Wi-Fi with the specifications they need to use the appropriate workplace tools and deliver quality work products. Similar to what research has shown, nearly all of the virtual interns reported having access to smart phones, digital tablets, or notebooks; but fewer had daily access to computers or Wi-Fi with the appropriate bandwidth and features that would allow them to access and use the tools they needed to have a quality intern experience.

Be mindful of interns' home workspace and help them navigate potential challenges. Workspace is often a limiting factor when employers consider how many interns their organization can accommodate at a given time. Virtual internships removed that barrier, but added new, and in some ways, more challenging ones for which employers had limited control. Most interns were able to use the equipment they had or that was provided to them to create a reliable workspace in their homes. Some, however, reported working from their beds, closets, or limited spaces outside of the home (e.g., school parking lots, restaurants, etc.). For those reasons, interns were not always positioned to follow recommended ergonomic work practices. Due to the lack of control interns had over their home workspaces, many were concerned about participating in video/audio conferences without interruptions. It was important for supervisors to reassure interns that most employees were working from home, experiencing similar issues, and were understanding of these challenges.

Encourage interns to share their needs with their supervisors or mentors. Teach interns to advocate for themselves regarding their own personal circumstances, conflicts, and preferences. These situations often involved school, sports, or family related schedules over which interns traditionally had limited control.

Fundamental to providing work-based learning is the opportunity for youth to fully participate in the experience. Barriers to full participation should be addressed and mitigated as soon as possible.

In the table that follows are actions organizations can take to address technology, workspace, and individual barriers of virtual internships.

What did interns say?

Over 90% of the interns reported having no significant issues during the virtual internship.

NAF 2020 Intern Survey

Addressing Barriers to Full Participation. Practices to Consider

Technology

Equipment

- ☐ Reach out to interns to assess their equipment needs

- ☐ Provide laptops with adequate memory and processing capabilities; ensure they are loaded with the appropriate software and apps

- ☐ Send interns headsets, cameras, and other equipment needed to successfully collaborate and work remotely

Connectivity

- ☐ Provide wireless hotspots for interns to use to connect to host organization's sites and tools

- ☐ Ensure interns have the appropriate credentials, training, and tech services needed to access and use the organization's platforms and resources

Skills/Expertise

- ☐ Modify program specifications to support use of tools familiar to interns (ex: open-sourced tools like Google Docs). This modification can decrease the training and support traditionally required for new systems users

- ☐ Check-in with interns regularly on their technology and quickly address any technical issues

Workspace

- ☐ Establish some basic specifications for setting up a remote workspace

- ☐ Share photo of the workspaces of colleagues and supervisors and tips for healthy and safe work habits

- ☐ Regularly check in with interns about their workspace, their comfort, and their overall health and wellness

Individual Considerations

- ☐ Build greater flexibility into the program to allow interns to meet internship goals while considering their interests, skills, challenges, and availability

- ☐ Adjust program specifications when possible, to allow interns to "work to their strengths"

- ☐ Encourage intern voice, asking them to share what is working for them and what is not

- ☐ Train supervisors and mentors to support interns remotely

Special thanks to the NAF Summer 2020 interns, partners, supervisors, and host representatives who contributed to the learnings and practices captured in this report.