

RECRUITING AND SELECTING GRADUATE EMPLOYEES VIA INTERNSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Internships and their use by organisations as a means to recruit and select graduate talent has undergone rapid expansion over the last three decades, to the point where today many interns and host organisations regard internships as the preferred pathway into entry-level professional positions. However, research on internships from a recruitment and selection perspective to date has largely been neglected. Therefore the current paper advocates the utilisation of internships as a recruitment and selection tool, and points to issues to be addressed in future research, aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of internships as a means to attract and screen graduate talent.

Keywords: Recruitment, Selection, Talent Management, Internship, Human Resource Management (HRM).

INTRODUCTION

It has been asserted by business leaders that finding talented employees is the predominant Human Resource Management (HRM) challenge of this decade (Manpower Group 2012; Thunnissen et al., 2013), due largely to increasing competitive global talent market conditions (Holtom, Mitchell, Lee & Berry 2008; Schuler, Jackson & Tarique 2011b). As a result, organisations are required to develop proactive strategies aimed at ensuring adequately stocked organisational talent pools, in order to maintain and build their competitive advantage (Mellahi & Collings 2010; Schuler, Jackson & Tarique 2011a). Thus, internship programmes are progressively being used by more organisations globally, as a means by which to attract and identify talented future employees, to the point where, in many organisations, internships have become the primary pathway into entry level employment positions for university graduates (Gerdes 2009; National Association of College and Employers (NACE) 2011).

The prevalent utilisation of internships by practitioners in a recruitment and selection capacity is not surprising given the number of unique strengths of internships have when they are considered as a supplement to organisational recruitment and selection efforts. Primarily, internships

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provide a unique opportunity for host organisations to evaluate potential job applicants in an actual workplace setting, prior to making a formal commitment to their employment, in what Coco (2000) refers to as a 'try before you buy arrangement'. Therefore, although internships represent a greater investment by organisations when contrasted with traditional recruitment and selection methods this expenditure can be justified, due to the potential for internships to provide a more reflective picture of how potential employees will behave in post internship employment positions. Thus, reducing the risk of the large organisational costs associated with incorrect employee selection decisions (Cascio 2006). Concurrently, from a recruitment perspective, internships provide interns with the opportunity to evaluate a potential employer prior to making the decision to accept a job offer, therefore also enhancing their fit with the organisation and their jobs if they convert to regular employment (Resick, Baltes & Shantz 2007).

Despite the widespread application of internships in a recruitment and selection capacity, there is currently a lack of work available which provides insights into which factors determine the successful conversion of interns into regular employees with their host organisation, and hence the functioning of internships in a recruitment and selection capacity. The sparseness of literature addressing the functioning of internships in this capacity can be attributed to the fact that the majority of previous internship literature has largely conceptualised internships as a learning experience for interns. Thus, it has predominantly focused on outcomes including intern learning and their enhanced employability in the labour market generally (Callanan & Benzing 2004; Knemeyer & Murphy 2001). Therefore, the examination of internships from a host organisation's recruitment and selection perspective has largely been overlooked, with the exception of an emerging stream of literature which has begun to redress this imbalance (Beenen & Mrousseau 2010, Zhao & Liden 2011).

INTERNSHIPS FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

The Intern's Perspective

Internships are largely conceptualised in the literature, as a form of experiential learning where students take an opportunity to apply theories from higher education to real-world situations, thereby providing an opportunity for them to integrate and consolidate thinking and action (Davies 1990). Multiple stakeholders are involved in the internship process; consequently multiple perspectives can be adopted when investigating them. The dominant perspective taken in previous research has been that of the intern; whereby a majority of the extant literature focuses on outcomes for interns. Established benefits of internship participation include: enhanced interpersonal communication (Beard & Morton 1999; Beck & Halim, 2008), problem solving and critical thinking (Beck & Halim 2008; Molseed, Alsup & Voyles 2003), leadership (Cook, Parker & Pettijohn 2000), written communication (Knemeyer & Murphy 2002), improved self-evaluations (Brooks, Cornelius, Greenfield & Joseph 1995; Taylor 1988), and job-related skills (Brumm, Hannemann & Mickelson 2006; Gault, Redington & Schlager 2000; Hynie, Jensen, Johnny, Wedlock & Phipps 2011; Scholz, Steiner & Hansmann 2004). In addition, internship participation has also been linked to improved academic performance (Blair, Millea & Hammer 2004; English & Koeppen 1993) and understanding of theoretical knowledge (Hynie et al., 2011; Mihail 2006). This range of established developmental benefits for interns

substantiates the effectiveness of internships as experiential learning experiences. However, as a majority of these studies viewed internships as an educational experience, less attention in the literature has been given to how the developmental outcomes translate into benefits for the host organisation.

Given the range of developmental benefits gained from internship participation, former interns tend to have enhanced employability following graduation, evidenced by reduced job search time, enhanced desirability in the eyes of employers, accelerated career progression, and higher starting salaries (Coco 2000; Gault et al., 2000; Sagen, Dallam & Lavery 2000). In addition to these tangible career benefits, former interns have also been shown to possess greater clarity in their career direction and more realistic job expectations (Callanan & Benzing, 2004; Cheung & Arnold 2010; Wesley & Bickle 2005), leading to higher levels of job and career satisfaction amongst former interns (Divine, Linrud, Miller & Wilson 2007; Taylor 1988). Although these findings indicate that organisations value internship participation, these studies were conducted from an intern's perspective. Thus, previous studies have largely focused on the former intern's enhanced employability in the labour market generally, rather than linking them to their conversion to employment with the host organisation of their internship. This has been acknowledged as a notable deficiency in past internship work from a host organisation's perspective (Hurst, Good & Gardner 2012).

The University's Perspective

Universities are also stakeholders with regard to business students' internships. Previous research has shown that university administrators and faculty across different disciplines concur regarding the importance of sustaining and developing their internship programs (Liu, Wang & Chen 2010; Maskooki, Rama & Raghunandan 1998; Weible 2010). The primary benefit of internships identified by universities is the aforementioned developmental and career benefits afforded to their students from internship participation. These benefits provide a means for universities to answer longstanding calls for them to produce more work-ready university graduates in fields such as business (Pfeffer & Fong 2002; Starkey & Tempest 2005). Thus, internships are viewed by universities as a means to bridge the gap between graduates' skill sets and contemporary organisational demands (Clark 2003; Knouse Tanner & Harris 1999). In addition, by enhancing the employability of a university's graduates, internships also provide reputational benefits for the universities, assisting them in attracting and retaining new students (Gault et al., 2000; Toncar & Cudmore 2000).

Furthermore, internships foster links between universities and the professional world (Cannon & Arnold 1998; Meredith & Burkle 2008), which may assist institutions in seeking funding for research and other activities (Gault et al., 2000; Henry 2002). Academic supervisors can also benefit from internship participation, as they gain enhanced understanding of different corporate environments, and learn about the expectations of the companies hiring their students (Tovey 2001). Internships also provide a potential channel for practitioner input into university curriculums (Thiel & Hartley 1997).

The Host Organisation's Perspective

The final major stakeholders in the internship process are the host organisations, as it is their participation which provides the internship positions. The motivations for both interns and universities for participating in internships are well known, due to the established range of aforementioned benefits for these stakeholders. However, less is known about the specific benefits derived by host organisations from their participation in internships. What is known is that organisations do value internships. For example, Fortune 500 companies perceive the provision of internships as an important component of their human resource management strategy (Barr & McNeilly 2002), and also the National Association of College Employers' (NACE 2012a) annual survey of United States employers reveals a continued upward trend in the number of internship positions offered.

In part, organisations may have relatively altruistic motivations for providing internship positions. For instance Brooks and Greene (1998) suggest that organisations see internships as a means to give something back to students and the community, and demonstrate their commitment to generally improving the quality of a profession (Crumbley & Sumners 1998). In addition, through the developmental benefits provided to interns through internship participation, organisations are provided with a means to collectively improve the quality of their shared labour pool (Chonko 1993; Starkey & Tempest 2005). However, the primary motivations for organisations providing internship positions are likely to be related to more direct benefits derived by the host organisation. In the immediate term, internships provide a means to supplement an existing workforce with an inexpensive and usually highly motivated source of labour (Brightman 1989; Coco 2000; Watson 1992), or as a cost-effective means to complete special projects (Brooks & Greene 1998). In addition, internships can reduce both hiring and training costs (Nielsen & Porter 1983; Pianko 1996), whilst also providing a positive public relations exercise for the organisation (Pianko 1996).

Arguably, the primary benefit of internships from an organisational perspective is their ability to attract, recruit and screen potential future employees (Beenen & Mrousseau 2010; Gabris & Mitchell 1989). A substantial number of new employees are employed through their internship programs (Beenen & Mrousseau 2010; Zhao & Liden 2011). For instance, J.P Morgan and Goldman Sachs employed over 80% of their new employees in 2008 and 2009 through their internship programs (Gerdes 2009) and Hewlett Packard has a tradition of employing approximately 70% of their new employees from their former intern pools (Watson 1995). Moreover, a NACE (2011) survey of 266 employers indicated that an average of 39% of all entry level employers in the United States were former interns of their employing organisation. This evidence suggests that internships are being extensively used as a recruitment and selection process. However, beyond indicating the use of internships with regard to this function, there is a notable lack of research investigating the factors leading to the conversion of interns into employees with the host organisation.

A Recruitment and Selection Perspective

That internships have become the preferred pathway into regular employment from a host organisations perspective is not surprising, given that organisations generally strive to attract, recruit, select, and retain talented employees. Hence, selecting the 'right' employees, is an

essential component of organisational effectiveness and competitive advantage (Allen, Bryant & Vardaman 2010; Ma & Allen 2009; Scullion, Collings & Caligiuri 2010), requiring the proactive identification and development of talented employees (Collings & Mellahi 2009), and of tasks uniquely suited to internships, which allow these tasks to be performed prior to formal employment. Thus, many host organisations have are motivated to provide internship positions, as they desire to recruit and select future employees from the pool of interns (NACE 2013).

Although little is known about the conversion of interns into regular employees within the host organisation, previous work has indicated that internship participation enhances the desirability of former interns as employment candidates generally. For instance, internship participation has been shown to improve career advancement opportunities with any employer (Fuller, Marler & Hester 2006; Gault et al., 2000; Siegel, Blackwood & Landy 2010), vocational commitment (Brooks et al., 1995; Callanan & Benzing 2004), organisational commitment (Dixon, Cunningham, Saga, Turner & Kent 2005, Liu, Xu & Weitz 2011), work preparation (Raymond & McNabb 1993), increased person-organisation fit (Resick et al., 2007), higher job satisfaction (Knouse et al., 1999), increased job offer acceptance (Beenen & Mrousseau 2010; NACE 2012b), and higher intern retention rates (NACE 2005; Siegel et al., 2010). Thus, host organisations would rather capitalise on their investment in the intern by converting the intern to work in their organisation, rather than enhancing the employability of the intern in the job market generally. Furthermore, it has been estimated that internship programs can save an average of \$15,000 per new hire at the entry level by avoiding the costs associated hiring of the wrong employees (Watson 1995).

The aforementioned post-employment benefits of employing former interns are largely attributed to the provision of the experiential learning process during internships, which enhances the job-related skills of interns, whilst also providing them with a realistic picture of organisational life, clarifying their expectations and easing their transition into the workplace and chosen career (Gault et al., 2000; Liu et al., 2011). However, the aforementioned post-employment benefits were primarily investigated from an intern's perspective; thus previous research has investigated these benefits in relation to the intern's general employability, rather than associated with conversion within the host organisation. The neglect of the host organisation outcomes in previous internship work can be attributed to the literature to-date predominantly conceptualising internships as a personal and career development experience for interns; hence little is known about the process by which interns are converted into regular employees with the host organisation following graduation. Consequently, the linkages between internship variables and host organisation recruitment and selection outcomes remain largely untested in the extant literature outside of a few recent exceptions (e.g., Beenen & Mrousseau 2010; Hurst et al., 2012, Zhao & Liden 2011).

Investigating the determinants of the conversion of interns into regular employees is particularly crucial given the nature of internships, allowing interns considerable discretion when deciding whether to convert to regular employment with the host organisation, as interns will at that stage have not yet made a formal commitment to their host organisation. Rather, internships are often used by interns as a non-committal way of sampling organisational life prior to making a long-term decision regarding their employment or career (Gault et al., 2000; Linn, Ferguson & Egart 2004). Thus, interns may be particularly sensitive to features of the internship experience when

deciding whether to convert to regular employment with the host organisation. Furthermore, the factors influencing an organisation's desire to convert a particular intern into a regular employee are also unknown. Thus, this study aims to assist in addressing this deficit in the literature, by testing the prerequisite theoretical linkages required for enhancing the effectiveness of converting interns into regular employees.

THEORETICAL LINKAGES

Internship Theory

The extant internship literature provides a limited theory base on which to build theoretical linkages associated with the conversion of interns into regular employees. Numerous reviews of the internship literature have pointed out that the central deficiency in previous internship research has been the lack of any theory development or testing (Bartkus 2007; Bartkus & Stull 1997; Wilson 1988). Rather, a majority of previous empirical work on internships has been largely descriptive in nature, for instance providing an overview of the internship experience (e.g., Eyer 1995; Garavan & Murphy 2001, Kim, Kim & Bzullak 2011), or describing the characteristics which contribute towards successful internships from an intern's perspective (Keating 2012). Rather, than developing theory within the context of internships.

The other major stream of internship research has used a comparative/experimentalist approach (or quasi-experimentalist approach) to investigate internships, by using participation in internships as the experiential treatment, contrasted with a control group of non-internship participants (e.g., Blair et al., 2004; English & Koeppen 1993; Knouse et al., 1999). The contribution of these previous descriptive and quasi-experimental studies has been to identify a range of features and beneficial outcomes of internships, rather than developing and testing causal theories, aimed at contributing towards the enhancement of internship effectiveness.

There are a small number of exceptions in the internship literature which develop and test causal theories of relevance to converting interns into regular employees, of which three recent studies have investigated interns' intentions to accept job offers as an dependent variable; Resick et al.'s (2007) study found that interns who perceived there was person-organisation fit were more likely to accept job offers from their host organisation, Beenen and Mrousseau (2010) revealed that intern learning mediated the relationship between goal clarity and job acceptance intentions, and Zhao and Liden (2011) demonstrated that the host organisations' openness to creativity increased interns' job application intentions. Additionally, two other recent studies investigated the antecedents of relevance to intern conversion. Liu et al. (2011) found that internship learning and mentoring were positively related to interns' satisfaction and affective commitment, and D'Abate Youndt and Wenzel (2009) revealed that the characteristics of internships, including job characteristics, learning opportunities, and supervisor support, contributed to internship satisfaction. This study aims to add to an emerging stream of literature by testing a number of additional, causal relationships, in order to develop predictive theory relating to the conversion of interns into regular employees.

Previous internship research provides a limited theoretical base from which this study can draw. However, the wider organisational literature provides an extensive range of theories developed in other employment contexts, which potentially generalise to internships. For example, theories relating to the process of newcomer employee adjustment to organisational life (Ashforth, Sluss & Saks 2007; Morrison 1993) may be highly applicable to internships, as interns share characteristics with newcomers, such as experiencing uncertainty and limited information during organisational entry, or to previous research investigating characteristics of short-tenure employees (Jokisaari & Nurmi 2009; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Glomb & Ahlburg 2005). It is particularly notable that although previous internship research has highlighted the importance of the intern-supervisor relationship in determining internship outcomes, established mentoring or leadership theories have not been applied previously to the context of internships (e.g., Lam & Ching 2007; Masumoto 2004).

Testing the generalisability of established organisational theories to internships has the potential to also shape extant theory, as other non-regular employment contexts are known to have unique implications for organisational theories developed in regular employment settings; for instance the context of temporary employment (Guest, Oakley, Clinton & Budjanovcancin 2006; Parker, Griffin, Sprigg & Wall 2002). However, due to the lack of empirical work extending theories developed in other employment contexts to internships, little is known about how contextual variables present within the internships which may impact on established organisational theories. Such variables may include interns' unique role expectations, as they are in transition between student and employee roles (Miller & Form 1951; Ng & Feldman 2007), the short duration of internships, which requires interns to learn and adapt to the workplace differently from regular employees (Jokisaari & Nurmi 2009), or the predetermined conclusion of the internship, and hence the employment relationship (Zhao & Liden 2011). Given that a vast majority of organisational theories remain untested to date within the context of internships, it is a potentially fertile ground for extending and/or evolving context-specific adaptations of extant organisational theory.

Recruitment and Selection Theory

Despite the apparent suitability of internships as a recruitment and selection tool, and their existing widespread application in this capacity, the recruitment and selection literature has largely neglected internships to date. In the case of recruitment the focus of research has traditionally been on a narrow range of topics including recruitment sources, organisational attractiveness and realistic job previews (Dineen, Ling, Ash & Delvecchio 2007; Rynes, Bretz & Gerhart 1991). This traditional body of work has been criticised for lacking practical relevance (Breaugh 2008; Ployhart 2006; Saks 2006), leading to calls for research addressing the specific features of the recruitment process which enhance organisational outcomes (Uggerslev, Fassina & Kraichy 2012). Thus, the examination of internships conceptualised as a recruitment process is able to address such calls, by providing insight into which factors during the internship experience contribute to the effective conversion of interns into regular employees after their graduation.

In common with the recruitment literature, the selection literature has also traditionally focused on a narrow range of selection methods, including interviews, resumes and personality tests

(Posthuma, Morgeson & Campion 2002), and to a lesser degree bio-data (Breugh 2009), situational judgement tests (Whetzel & McDaniel 2009) and assessment centres (Thornton & Gibbons 2009). However, the ability of these methods to predict post-employment behaviours, such as employee performance, has been questioned (Breugh 2009; Posthuma et al., 2002; Thornton & Gibbons 2009). The lack of predictive validity of these traditional selection methods has primarily been attributed to their susceptibility to faking by candidates, and that they evaluate candidates in maximum performance rather than in typical performance settings (Arthur, Glaze, Villado & Taylor 2009). This has led, to calls to broaden the scope of selection research, to include alternative selection methods that are capable of overcoming these weaknesses (Breugh & Starke 2000; Rynes 1991), calls which have largely gone unanswered to date. However, given that interns are placed in an actual work setting for an extended period of time prior to employment, internships can provide an alternative selection method, with the potential to mitigate both of the aforementioned weaknesses of traditional selection methods.

Future Research

Approaching internships from a recruitment and selection perspective reveals potential avenues of investigation for future research. For example intern in-role performance has not previously been investigated, which is notable given that employee performance has consistently been linked to important organisational outcomes, including productivity (Brown & Medoff 1978), sales growth (Batt 2002), and safety (Shaw, Gupta & Delery 2002). Hence, employee performance description and prediction plays an important role in personnel-related decisions (Barnes & Morgeson 2007; Landy & Farr 1980). From a host organisation's employee-selection perspective, intern in-role performance is a key variable, as it can be argued that the primary advantage of internships as a selection method is their potential to provide a context in which to evaluate candidates in typical performance situations (Zhao & Liden 2011). Alternative traditional selection methods, such as job interviews and assessment centres, evaluate candidates in maximum-performance situations. Thus, these traditional selection methods provide an indication of what a candidate can do, which has been shown not to necessarily be indicative of what they actually will do post-employment (Klehe & Anderson 2005; McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt & Maurer 1994).

Due to the questionable predictive validity of selection methods which evaluate employment candidates maximum performance, past reviews of selection methods have asserted the need for empirical examination of recruitment and selection processes in typical performance settings (Posthuma et al., 2002). Internships provide an ideal selection setting in which to evaluate typical performance, prior to employment. Firstly, during internships interns are less attuned to the fact that they are being evaluated, secondly interns are not explicitly directed to perform at their best, and finally their performance is observed over an extended period of time focused on the actual day-to-day tasks of the job (Sackett, Zedeck & Fogoli 1988).

Additionally, internships provide a selection context in which to assess employment candidates dispositions, which is important given the established links between employee dispositions and workplace outcomes, personality tests have been widely used as a selection method (Heller 2005; Rothstein & Goffin 2006; Ryan & Sackett 1987). However, their predictive validity relative to some post-employment behaviours such as job performance has been questioned (Guion & Gottier, 1965, Morgeson, Campion, Dipboye, Hollenbeck, Murphy & Schmitt 2007). These

criticisms are, however, not centred on the predictive validity of the dispositions themselves, but rather on the predictive validity of personality tests, since within a selection context personality tests are susceptible to faking, as the candidate may endeavour to reveal dispositions which they believe are desired by the employer (White, Young, Hunter & Rumsey 2008). A weakness which can potentially be overcome in internships, as intern dispositions can be evaluated over an extended length of time in multiple work place settings prior to making an employment decision.

CONCLUSION

Given the mismatch between current organisational practices relating to internships and work approaching internships from a recruitment and selection perspective highlighted in this paper, it is clear that the future investigation of intern conversion is both of practical and theoretical relevance. The paper also points to particular the strengths of internships when applied in recruitment and selection capacity, thereby identifying directions for future research aimed at improving internships' contribution to organisations' Human Resource Management practices. For example, the paper advocates the internships are explored as a selection setting in which to access personality traits such as in order to overcome the questionable predictive validity of personality tests when applied in a selection capacity (Rosse, Stecher, Miller & Levin 1998; White et al., 2008) thereby potentially contributing to the stream of research investigating preventative strategies for mitigating faking in personality tests when used as selection method (Donovan, Dwight & Hurtz 2003; Fan, Gao, Carroll, Lopez, Tian & Meng 2012; Jackson, Wroblewski & Ashton 2000).

Furthermore, the urgent requirement for research approaching internships from a recruitment and selection perspective is demonstrated in this paper, because of the gulf between practitioners' extensive utilisation of their intern pools as a source of future employees, and the current body of internship, recruitment and selection theory that is able to direct host organisations' efforts towards successfully converting interns into regular employees. It is particularly timely to examine internships in a recruitment and selection capacity, since due to an increasingly competitive global talent market, managers are required to become increasingly proactive in developing strategies to ensure adequately stocked organisational talent pools (Beechler & Woodward 2009; Schuler et al., 2011b, Thunnissen, Boselie & Fruytier 2013), coupled with the known impact the recruitment and selection, of the most appropriate employees has on organisational performance (Collings & Mellahi 2009; Hunter & Gerbing 1982). Therefore, future internship research attempting to narrow this gulf between practice and theory is essential.

This paper also has a number of more specific practical implications for host organisations who wish to design their internship programmes to enhance intern conversion outcomes, including designing internships to be reflective of regular employee organisational entry rather than a more incremental learning process, to allow the evaluation of key selection criteria within a typical performance setting, whilst advocating that internships are formally incorporated, as a component of a multiple hurdle selection process, including the explicit evaluation of specific selection criteria during the internship, such as intern-in-role performance and personality characteristics.

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