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From Classroom to Internship: Supervisor Evaluations

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine worksite supervisors' ratings of the performance of communication student interns using seventeen performance standards set by the Career Center at the institution. The results of almost 400 supervisor evaluations were collected over a five-year period (2014-2018) within the department. The results are consistent with previous studies showing students are performing above average in all areas with the highest results in positive attitude and lowest results in written communication.

Introduction

The *New York Times* reports that internships are becoming critical and employers are using internships as a way to recruit full-time employees (Selingo, 2017). Some programs at universities require internships as part of an undergraduate's academic experience. Students participate in an academic internship, which includes performance ratings by their on-site supervisor.

This study examines internships by reviewing the worksite supervisor's evaluation of intern performance. At the institution, students earning the mass communication degree are encouraged to take their internship when they are most prepared and eligible. To be eligible for an internship for academic credit, a student must have a minimum for a C+ or 2.5 grade point average, junior status, completed four mass communication skills courses, and two mass communication practicum courses.

During their internship, students were tasked with completing assignments through an online course management system while completing their

internship. The first assignment required students to post a discussion about the responsibilities and tasks they were expecting to complete during their internship. The second assignment activity, expected to be produced toward the end of the semester, was a video testimonial in which students recorded responses that answered questions about their experience. These questions included:

- How has your internship experience prepared you for a career in the communication industry?
- How has your internship further developed your skills or career goals?
- How have your mass communication courses prepared you for your internship?
- Why do you believe an internship is necessary for a mass communication student?

The final assignment was a three- to five-page paper that explained their internship responsibilities, examples of how they observed or applied theory they learned in their previous courses to the internship experience. They were to also document time

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they spent on their internship and provide examples of the work they had completed during their internship experience.

Upon reaching one hundred and fifty hours, students and worksite supervisors completed a midterm evaluation. At the end of the semester, or at three hundred hours, students and worksite supervisors completed the final evaluation.

Literature Review

A variety of disciplines, such as law, medicine, education, and healthcare require students to complete an internship experience before entering the industry (Herring et al., 1990). Internships, usually a three-way partnership among a higher education institution, an employer, and a student, provides opportunities for students to apply classroom knowledge in a workforce environment and engage in professional activities (Lei & Yin, 2019). Internships offer students the opportunity to practice skills as “professionals-in-training” (Kramer-Simpson, 2018). These activities are a common way to transition into the workforce (Kokemuller & Media, n.d.).

Internship experiences can be valuable to both student interns and employers. Students are exposed to work place culture, develop self-confidence, and have the ability to build their resume preparing them for the labor market. For employers an internship can be a challenge as it requires developing meaningful projects, time commitment, and pay issues (Anderson, et al. 2002). However, employers can benefit by using the internship as an opportunity to test and train interns for potential positions and acquire fresh ideas (Internships - The Advantages and Disadvantages of internships, n.d.).

For students, identifying the right internship can be a daunting task. Students' search for internships are often motivated by their prior experience. They seek opportunities that fit their personal preferences, provide day-to-day interactions, and complement their skillset (Montague & Violette, 2017). However, Beard (1999) identified six predictors of a successful internship; academic preparedness, proactivity/aggressiveness, positive attitude, quality of worksite supervision, organizational practices and policies, and compensation. Academic preparedness is different for each program, however may include a specific number of courses, an acceptable grade point average, and a certain number of credits completed (Beard & Morton, 1999). Proactivity/aggressiveness refers to ini-

tiative and volunteering for assignments (Benson & Byrne, 1993). A positive attitude toward the industry, interest in work tasks, and attraction to the sponsoring employer are outcomes to a successful internship (Yongmei, Jun & Weitz, 2011). Also noted in Yongmei, et al., quality worksite supervision or mentoring may be the most important learning tool interns encounter. Organizational practices refer to structure within an internship to include intern and employer meetings, expectations of job, length and terms of the internship. Compensation for an internship may include academic credit or monetary compensation which also shows commitment from the employer and allows students to offset costs from not being able to hold a part-time job (Beard & Morton, 1999). Although most of the work comes from the student intern, there is a responsibility to the employer and the educational institution in providing an opportunity that allows for a successful transition into the industry. Through a review of 57 studies, Sanahuja and Ribes Giner (2015) identified that internships enhance a student's opportunity to be employed after graduating college and are a “win-win” for students, employers, and higher education. Supervisors expressed the benefits of interns as an inexpensive, qualified labor, along with opportunities for interns to develop a variety of job skills.

Sapp and Zhang (2009) found that supervisors of business communication interns ranked writing skills as the lowest performance evaluation when compared to attitude, interaction with others, dependability, computer skills, overall quality of work, ability to make a contribution, time management, spoken communication skills, professional skills, and initiative. Related to the supervisors' expectations and perceptions, students are likely to enter an internship with a positive attitude but less likely to be prepared with the skills they learn in college such as professional skills, initiative, and writing skills, which ranked the lowest three.

Method

This research examines how worksite supervisors of communication interns rated their interns over a five-year period (2014-2018). It is an examination of almost 400 supervisor evaluations of their interns in the communication field.

The largest number of internship sites were in Georgia but at least 10% of the sites were outside the state including international locations. Internship sites included Chambers of Commerce, television sta-

tions, radio stations, newspapers, nonprofit organizations, well known tourist attractions like the Georgia Aquarium, Disney World, and the High Museum of Arts, as well as international public relations and advertising agencies.

Interns spent a minimum of 300 hours at their internship location. Worksite supervisors completed evaluations on their interns after 150 hours were completed and again after the 300 hours were completed. In most cases students were not paid for their internship but did receive three hours of academic credit.

Seventeen variables were examined on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 being Strongly Agree. Variables included academic understanding, classroom knowledge of the interns, response to supervision, initiative, ability to work independently, and teamwork. The intern’s communication skills were rated by overall effective communication, written communication, and verbal communication. Other variables looked at the intern’s quantity and quality of work as well as their professional demeanor, attitude and follow-through. The intern’s punctuality and attendance were two other variables examined and finally the supervisor gave the intern an overall rating.

In addition, two open-ended questions were included: “Describe strengths demonstrated by the student during this work period” and “Indicate any areas for improvement for the remainder of the internship.”

Results

Three hundred and seventy-seven interns were evaluated by the internship worksite supervisors. Twenty-one percent of the interns were male; 78% were female. Thirty-seven percent of the supervisors were male and 62% were female. Supervisors rated the interns on 17 different variables on a 1-5 scale. Overall supervisors rated interns high with a 4.69 on their overall performance. All variable means were above 4.5 on the 1-5 scale.

Supervisors gave interns their highest score, 4.85, on positive attitude; Ranking next were “Came to work regularly” (4.83) and “Came to work on time” (4.81). Interns scored lowest on variables measuring communication and academic ability. Lowest score was 4.61 on written communication. Slightly above the lowest score was academic knowledge (4.63) and academic understanding (4.64) as well as effective communication (4.64) and verbal communication (4.66). See Table 1.

This study examined differences in gender and internship ratings. When male interns were compared to female interns, only one variable showed a statistically significant difference: Female interns were rated higher on the variable measuring initiative (M= 4.73) compared to male interns (M=4.55). None of the other 16 variables showed a statistically significant difference between male and female interns based on the ratings of their supervisors.

Supervisors were asked if they discussed the internship evaluation with the intern. Fifty-seven per-

Table 1: Supervisor Ratings

Variables examined (N= 377)	Mean
Positive Attitude	4.85
Came to work regularly	4.83
Teamwork	4.82
Came to work on time	4.81
Response to Supervision	4.78
Professional Demeanor	4.76
Follow-through	4.75
Independent Work	4.71
Work Quantity	4.70
Initiative	4.69
Overall Performance	4.67
Verbal Communication	4.66
Academic Understanding	4.64
Effective Communication	4.64
Work Quality	4.64
Classroom Knowledge	4.63
Written Communication	4.61

cent of the supervisors replied yes. Supervisors were more likely to discuss the intern report with interns who performed highly on all the variables. Supervisors were less likely to discuss the report with interns who did not perform as highly on variables. Neither gender of student or supervisor influenced whether the supervisor discussed the report with the student.

Although male interns were more likely to have a male supervisor and female interns were more likely to have a female supervisor, there were no statistically significant differences between the reports of male supervisors and female supervisors,

A closer examination of the academic understanding variable showed interns who were rated a 5 in Academic Understanding rated statistically significantly higher on every variable than those who scored a 4. Supervisors who thought students were better prepared academically also thought those students performed better during the internship giving them higher ratings.

Supervisors were asked two open-ended questions. They were asked to “Describe strengths demonstrated by the student during this work period” and to “Indicate any areas for improvement for the remainder of the internship.” Responses to these two questions were analyzed using a constant comparative method. Supervisors reported 26 different strengths of communication interns. Strengths reported most often were that interns were hard working, good team players, self-starters with good attitudes. Almost 20% of supervisors mentioned those strengths when complimenting interns. About 15% of supervisors also commented on the communication skills of students, their ability to work independently, and their ability to learn quickly. Twelve percent of supervisors specifically mentioned writing skills as a strength of the communication interns.

Comments from worksite supervisors on student strengths:

Our intern is an enthusiastic, positive team player capable of working independently with little supervision. He’s driven, takes initiative, and works tirelessly when assigned tasks. He has demonstrated his enthusiasm about our industry, compiling helpful trade reports for the entire sales team, and taking arduous notes in every meeting.

She was really fantastic. Great attitude, punctuality and flexibility, which is especially valuable in an intern.

[Our intern had a] Strong drive to learn new design concepts, ability to interpret what is being said into what needs to be done/created, great attitude, ability to follow directions, and will always finish the project.

When responding to the “areas of improvement” needed in the intern question, over half of worksite supervisors commented that they could not identify any areas of improvement. When supervisors did identify areas of improvement, they most often cited writing skills, taking more initiative, and professional communication as areas that interns needed to improve. Close to 7% of supervisors gave those three areas in their comments. Examples of those comments follow:

[Our intern] can improve in her communication skills. Oftentimes she will what she calls ramble as well as using filler words often when she communicates. In addition to continue to grow in attention to detail with editing, proofing content to make sure it flows well and makes sense.

She seems to have an interest in writing and I think she would be able to improve her writing skills by perhaps taking a course in effective writing in business or communication classes. He can also work on being more of a self-starter. Some projects have logical next steps, but unless they’re spelled out, he won’t think to do them. I’d encourage him to continue to grow and think outside the box, and always ask, What next?

Taking initiative with regard to unsupervised task. If you are not sure what to do – Ask what to do.

Discussion

This study finds worksite supervisors think interns put forth effort demonstrating a good attitude in the workplace but have some weakness in communication and academic preparedness. Findings are consistent with previous studies (Beard, 1999).

Two of the six predictors of a successful internship identified by Beard (1999) were examined in this study, positive attitude and writing. In this study positive attitude had ratings that received the highest ratings. The highest rating average was 4.85 in positive attitude. The other predictor measured, writing, received 4.61, the lowest rating. However, in open-ended questions, 12% of supervisors listed writing as a

strength and only 7% of supervisors stated in an open-ended question that interns needed to improve writing. Sapp and Zhang (2009) also found writing as a weakness of interns. Seven percent of supervisors also listed initiative and professional communication as areas that needed improvement.

Other areas listed most often by supervisors as strengths were good team players, self starters, good attitudes, and hard working. Almost 20% of supervisors used these terms to describe the intern.

It is also important to note that ratings of male and female interns were similar. Only one variable showed a statistically significant difference, females rated higher than males on initiative. Results also showed no differences in ratings by male and female supervisors.

Fifty-seven percent of supervisors said that they had discussed their evaluation with the interns. This study found supervisors were more likely to discuss their evaluation with interns who did well during the internship.

Conclusion

In Williams' (2010) case study, assessment feedback from the internships resulted in strengthening ties with internship worksite supervisors, a discussion about creating a new writing course, and helped faculty validate classroom instructional approaches.

This study and other factors led professors to recognize a need to develop a stronger writing curriculum and have implemented additional writing courses and requirements. A future study may indicate that students who have participated in the additional writing curriculum requirements may receive higher supervisor ratings in the area of writing.

Further research may include a study that determines if worksite supervisor/employer expectations are too high in the areas of writing. In the mass communication field, there are a variety of writing styles, which might be addressed in the evaluation area of writing. Understanding the expectations of the supervisors in the area of writing, which consistently ranked lower for supervisors, may clarify curriculum decisions while preparing interns for their internship. Further explanation is needed from supervisors as to the area of writing that needs to be improved. Is it grammar, style, or structure? Further studies and discussions with supervisors may offer ideas of how faculty at higher institutions can better prepare students for internships in the area of writing.

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