



Virtual Internships Working Paper May 2020

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused interruptions to every aspect of life in New York City, including the ability for young people to engage in work-based learning. When schools were closed in mid-March, work-based learning activities were suspended, meaning students are no longer participating in internships and other career exploration and readiness experiences. More recently, it was announced that the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), which provides paid employment opportunities to 75,000 young people over the summer, has been cancelled.

Work-based learning experiences - from school-year internships and apprenticeships to SYEP - are critical to students on a variety of levels. Work-based learning helps students identify their interests and aptitudes, build their professional networks, develop meaningful skills, and make decisions about their education and career trajectory. Summer employment programs provide necessary income to young people and their families while giving many students their first work experience.

Amid the uncertainty the pandemic has created, many organizations and companies are pivoting to hosting virtual internships over the summer. Virtual internships will necessarily differ from more traditional internships; however, many of the same benefits to young people and employers can be accrued. In this document, we aim to provide guidance to intermediaries, community-based providers, employers, and other stakeholders on how to effectively implement virtual internship programs.

The Promise of Virtual Internships

Certain elements of a traditional, in-person internship may be difficult to replicate remotely, but there is no shortage of options in crafting a virtual internship experience that can be of great benefit to students. Based on a review of employer and organizational practices and conversations with a variety of stakeholders, we highlight some of the ways in which providers and employers are thinking of implementing virtual internship programs.

Career exploration and counseling

Internships are inherently a way for young people to explore potential career options. Virtual internships can take this idea further, and guide students through a tailored set of resources that will help them learn about different careers, identify their interests and aptitudes, and talk to professionals about occupations and pathways within industries of interest. These experiences should be structured and facilitated by a provider or employer staff member with experience using any online tools that are being used.



Project-based micro internships

Many companies are utilizing micro-internships, which consist of short-term projects for students to complete during a relatively small window of time. Micro internships can ask students to help companies solve real-world challenges, while placing less of a burden on students and employers to manage daily tasks or larger scale projects. It is important that micro internships are tied to the development of specific skills. Identifying areas of improvement and potential enhancements to a company's website is one example of a short-term project that has provided value to employers and helped young people develop their skills. Employers may also ask interns to complete projects that are not necessarily urgent, but would have been taken on by full-time employees if not for a lack of bandwidth.

Training and upskilling

Especially in instances where employers do not have a substantial amount of work for interns, virtual internships can focus on providing training and upskilling to interns that will help them develop the competencies needed for future work within the same company or industry. The demand for skills across a variety of software applications and the prevalence of online learning modules should allow for substantial skill development during virtual internships. Interns should be offered flexibility and support in engaging in upskilling alongside assigned tasks.

Community service projects

The COVID-19 pandemic has created substantial need in communities across New York City, and virtual internship experiences could center around providing targeted resources, supports, and services. Such opportunities could provide interns with experience in everything from project management and logistics to social service delivery and public/nonprofit administration.

Recommended Practices

There are several practices providers and employers can institute to better support interns when they cannot be in the same physical space as their peers, colleagues, and supervisors.

Peer-to-peer engagement and support

Due to social distancing requirements, many young people may be feeling disconnected from their friends and others who they rely on for support. Virtual internship providers should ensure that young people are not isolated in their experience and that there are frequent opportunities for interns to engage with and support one another.

Mentorships

In addition to peer support, interns should also receive guidance from trained mentors. Mentors should be prepared to help young people deal with a range of issues - including those not related to their work experience - and to do so with a focus on cultural competency.



Curating and co-creating projects

Virtual internships represent an opportunity for young people, providers, and employers to collectively brainstorm and co-create work projects. This could be especially useful for employers who do not currently have the bandwidth to create internship experiences, but who would be open to hosting interns if a project idea was brought to them.

Virtual networking and site visits

Internships are a valuable opportunity for young people to meet professionals across organizations and industries and expand their professional networks. Virtual internships can include remote events that allow young people to meet other professionals and explore a range of work sites, occupations, and industries. These experiences should be structured and facilitated by staff from the provider organization.

Virtual presentations

Many companies are incorporating presentations into their virtual internship experiences, including brown-bag lunches and TED-style talks. These presentations can both offer interns an opportunity to hear from professionals within an organization and also work on their own presentation skills.

Anticipating Challenges

For providers and employers who are new to virtual internships - as many will be - there could be obstacles in providing a quality internship experience. Some of those challenges can be mitigated by using the strategies mentioned above. We also anticipate virtual internship providers and employers needing to address the following issues.

Technology

Interns will need to have reliable access to the technology required of a virtual internship. This may include a computer, high-speed Internet, and access to other relevant software. Before the virtual internship begins, providers and employers should ensure that interns have what they need to get started and know where to go to troubleshoot technology issues. Providers and employers will also need to ensure that they are following appropriate regulations and security protocols concerning engaging with minors online.

Workplace norms

In traditional internships, it may take some time for young people to become accustomed to general workplace norms and the culture of a specific employer. For virtual internships, young people will have to become accustomed to the norms and best practices of remote work. Provider organizations should offer training and support to young people as they navigate how to engage in remote work that is best for them and aligned with employer expectations.



Employer and supervisor bandwidth

The pandemic has put considerable strain on all types of employers, and some may not have the bandwidth to host an internship program. Potential supervisors and mentors may face challenges in their role due to working from home and the added responsibilities of supervising or schooling home-bound children. Having a dedicated staff member to manage the internship program has shown to be beneficial to employers, but providers will need to be sensitive to the challenges and offer guidance on ways in which the virtual internship can be managed with a lighter lift.

Key Distinguishers

This document provides examples of promising practices in virtual internships and offers guidance for providers and employers on how to mitigate potential challenges. To view all of the essential components of providing a meaningful virtual internship experience, please see [HERE to HERE'S Key Distinguishers for Virtual Paid Work Experiences](#). Prior to the pandemic, HERE to HERE had spent the past year developing [Key Distinguishers](#) for four areas in which work-based learning takes place: high schools, post-secondary programs, paid work experiences, and employers. The Key Distinguishers were designed as a tool to guide work-based learning practice and assessment, and with the COVID-19 pandemic limiting many traditional work-based learning opportunities, we have created a set of Key Distinguishers for virtual paid work experiences.

Considerations for the Future

For the summer (and potentially fall) of 2020, virtual internships are emerging as a response to the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, virtual internships may represent a new way for students to engage in work-based learning even after things have returned to normal. Virtual internships that do not need to be completed on-site with employers can provide greater flexibility for students to participate in meaningful career exploration and skill building opportunities, which could have implications related to placement capacity, scheduling, seat time policies, CDOS Credential requirements and more. Additionally, the ability for students to develop remote working abilities early can itself be a meaningful form of skill development, as more companies across sectors have begun to transition to remote working, even before the pandemic. The limitations of the pandemic may be opening up a window for students, schools, providers, and employers that they may not want to close.