

2 Problem Definition

During my 15-week internship program, it was shocking to realize that at last 3 weeks were spent on my training: 20% of the time I was working there was used doing research, calling tech support and trial-and-error. From the most basic thing such as how to answer the phone to the most complex website management, a majority of the tasks I was assigned I would be left to my own devices, with little help from my supervisor or other managers. It would make mistakes to figure out how to do certain things, but by then a potential chamber member would assume I was rude or unqualified. For example, once I checked a database that indicated which event attendees had paid. I did not know it was updated every 3 days. As a result, I made a mistake by assuming the database was up-to-date and charged an attendee who had already paid. I then, from there had to make sure he was reimbursed. It was disconcerting that many tasks I was given daily were not in the job description I received before joining. This is, in my experience, a common practice in most job environments and having interviewed fellow interns at different companies, particularly frequent for corporate interns.

This leads to the questions: “If a company relies heavily on interns, shouldn’t they create an intern training program? What would be the causes and consequences of an inefficient or poorly designed intern training program?”

2.1 Symptoms, Causes and Consequences

Any company that adds interns to their workforce does, to different extents, intern training. However, the effectiveness of each training program can be the difference between an efficient intern and an intern that does not adequately adapt to its new workplace in short time. In a short-duration (15 weeks) program like mine, spending 20% of the time learning to fulfill the given tasks is not acceptable if the company wants to stay competitive. With interns there is inherently a high turnover rate. Because they spend much of their time learning ad-hoc, they are effective and efficient employees only about 80% of the time.

This lack of competitiveness in interns can lead to costly mistakes due to the lack of effectiveness and efficiency, even if this is only for a relatively short period of time. This is a cost shared by both the intern and employee/internship site, and every company should analyze if it is a cost they are prepared to cover.

2.2 Diagram and Table

This is an example of the learning curve for a new task with the training I received on site. The task consisted in adding business cards to the database on the shared drive folder.

Task	Hours per Task	Cumulative Hours
First time	10 hrs	10.0 hrs
Second time	5.1 hrs	15.1 hrs
Third time	4.74 hrs	19.84 hrs
Fourth time	1.5 hrs	21.24 hrs
Fifth time	0.6 hrs	21.84 hrs

*TABLE 1: Task Completion Time. Created by Gerardo Audelo Villalobos January 2013. Based on (Ritter, F. E., & Schooler, L. J., 2002).

What this graph shows is that the trial and error phase utilizes a lot more resources for executing tasks, as completing them the first 2 or 3 times is by far more time consuming. Once the intern gains the knowledge and experience to execute them more efficiently, these tasks take minimal time to complete.

The first time I executed this task I had to ask several members of the staff, most of whom had little idea how it was done. Improper advice was given until a staff member pointed at a Card Scanner. It lacked a Serial Key for the installation, a USB cable and the software installation CD. After procuring it from the manufacturer and purchasing a USB cable, it was still unclear what format the software should export it to. Having no indication whatsoever, I chose a very common extension in XLS for Office Excel, which was quickly proven wrong when the file format was incompatible with the company's accounting program. The second and third time completing the task, most of the time was again spent on trial and error to find a format that was compatible for both the website management and accounting software. Retro-processing previous files, I found the proper extension and every successive time I had to scan business cards, it would take me an estimate of 30 minutes for every 50 cards, which included an average of 15 idle minutes spent on the system uploading files to the server.

This task was not included in the job description, probably being deemed unworthy of mention. However, it soon became a daily task as every staff member was unable to use the program and scanner and would hand their collections of business cards for me to scan.

Diagram 1: Process of Intern Training

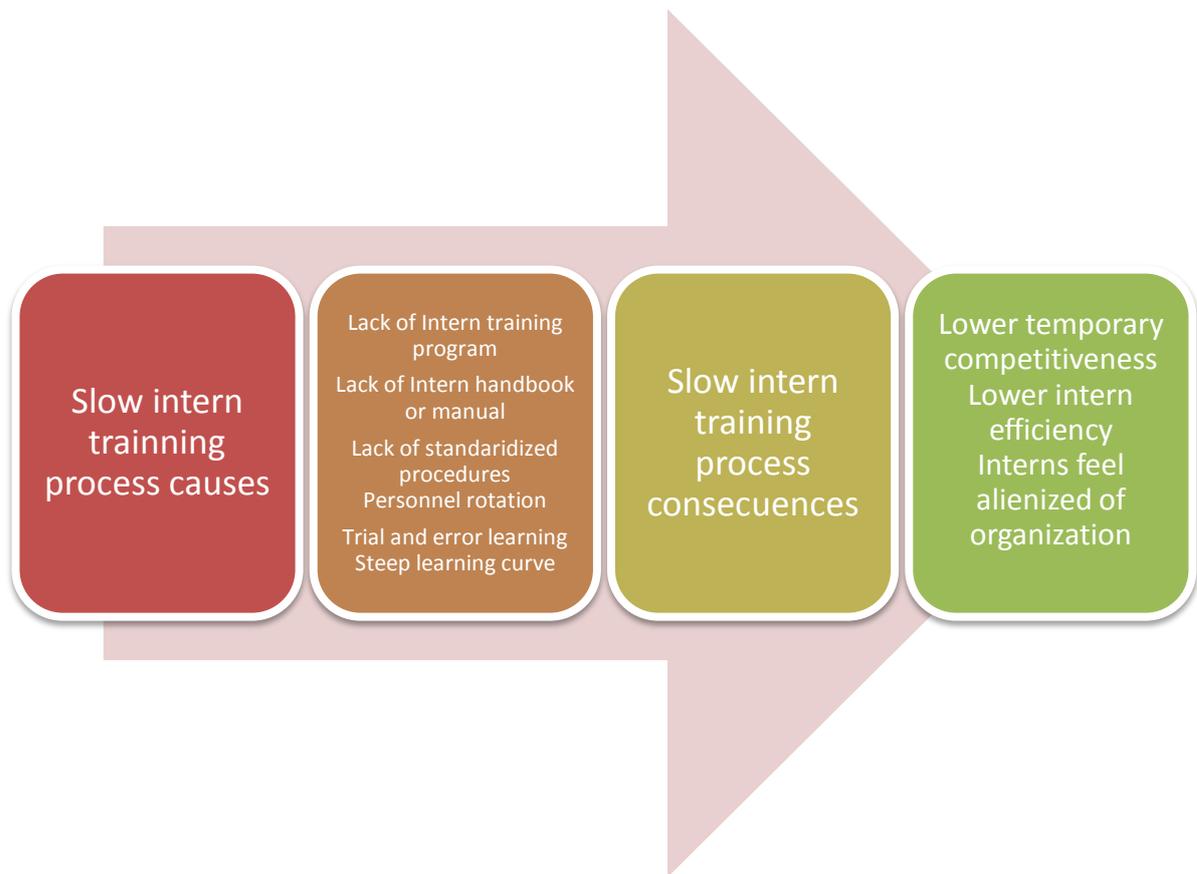


DIAGRAM 1, created by Gerardo Audelo Villalobos January 2013

With this diagram, it is noted that the issue of slow and inefficient intern training exists and that the consequences of it affect both the intern and the internship site.

2.3 Review of Literature and Background Research

Internship/residency, as defined by the Bureau of Labor: *Training that involves preparation in a field such as medicine or teaching, generally under supervision*

in a professional setting, such as a hospital or classroom. This type of training may occur before one is employed. Completion of an internship or residency program is commonly required for state licensure or certification in fields including medicine, counseling, architecture, and teaching. This category does not include internships that are suggested for advancement. Examples of occupations in the internship/residency category include physicians and surgeons and marriage and family therapists (United States Department of Labor- National Occupational Data Definitions, 2012).

A handbook, as defined by Business Dictionary (WebFinance Inc, 2011) is a *comprehensive and detailed work on a particular topic for practitioners, structured for quick reference and often used as a supplement to a text book. The term is commonly used interchangeably with manual.*

So, in essence, a handbook can be used as reference for interns that need a quick and practical review of a topic they might be familiarized with but lack some specific information about. Because of this, a handbook needs frequently asked questions and short explanations of procedures that a new employee or intern might face.

According to the Intern Training program created by the Arts and Administration Graduate Students of the University of Oregon (Bolander, 2005), the Internship handbook should have the following:

- a. History of organization
- b. Biography of Executive Director
- c. Staff directory
- d. Department descriptions (optional)
- e. Intern responsibilities
- d. Policy and procedures
- e. "Odds and Ends" for interns
- f. Helpful hints for new interns

Intern Responsibilities are often unclear, especially with a job description that is neither precise nor full.

Department Descriptions and Staff Directory offer great tools for knowing the rest of the staff. It is common that interns work for other departments as well as their main position, and understanding the roles of each department will dissipate confusion for the intern.

Policy and procedures are some of the most common questions interns can have. What information can be shared on an e-mail? What tone should one use when contacting fellow staff members or clients? How do I request materials such as printer toner or paper? If a Chamber member asks me the password for the wireless connection, can I give it to them? These are questions that, if unanswered, can have grave consequences for all the involved parties.

According to the University of Clemson's Michelin Career Center (Michelin Career Center, 2011), these are the questions potential employers should ask before hiring an intern:

What will the intern do? Be as specific as possible in regard to projects to be completed, committees or meetings the student can join/observe, etc. While most interns will spend a portion of their time on clerical work, it is expected that the majority of their time be spent on professional work – not administrative.

Having an specific list of tasks, it is easy for the intern to know if they possess the required skills, if they will gain experience they might find valuable in their professional future and formulate goals to accomplish during their internship.

Who will supervise the intern? A professional staff member (non-clerical) should be chosen to serve as the point person for the intern. This person will be the contact with the intern's college, provide leadership and direction for the intern, and evaluate the intern throughout and at the end of the experience. Choose someone who

is committed to teaching and mentoring a new professional (and has the time to do so).

A supervisor with good interpersonal skills should be a priority given that the intern, in exchange for their services, needs mentoring as a form of payment. A staff member with little experience or that lacks time to provide advice would make a poor choice for a supervisor.

What qualifications do you want the intern to have? Think about the skills you'll need this intern to bring to the position – technical/computer skills, communication skills, teamwork, etc. We encourage you to avoid listing a GPA requirement because GPA is not a predictor of success on the job. You might be ruling out a qualified, hard-working student on the basis of an arbitrary number.

What type of programmatic options can you offer an intern? Decide how the intern will be trained and who in the organization will be involved. Try to find ways for the intern to interact with other staff in the department and other departments in the organization. Seek ways to assimilate them into the organization – lunches with executives, attending/observing meetings, shadowing sales calls, etc. Remember, a good intern experience will reap you much positive word of mouth on campus while a negative experience will make it more difficult for you to recruit future interns or permanent hires.

Finding a way to assimilate interns quickly is a necessity given the short duration of most internships and most recommendations should help accelerate the process. In my case, none of these were done with the exception of observing meetings, which was also done near the end of my internship.

Will you pay the intern? Most students work part-time to contribute to college expenses and would be unable to leave a part-time position for an unpaid internship. Offering a wage for the internship program

will ensure you are attracting the best candidates. While some industries don't or are unable to pay (broadcast communications, non-profits, human services), most others offer an hourly wage averaging \$10 to \$14. If you are unable to make a salary commitment, at least find ways to help the student cover his internship-related expenses (mileage, parking, lunch) or pay a stipend at the end of the internship.

Additionally, these are their suggestions for the program:

Orientation. Take time the first day to orient the intern to the office, introducing him to other staff members and providing an overview of the organization hierarchy. It is helpful to identify particular staff members the interns should go to for help with office procedures and other questions if their supervisor is not available. Even simple gestures like pointing out the restroom and break room will make the intern feel welcome.

Company information. A good first step in helping the intern understand the organization is to supply information in the form of websites, manuals, newsletters and other literature that will help the intern understand the organization and industry in which they now work. Be sure to help the intern understand corporate culture as much as possible.

Resources. Without a desk, computer, phone, and a small selection of office supplies, the intern will be ineffective and uncomfortable.

Expectations. During the first week, discuss your expectations of the student's performance and his expectations of the internship experience. Write down these expectations and review them on a regular basis.

Having an open discussion about these items at the beginning of the experience will help both parties stay on track and will result in a more positive experience.

Direction. In addition to a well-written position description, an intern will need, especially at first, very clear instructions on tasks to complete. Help the intern learn by giving background behind a particular project, teaching him about the purpose of the project and inviting his questions. Assigning the right amount and type of work is a challenging part of supervising an intern. Be sure to provide challenging projects from the beginning; interns that are underutilized often feel unneeded. Watch for signs that they are confused or bored – they might not verbalize their concerns.

Feedback. Interns need feedback on their work on a project basis and also midway through and at the conclusion of the internship. As with any evaluation, make sure you point out both positive elements of the intern's work and points that can be improved upon. Give the intern time to ask questions and clarify expectations. Having at least one evaluation in writing will provide quantitative feedback and help with your record keeping. Consider requiring the intern to evaluate his internship experience so you can make internal changes to your program (Michelin Career Center, 2011).

Company information is vital for the intern: an intern is an employee, and being ignorant of company information can damage their status. As an example, it was my experience to be uninformed that the greater Washington Hispanic Chamber of Commerce had a Foundation, with very different objectives and procedures and gave incorrect information. This gives a terrible professional impression and damages the organization's image. While privileged information might be protected, it is wise to share the rest with interns. After all, they should be treated as employees if they are expected to behave as such.

Orientation and expectations can be vital for short-term internships. Goals can be created, and a more precise job description can be formulated. This benefits

the intern, as they can be better prepared for their tasks and the manager or supervisor, as they will be able to measure the intern's progress and task completion.

2.4 Interview With A Fellow Intern

To verify the problem's existence and find out if it was an isolated problem or not, I conducted a personal interview with Christopher E. Toyloy (Toyloy, 2012), who was an intern at the Virginia Chamber of Commerce, a very similar job and organization. He described an almost identical insertion into the VCC, including the lack of any sort of guidelines/manual that made it difficult for him to be efficient for an estimated 3 weeks. Toyloy was a fellow student from Panama and TWC, and shared his insight:

“On the first day, I was shocked by the lack of preparation prior to my arrival. I had trouble going into the building because my supervisor didn't tell security that I would be working there. I wasn't formally introduced to the rest of the staff, just to the other interns.”

After being asked about the training he received, he said the following:

“Training? No. They just assume you know how to do it or that you will learn eventually. They don't bother teaching you what they assume are easily-learned skills. You learn them on the go and after you mess up a couple times. They give you a corporate e-mail account, some passwords and a desk and start asking you to do things.”

When I asked about the improvement of the Intern Training Program, he admitted it was necessary and that an employee manual would be a big advantage over the current situation.

2.5 Intern Training Problem

Talking with fellow interns, it quickly became evident very few companies could be bothered with giving a new intern proper training and were willing to let the interns spend valuable time learning the procedures themselves.

and a short interview with 10 different interns verified that they were given similar tasks without orientation or training, thus the learning process was slow. Reducing the time it takes to learn a task that will be asked to complete several times a week (if not daily) would allow for a better execution during the learning process and subsequent times as well as a degree of mastery by the end of the internship.

It is, therefore, why I believe a solution to intern training should be found to better exploit the abilities of interns as well as letting them gain more experience at their internship site.