

Enhancing the Reliability of Internship Evaluations

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Internships are valuable components of higher education academic programs benefiting the student, employer as well as the university. The authors argue that the performance evaluation of students during their internships are the closest many business programs will get to an assessment of actual job performance, given the legal issues involved in gathering job performance data from alumni. The purpose of this study was to demonstrate that the evaluation of students by their internship employer during the internship is a valuable tool in not only assessing student learning but also program review and revision. The results of previous studies suggest that the evaluation of student learning through employer evaluations has substantial merit, provided that the performance dimensions are well defined and the response categories are appropriately anchored. Because of limited variability in the previous study, the authors present a revision of the employer evaluation instrument that better meets the learning goals of the internship, has better-defined performance dimensions, and appropriate response anchors. After revising the internship evaluation instrument, results demonstrate a significant increase in the variability of performance ratings. This increase in variability bodes well for the examination of academic factors that may well predict internship/job performance.

INTRODUCTION

As institutions of higher education struggle to keep pace with employer demands, they are constantly altering curriculum in order to improve educational value. In the continuous effort to enhance the value of student education and to generate effective decisions, universities must be informed of employers' attitudes towards current programs and curriculums if they intend for their students to exceed employer expectations. The most common method used to gauge employer satisfaction regarding institutional programs is surveying the employer concerning the quality of the interns produced by the institution. The employer evaluation of the intern can then

be used as an overall assessment of an institution's program. If employers are satisfied with their intern(s), it is generally assumed the institution's curriculum meets or even surpasses employers' needs.

Since internships have long been regarded as an important supplement to undergraduate education and this type of education plays a vital role in enhancing the preparation of undergraduates in the entry-level job market, it is beneficial for institutions to be concerned with the type of intern they are producing. Administrators and faculty should systematically assess their learning outcomes to ensure that the program develops students who will meet employer expectations. The goal of the institution should be to repeatedly surpass the criterion set by employers. The purpose of this study is to examine the value of intern evaluations in the assessment of both management and marketing programs.

Literature Review

Before demonstrating how employer evaluations may be used for program revision, a review of the benefits of internships will be provided. It is important to note the many benefits of internships before delving into how they can be used to improve university curricula. The benefits discussed include those to the student, employer and the institution.

The most obvious benefits provided through an internship are those to the students participating in the internship. Internships present the student with an opportunity to gain invaluable experience. They offer the student a chance to bridge the gap between expectations developed in the classroom and the reality of the working environment. Internships can help expand upon immediate skills that can improve course performance, such as better time management and communication skills, better self-discipline, heightened initiative and an overall better self-concept (Dennis, 1996). Overall, interns are better prepared to enter the job market and enjoy greater job satisfaction (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000). Employers are looking for students who have gained hands on experience throughout their college education. Internships supply the student with the real world experience employers require.

It should be noted that while internships may provide students with the above-mentioned benefits, certain criteria must be met in order to provide these high level advantages (Berger, 1991; Taylor, 1988). For an internship to provide the best possible outcomes for students, professional-level work should be available for the intern (Ramus, 1997; Berger, 1991; Wurfel, 1985). Interns who are integrated into the work environment and treated as part of the organizational team will enjoy and appreciate their position a considerable amount more than those who are given menial tasks (Ramus, 1997). Interns should also be given projects that are challenging and require a substantial amount of responsibility, this will motivate the intern to perform much better than a student who receives the burdensome chores regular office workers loathe (Coco, 2000; Ramus, 1997; Wurfel 1985). Internships are the most successful when both the employer and the intern are motivated to achieve the best results (Coco, 2000; Ramus, 1997). Students whose internships meet the aforementioned criteria reap the most rewards and gain a greater amount of skill as opposed to those who do not.

The benefits and criteria of internships previously listed should be incorporated into the program revision process. If an institution is producing interns who perform well in this type of environment, employers will be satisfied. If they are not, employers will be able to point out problem areas students encounter in their evaluation. This information can then be used to make further improvements.

Employers are also benefactors of internships. Research shows there are many areas companies benefit from by actively participating in college internship programs. Interns provide the company with inexpensive workers and cheap labor. In other words, internships provide low-cost assistance with routine duties (Coco, 2000; Pianko, 1996). Interns hired through an internship program maintain a high probability of being hired by the company, meaning they may very well be the future of the company (McCollum, 2001). Also, new hires who have completed internships do not require the same amount of training compared to new hires who have not had an internship (Pianko, 1996).

Internships act not only as a job placement opportunity for students, but employers are able to use internships as a valuable recruiting channel and may evaluate potential employees virtually risk-free (Coco, 2000; Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000). Internship programs can fill a dual role in recruiting since students who have had an enjoyable internship experience will tell other students at their school a particular company is an excellent place to work (Pianko, 1996). In this regard, internships can be a significant cost cutter for employers. Overall it costs less to hire an intern. The average cost of hiring a college recruit with internship experience is almost half that of hiring an experienced individual (Pianko, 1996).

The university is the last major beneficiary of the internship program. Universities and colleges that provide students with a well-maintained internship program are able to substantiate their curriculum in applied settings. Internships also play a vital role in assisting universities with student placement at the time of graduation. If a university has a well-nurtured relationship with a corporation that provides available internships, the university may be able to obtain financial support from that company (Coco, 2000). Internships also provide the university with a powerful marketing tool/recruitment tool. Prospective students and their parents are realizing the need for excellent preparation for employment following the four years of a college education. Having a well-maintained internship program is an incentive for individuals to choose a particular college or university (Coco, 2000; Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000).

This literature suggests that employers and universities value internships, and that they are a benefit to all parties involved. After reviewing the benefits to the students, employers and universities, and the value and importance internships hold, the question may be asked; how can a university improve its program in order to better prepare a student for their internship? This research seeks to answer that question through the use of intern evaluation data. The evaluations completed by employers will identify strengths and weaknesses of the institution's business program. The institution will then be able to capitalize on its strengths and modify their areas of improvement.

METHODS

Participants

The participants in this analysis consisted of 81 supervisors of students with a major in the John L. Grove College of Business of Shippensburg University during the 1998-1999 academic year. Each intern completed their internship in their junior or senior year. The distribution of majors consisted of 46% marketing majors, and the other 54% were management majors.

Survey Administration

Employers completed an evaluation at the completion of the interns' internship experience (Appendix A). The survey evaluated the satisfaction of the employer in regard to the intern's

performance. The employer's assessment concentrated on the skill, knowledge, character traits, and performance objectives of the intern. The scale used to rate the intern ranges from poor to excellent, also including a not applicable category. The values that correspond to the ratings are as follows: 1 – Not Applicable; 2 – Poor; 3 – Fair; 4 – Good; 5 – Excellent.

The skills category included questions regarding written and oral communication skills, critical thinking/problem solving skills, ability to work with others, and computer/technical skills. Questions concerning the interns' knowledge within major, general business knowledge, and willingness and ability to learn were included in the knowledge category. The category representing character traits included the following: responsibility, dependability, initiative, attitude toward work, and attendance/punctuality. The final category included questions in regard to performance objectives, such as quality of work, quantity of work, and their overall performance.

The mean and standard deviation of each question in the survey were calculated based on the ratings from the employers; the lowest possible score being one, with the highest possible score being five.

As can be seen from the data in Table 1, the standard deviations of the evaluated categories do not meet the generally recognized criteria of one-quarter of the scale range. Therefore, the goal in the evaluation revision became two-fold: to better define both the rating categories and the response categories that will enhance the variability and the subsequent validity of the evaluation instrument; and better define the learning goals of the internship for assurance of learning purposes.

TABLE 1

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ability to Learn	4.13	.21
Attitude toward Work	4.36	.43
Relations with Co-workers	4.41	.56
Professional Growth	4.18	.37
Reaction to Supervision	4.29	.47
Quality of Work	4.19	.52
Dependability	4.31	.76
Judgment	4.00	.82
Preparation	3.56	.80
Personal Growth	4.10	.28

The evaluation instrument was re-designed with significant input from employers, alumni who had an internship experience, and faculty. The primary focus of this effort was to better define the both the rating and response categories while insuring that learning objectives could be assessed, and making it both straightforward and useful for employers. The evaluation instrument that resulted from this effort is attached in Appendix B.

Over the subsequent three years, the data on employer internship evaluation was compiled. The sample consisted of 420 junior and senior business majors in the John L. Grove College of Business.

The mean and standard deviation of each question and category (skill, knowledge, character traits, and performance objectives) in the “revised evaluation instrument” were calculated based on the ratings from the employers; the lowest possible score being one, with the highest possible score being five.

As can be seen from the data in Table 2, the standard deviations of the evaluated categories do generally meet recognized criteria of one-quarter of the scale range. Therefore, the goals in the evaluation revision: to better define both the rating categories and the response categories that will enhance the variability and the subsequent validity of the evaluation instrument; and better define the learning goals of the internship for assurance of learning purposes appear to have been accomplished.

TABLE 2

	Mean:	Standard Deviation:
Skills:		
Written Communication	3.77	1.27
Oral Communication	4.13	.91
Problem/Solving Critical Thinking	4.17	.87
Collaboration/Working with Others	4.47	.89
Computer/Technical	4.28	.91
Knowledge:		
Knowledge Within Major	4.02	1.02
General Business Knowledge	3.94	1.00
Willingness to Learn	4.60	.78
Ability to Learn	4.43	.84
Character Traits:		
Responsibility/Dependability	4.44	.92
Initiative	4.22	.97
Attitude Toward Work	4.45	.87
Attendance/Punctuality	4.34	.94
Performance Objectives:		
Quality of Work	4.27	.90
Quantity of Work	4.21	.97
Overall Performance	4.29	.93

While both employers and faculty supervisor were overwhelming satisfied with the revised instrument and the College of Business committee was delighted with the linkage to learning assessment, and while the variability was substantially increased, the criteria of a standard deviation of one-quarter of the scale range was not consistently achieved. Table 3 provides comparison of the means and standard deviations of similar rating categories between the original and revised instrument.

TABLE 3

Dimension	Mean #1	S.D. #1	Mean #2	S.D. #2
Ability to Learn	4.13	.21	4.43	.84
Attitude toward Work	4.36	.43	4.45	.87
Relations with Co-workers	4.41	.56	4.47	.89
Quality of Work	4.19	.52	4.27	.90
Judgment	4.00	.82	4.17	.87
Preparation	3.56	.80	3.94	1.00

The data suggest that while the performance evaluation of the interns has not markedly changed, the variability of the ratings on the “common” dimensions was substantially increased. These results bode well for the reliability of the instrument and its subsequent utility in students’ learning outcome assessment.

Additionally, in reviewing the matrix of the inter-correlations between the revised instrument questions (Tables 4 and 5), there appears to be a relatively consistent pattern of higher correlations between questions within a Category than there is between questions across Categories. This appears to demonstrate evidence of both convergent and discriminate validity.

APPLIED CONCLUSIONS

Universities have been scrambling over the past few years to respond to various recommendations from a multitude of commissions that they need to be more specific to the public about what students have learned by the time they receive their degree. Employers are also weighing in with their recommendations. A survey of 301 business leaders suggests that colleges find ways to assess a student’s ability to apply college learning to real-world settings. The surveyed business leaders specifically addressed the assessment of internship experiences (AAC&U, 2008).

Internships play an important role in the assurance of learning of nearly every college student, provided that the goals of the student, the program, the university, and the organization come together to formulate the aforementioned benefits. When the goals of the program and the goals of the employer complement one another, there is a greater chance the college/university is providing interns that meet the needs of the employers.

It is no longer safe to assume the university education has helped students gain the skills necessary to succeed in the working environment. It is critical that the learning goals of the internship be specified and that they assessment of goal accomplishment be specified. Moreover, as this study demonstrated, it is critical that the evaluation of the assessment process and instruments take place to insure that the results are reliable and that they are useful for program improvement.

TABLE 4

	SKILLS					KNOWLEDGE					
	Clear expression of ideas in writing and in appropriate grammatical form	Effective expression of ideas to others in individual and group situations	Shows ability to identify fundamental concepts, ideas, themes, or issues that help to integrate, interpret underlying patterns in a set of data or information	The extent to which the intern works cooperatively with others, recognizes the needs and desires of other people, treats others with respect and courtesy, and inspires their respect and confidence	The extent to which the intern demonstrates technical knowledge required to perform the job	The extent to which the intern demonstrates and is able to apply their educational learning within the business and work environment	The extent to which the intern understands established business practices and work culture, processes and procedures	The interest and desire the intern shows in learning new concepts, ideas, programs or facets of the company	The ease in which the intern grasps new concepts, ideas, or tasks that are not a part of those normally expected		
Clear expression of ideas in writing and in appropriate grammatical form	1.00										
Effective expression of ideas	0.48	1.00									
Shows ability to identify fundamental concepts	0.39	0.51	1.00								
The extent to which the intern works cooperatively with others	0.28	0.36	0.39	1.00							
The extent to which the intern demonstrates technical knowledge	0.29	0.32	0.40	0.28	1.00						
Intern is able to apply their educational learning	0.43	0.46	0.51	0.33	0.32	1.00					
The extent to which the intern understands established business practices	0.37	0.54	0.42	0.29	0.28	0.65	1.00				
The interest and desire the intern shows in learning	0.22	0.36	0.41	0.39	0.29	0.47	0.53	1.00			
The ease in which the intern grasps new concepts	0.28	0.48	0.54	0.38	0.40	0.59	0.57	0.73	1.00		
Can be counted on to turn in assignments when due	0.19	0.32	0.40	0.37	0.23	0.45	0.47	0.61	0.60		
The extent to which the intern shows initiative	0.31	0.48	0.58	0.34	0.23	0.51	0.54	0.66	0.67		
The extent to which the intern demonstrates a willingness to cooperate	0.22	0.42	0.43	0.44	0.25	0.46	0.52	0.72	0.70		
Can be counted on to attend meetings, etc.	0.25	0.39	0.37	0.39	0.23	0.51	0.52	0.58	0.59		
The extent to which completed work is accurate	0.36	0.52	0.53	0.39	0.31	0.59	0.62	0.69	0.71		
The extent to which compares to standards for the job or produced by other employees	0.34	0.53	0.47	0.38	0.27	0.58	0.61	0.61	0.65		
The overall skills, knowledge, and character traits exuded by the intern	0.30	0.56	0.59	0.44	0.28	0.63	0.64	0.73	0.75		

**Table 4
Continued**

	CHARACTER TRAITS						PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES	
	Can be counted on to turn in assignments when due; volunteer to assist others in projects; and complete work independently	The extent to which the intern shows initiative in making work improvements; identifies and corrects errors; develops new work task, or solves problems	The extent to which the intern cooperates and accepts direction and instruction in a positive manner	Can be counted on to attend meetings, arrive to meetings and work on time and as scheduled	The extent to which completed work is accurate, neat, well organized, thorough and applicable	The extent to which the amount of work completed compares to quantity standards for the job or produced by other employees	Based on the overall skills demonstrated by the intern, knowledge shown by the intern, and character traits exuded by the intern	
Clear expression of ideas in writing and in appropriate grammatical form								
Effective expression of ideas								
Shows ability to identify fundamental concepts								
The extent to which the intern works cooperatively with others								
The extent to which the intern demonstrates technical knowledge								
Intern is able to apply their educational learning								
The extent to which the intern understands established business practices								
The interest and desire the intern shows in learning								
The ease in which the intern grasps new concepts								
Can be counted on to turn in assignments when due	0.60	1.00						
The extent to which the intern shows initiative	0.67	0.61	1.00					
The extent to which the intern demonstrates a willingness to cooperate	0.70	0.64	0.69	1.00				
Can be counted on to attend meetings, etc.	0.59	0.56	0.58	0.68	1.00			
The extent to which completed work is accurate	0.71	0.62	0.65	0.68	0.63	1.00		
The extent to which compares to standards for the job or produced by other employees	0.65	0.63	0.67	0.64	0.61	0.72	1.00	
The overall skills, knowledge, and character traits exuded by the intern	0.75	0.66	0.71	0.76	0.67	0.82	0.74	1.00

Overall, because of the increased satisfaction by both employers and faculty, the data provided with the revised employer evaluations will no doubt be more useful in the evaluation of student interns and in the program revision process. Additionally, because of the increased variability in the assessment instrument, future research on the predictability of internship success is significantly enhanced. Finally, for a research-only perspective, it is essential to remember that academic criteria, such as a minimum 2.5 GPA, established to obtaining a university-sponsored internship will result in a restriction of range problem for the researcher and impede the predictability of the evaluation instrument.

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Appendix A: Employer Survey

	Not Applicable 1	Poor 2	Fair 3	Good 4	Excellent 5
Skills:					
Written Communication					
Oral Communication					
Problem Solving/Critical Thinking					
Collaboration/Working with Others					
Computer/Technical					
Knowledge:					
Knowledge Within Major					
General Business knowledge					
Willingness to Learn					

Ability to Learn					
Character Traits:					
Responsibility/Dependability					
Initiative					
Attitude Toward Work					
Attendance/Punctuality					
Performance Objectives:					
Quality of Work					
Quantity of Work					
Overall Performance					

Appendix B:

Supervisor/Employer Evaluation

**Shippensburg University
John L. Grove College of Business
Business Internship Program**

Intern's Name: _____

Major: _____

Dates of Internship: _____, 20____ to _____, 20____

Employer: _____

Please return to:
Business Internship Director
Shippensburg University
1871 Old Main Drive
Shippensburg, PA 17257-2299
717-477-4003 (FAX)

Please rate the intern in each category based on the following scale. Rate the intern objectively, compared with previous interns you have employed, with other personnel assigned the same or similar responsibilities, or with individual standards.

5 – Consistently exceeds what is expected

- Job performance easily exceeds job requirements; performance approaches best possible attainment

4 – Frequently exceeds what is expected

- Accomplishments are above expected level or essential requirements

3 – Consistently achieves what is expected

- Meets some of the established objectives in a satisfactory and adequate manner

2 – Occasionally fails to achieve what is expected

- Meets some of the established objectives and expectations but definite areas exist where achievements are substandard

1 – Consistently fails to achieve what is expected

- Performance is at a level below established objectives with the result that overall contribution is marginal and substandard

0 – Not applicable

1. Skills

Supervisor Rating		
	Written Communication	Clear expression of ideas in writing and in appropriate grammatical form
	Oral Communication	Effective expression of ideas or viewpoints to others in individual or group situations
	Problem Solving/Critical Thinking	Shows ability to identify fundamental concepts, ideas, themes, or issues that help to integrate, interpret underlying patterns in a set of data or information
	Collaboration/ Working with Others	The extent to which the intern works cooperatively with others, recognizes the needs and desires of other people, treats others with respect and courtesy, and inspires their respect and confidence
	Computer/ Technical	The extent to which the intern demonstrates technical knowledge required to perform the job

2. Knowledge

Supervisor Rating		
	Knowledge within Major	The extent to which the intern demonstrates and is able to apply their educational learning within the business and work environment
	General Business Knowledge	The extent to which the intern understands established business practices, governance, culture, processes and procedures
	Willingness to Learn	The interest and desire the intern shows in learning new concepts, ideas, programs or facets of the company
	Ability to Learn	The ease in which the intern grasps new concepts, ideas, or tasks that are not a part of those normally expected.

3. Character Traits

Supervisor Rating		
	Responsibility/ Dependability	Can be counted on to turn in assignments when due; volunteer to assist others in projects; and complete work independently
	Initiative	The extent to which the intern shows initiative in making work improvements identifies and corrects errors, develops new work tasks, or solves problems
	Attitude Toward Work	The extent to which the intern demonstrates a willingness to cooperate and accept direction and instruction in a positive manner
	Attendance/ Punctuality	Can be counted on to attend meetings, arrive to meetings and work on time and as scheduled

4. Performance Objectives

Supervisor Rating		
	Quality of Work	The extent to which completed work is accurate, neat, well organized, thorough and applicable
	Quantity of Work	The extent to which the amount of work completed compares to quantity standards for the job or produced by other employees
	Overall Performance	Based on the overall skills demonstrated by the intern, knowledge shown by the intern, and character traits exuded by the intern