

In The Eye of the Beholder: The Relationship between Intern Effectiveness, Satisfaction, and Job Characteristics

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Faculty and site supervisors hope that the internships they provide to undergraduate students afford a valuable learning experience that bridge the gap between classroom learning and application. However, little empirical research has measured the components of an effective internship experience. In this study, the authors examined the relationship between internship job characteristics and interns' performance and satisfaction from two perspectives: the site supervisor and the intern. At the conclusion of their internship, 159 student interns and their site supervisors completed an adaptation of the Job Diagnostic Survey, and supervisors rated intern performance. The results suggest that job characteristics are in the eye of the beholder; that is, supervisors and interns viewed the intern's work differently. For example, supervisors reported that they believed that the interns were more satisfied and that they learned more about their career direction than did the interns themselves. Core job characteristics and contextual variables were associated with intern satisfaction, but supervisors and interns perspectives differed with respect to performance. Compared to their supervisors, students reported that their internships possessed more task identification and allowed for more co-worker support. Most of the core job characteristics and several contextual variables as seen by the supervisor were related to intern performance. From the students' perspective, only task feedback and few contextual variables were associated with performance. From both the

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supervisors' and students' perspectives, all of the core job characteristics and contextual variables were associated with the internship satisfaction. We discuss several implications of these findings for designing motivating internships that drive high intern satisfaction and high performance.

Key words: internship effectiveness, satisfaction, job characteristics

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INTRODUCTION

More than a dozen years ago, 92% of business schools offered some type of internship experience (Coco, 2000). Knouse and Fontenot (2008) note four positive outcomes of internships for business students and employers: (1) screening device for employers to identify potential new hires, (2) helps students seeking jobs, (3) validates student career direction, and (4), provides an opportunity to experience a realistic job preview for a career. Friedman and Roodin (2012) reviewed the importance of internships in undergraduate education. Internships are widely accepted as an important element of undergraduate education (D'Abate, Youndt, & Wenzel, 2009). Narayanan, Olk and Fukami (2010) defined an internship as a term-length placement of an enrolled student in an organization (paid or unpaid) with a faculty supervisor, a site-company supervisor, and some academic credit earned toward the degree. Internships often bridge the gap between concepts learned in traditional academic settings and methods (e.g., classrooms and readings) and the workplace (Wesley & Bickle, 2005), help interns confirm their academic and employment choices, and provide networking contacts useful for gaining employment (Jackson & Jackson, 2009). Students with intern experience are more marketable following graduation than students without internships, and that employers will pay a premium for students with an internship experience (Gault, Leach & Duey, 2010; Knouse &

Fontenot, 2008; Fuller & Schoenberger, 1991; Hecker, 1992). A quarter of the nearly 480 respondents in a Wall Street survey said that more than 50% of their new-graduate hires had been interns at their companies and 14% said more than 75% were (Cheney, 2010). Most employers use internships to screen job candidates (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2011). Given the emphasis placed by employers on internships, it is no wonder that business schools encourage students to have several internships. Despite the emphasis placed on this form of experiential learning, little research has been conducted that guides site supervisors, faculty, and students on how interns' performance is evaluated. In this study, the authors examined the relationship between internship job characteristics and interns' performance and satisfaction from two perspectives: the site supervisor and the intern.

Many studies have noted an advantage in the job market for students who have completed an internship, which remains the dominant way that employers identify job candidates (Knouse and Fontenot, 2008). Surveys of college graduates from 2011 report a distinct advantage for paid internships vs. unpaid internships among students being hired directly after graduation (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2011). It is clear among students that compensation for internships is a major consideration; without pay many students are simply unable to afford to participate. However, equally important is the likelihood that such internships will lead directly to full-time employment. This makes the internship experience all the more valuable in the view of students. However, there has been little research documenting intern effectiveness and satisfaction as viewed by employers and the students themselves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the existing literature focuses on students' satisfaction with their internship experience. In their review, Knouse and Fontenot (2008) reported studies by Rothman (2007) that showed student satisfaction was correlated with internship placements that offered challenging work, regular feedback from mentors, clear, objective assignment of

tasks, broad exposure to a number of departments or units, and respect from employee staff and mentors at the business. Both employers and student benefit from clear, specific internship job descriptions (Knouse and Fontenot, 2008). This leads to realistic expectations for both students and employers and higher levels of satisfaction among the former. Giving students some choice in the work that they will perform as interns also relates positively to higher ratings of satisfaction (Naryanan, Olk, and Fukami (2006). Interns also benefit from the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Directed writing assignments, journals, e-mail, or regular telephone contact with faculty and on site mentors can foster considerable student reflection. The key is that the internship affords multiple opportunities for reflection.

D'Abate, Youndt and Wenzel (2009) found that task significance and feedback (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), learning opportunities, and site supervisor support were related to students' satisfaction with their internships. Narayanan, Olk and Fukami (2010) presented a comprehensive literature review that addressed characteristics of internships that lead to intern satisfaction, but they concluded that more research is needed to determine the conditions under which students and employers are satisfied with internship experiences. These authors discuss student, university, and business roles that increase intern effectiveness. For example, the university should provide a structure for the internship experience and assign faculty advisors, and prepare students for the internship, and site supervisors should provide support and performance feedback to students at the work site.

In a national study of 235 employers, having excellent communication skills was the highest rated dimension sought by employers seeking new hires, regardless of field or type of business (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2010). Employers view the ability to write, speak and listen effectively as essential for business success. Second and third on the list of desirable employee qualities were a strong work ethic and initiative, respectively. Both of these qualities appear to incorporate three items on the appraisal scale used in this study: self-direction, learning new duties quickly and completing tasks on time. Employers

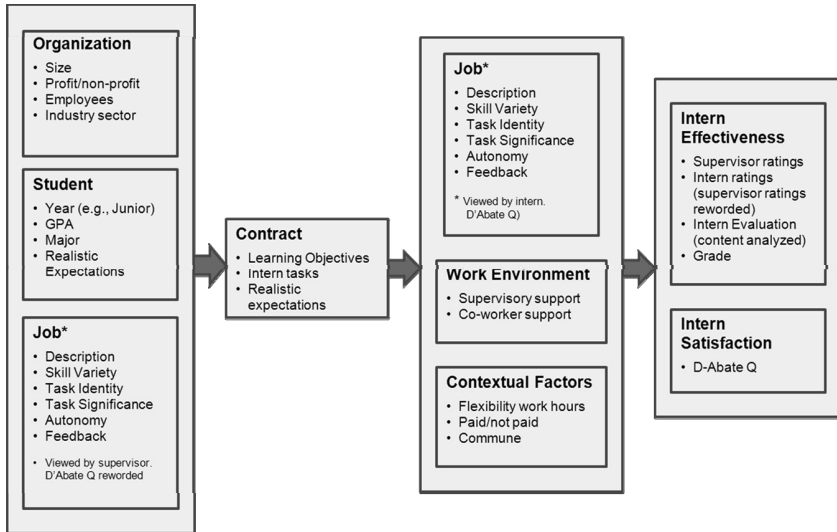
demand staff that are internally driven, work hard, and complete tasks on schedule.

JOB DIAGNOSTIC MODEL

Hackman and Oldham (1975) proposed the Job Characteristic Model where employees seek motivating work that is meaningful (one's work matters), requires responsibility, and provides feedback on work outcomes. These psychological states are the result of the work having certain core job characteristics. Skill variety refers to the extent that an employee believes that a number of valued skills are required to complete the work. Task identity is the extent that an employee sees the work as a whole rather than simply a part of a larger process. Task significance is the importance the employee assigns to the work. Autonomy is the extent that an employee believes that the work provides the freedom to make decisions. Feedback is the extent that the work itself (as opposed to external sources such as the supervisor) provides feedback to the employee as to the quality of the work. These job characteristics are task identity, task significance, skill variety, autonomy, and task feedback. Task identity, task significance, and skill variety promote experienced meaningfulness, while autonomy results in experienced job responsibility, and feedback results in knowledge of job outcomes.

INTERN SATISFACTION AND PERFORMANCE MODEL

Since internships are important for undergraduate education and increase students' competitiveness in the job market, we conducted this study to identify correlates of intern satisfaction and effectiveness from two perspectives: the students and their onsite supervisors. Figure 1 continues a model of intern satisfaction and performance, adapted from Hackman and Oldham's (1975) job characteristic model. Contextual factors include attributes of the site organization (e.g. size), student (e.g., academic performance), and the job (e.g., core job dimensions). An internship contract is then agreed upon by the organization, the student, and the school

FIGURE 1. Intern Performance and Job Satisfaction Model

regarding internship objectives, tasks, and behavioral and performance expectations. The intern then perceives the job with respect to core job dimensions, the support afforded by the site supervisors and others in the organization during the internship, and other contextual factors such as location and hour flexibility. These intern perceptions then determine the intern's satisfaction and performance. This research does not test the entire model, only the relationship between onsite supervisor and intern perceptions of the intern's work with respect to intern satisfaction and performance. Other aspects of the model are the subject for future research.

METHOD

Subjects

A large state university in upstate New York administers all internships through a central office where faculty sponsors, site supervisors, and students-selected placements were matched to maximize the internship experience.

At the conclusion of the internships, 159 site supervisors and their interns completed the Intern Job Diagnostic Questionnaire (IJDQ) and site supervisors rated their interns' performance. The site supervisors directed the activities of undergraduate students at the work setting during the 2010 spring and summer semesters. Internships lasted approximately 15 weeks, and the students received course credit for their experience. The internships occurred in both for profit and non-profit organizations, and in a wide variety of business sectors (e.g., health services, financial, communication, and consulting). University faculty assisted the students with respect to formulating learning outcomes and feedback on assigned papers. The interns majored in a wide variety of academic areas, including business, communications, health promotion and wellness, zoology, math, biology, psychology, broadcasting, and journalism. To participate in an internship, students had to be either the equivalent of a junior or a senior (third or fourth year of college, respectively) in credits and have achieved a minimum cumulative grade point average of 2.50 (on a 4.0 scale).

The Intern Job Diagnostic Survey

The Intern Job Diagnostic Survey (IJDS) is an adaptation of the Job Diagnostic Survey, which measures characteristics of work that result in employee motivation, satisfaction, and performance (Steers and Porter, 1991; Hackman and Oldham, 1980), and an instrument used by D'Abate, Youndt & Wenzel (2009). D'Abate, Youndt & Wenzel (2009) revised the original Job Diagnostic Survey (Hackman and Oldham, 1980; 1975) to be appropriate for student undergraduate interns. For example, the Job Diagnostic Survey item "The internship was quite simple and repetitive" was revised as "My internship was quite simple and repetitive". D'Abate, Youndt & Wenzel (2009) provided the survey as an appendix. Presently, the authors also revised the IJDS for use by supervisors. For example, the authors revised "The internship required me to use a number of complex or high-level skills" as "The internship required the student to use a number of complex or high-level skills." Contextual variables were also included: earning opportunities, career development, supervisory support, co-worker support, organizational satisfaction, work

hour flexibility, the commute, and desirability of the work location. The student and supervisor version of the IJDS may be obtained from the first author. We used the same five and seven point Likert scales employed by D'Abate, Youndt & Wenzel (2009). For example, respondents indicated the extent that "The internship required me to use a number of complex or high-level skills" using a seven point rating scale where 1 = "very inaccurate" and 7 = "very accurate".

Performance Appraisal Instrument

Friedman and Roodin (2012) describe the supervisor appraisal instrument used presently in detail. This instrument was developed ten years ago with assistance from the School of Business faculty. To rate the interns' overall performance, supervisors used a five point Likert scale (5 = Always Exceeds Expectations, 4 = Sometimes Exceeds Expectations, 3 = Regularly Meets Expectations, 2 = Sometimes Meets Expectations, 1 = Rarely Meets Expectations, N = Not Applicable or no basis for evaluation). The completed appraisals were given to the faculty sponsor who then determined the course grades for the intern ("honors", "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory") through evaluation of both the required academic papers and the site supervisor appraisal. The study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board which reviews all research that use human subjects. The university internship office sent the IJDS and the appraisal instrument to each site supervisor with an explanation about the instrument and directions as to its use. Using the instrument, the site supervisors rated the intern along nineteen performance items (e.g., demonstrates effective oral communication and listening skills) and provided an overall assessment of intern performance. At the conclusion of the internship, the site supervisors assessed their intern's performance and completed the IJDS, and returned the completed appraisal to the university internship office. Student interns completed the IJDS online using SurveyMonkey.

Analysis

The IJDS scale reliabilities were computed using Cronbach's Alpha estimates. Matched T-tests were conducted to test the differences between

interns' and their site supervisors' perception of the internship. To ascertain the relationship between the dependent and independent variables, we computed Pearson correlations among intern effectiveness and satisfaction, job characteristics and the contextual variables.

RESULTS

Table 1 contains the internal reliabilities of the IJDS subscales. The Cronbach's Alpha estimates for the supervisor and intern IJDS job characteristic scales ranged from .84 to .66, and were judged to be adequate. Intern reliabilities were also adequate for the interns' IJDS contextual

TABLE 1. Cronbach's Alpha for Supervisor and Student Intern Ratings of Intern Satisfaction, Job Characteristics, and Contextual Variables.

	Supervisor	Student
Internship Satisfaction	.84	.66
Job Characteristics		
Skill Variety	.63	.64
Task Identity	.64	.72
Task Significance	.66	.73
Task Autonomy	.74	.71
Task Feedback	.74	.76
Contextual Variables		
Learning Opportunities	.56	.77
Career Development	.50	.71
Supervisory Support	.57	.85
Co-worker Support	.65	.85
Organizational Satisfaction	.65	.84
Flexibility of Work Hours	.80	.87
Commute	.65	.70
Pay Satisfaction	.45	.62
Desirability of Location	.40	.67

variable scales (Cronbach's Alphas ranged from .87 to .62). On the other hand, the supervisors' contextual scale internal reliabilities were mixed (several .65 or lower), and were not deemed adequate.

Table 2 contains means, standard deviations and matched t-tests for interns and site supervisors IJDS scales. Supervisors believed that their interns were more satisfied with the internship than the interns' actually were. Students reported that their internship work had greater task

TABLE 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and T-tests for Supervisor and Student Ratings of Intern Satisfaction, Job Characteristics, and Contextual Variables.

	Supervisor		Student		<i>t</i>
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	
Internship Satisfaction	5.84	.72	5.64	.77	2.65**
Job Characteristics					
Skill Variety	4.97	.85	4.81	.94	1.64
Task Identity	4.53	1.26	4.86	1.13	-2.68**
Task Significance	5.32	1.39	5.04	1.10	1.82
Task Autonomy	5.29	1.22	5.21	1.19	.53
Task Feedback	4.87	.97	4.74	1.02	.82
Contextual Variables					
Learning Opportunities	4.52	.56	4.55	.60	-.34
Career Development	4.27	.64	3.97	1.06	3.23***
Supervisory Support	4.19	.55	4.26	.79	-.91
Co-worker Support	4.33	.59	4.54	.65	-2.75***
Organizational Satisfaction	4.33	.67	4.38	.60	-1.16
Flexibility of Work Hours	3.70	1.16	3.86	1.12	-1.55
Commute	3.86	.76	4.00	.90	-1.71
Pay Satisfaction	3.63	.90	3.84	.90	.31
Desirability of Location	3.58	.71	3.88	.88	-3.16***

* $p \leq .05$

** $p \leq .01$

*** $p \leq .001$

identification than the supervisors believe. Otherwise, supervisors and students perception of the extent that the internships' processed job characteristics were similar. Significant differences were found for the career development, co-worker support, and location desirability contextual variables. Compared to their supervisors, students believed that the internships provided less useful information regarding their career development and choice, believed that the internship required more support from co-workers, and that the internship's location was more desirable.

Table 3 contains Pearson correlations among the dependent and independent variables. The supervisors' job performance ratings of their interns were significantly related to all of the core job characteristics and contextual variables except learning opportunities, career development and flexibility of work hours. Supervisors' estimate of the interns' satisfaction was significantly related to all independent variables except flexibility of work hours.

With the exception of task feedback, interns' core job characteristic ratings were not related with the supervisors' assessment of their job performance. Only supervisory support, organizational satisfaction and desirability of the work location significantly correlated with the supervisory job performance rating. As viewed by the interns themselves, internship satisfaction was significantly correlated with all core job characteristic and contextual variables except flexibility of work hours.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Internships have become a virtual mandate by employers in selecting new hires; and internships have surpassed all other forms of recruiting (NACE, 2010). The results of this study suggest that students and employers (site supervisors) evaluate both the internship experience and successful intern performance from disparate perspectives once on the job. We found that supervisors appear to over-estimate interns' satisfaction with their placement and the contribution of the internship to student's career development when compared to student evaluations. Generally

TABLE 3. Pearson Correlations between Performance, Satisfaction, Job Characteristics, and Contextual Variables made by Supervisor and Student Intern.

	Supervisor		Student	
	Intern Performance ¹	Intern Performance ²	Intern Performance ³	Intern Performance ⁴
Job Characteristics				
Skill Variety	.21***	.29***	.09	.36***
Task Identity	.19**	.26***	.08	.28***
Task Significance	.20***	.27***	.03	.57***
Task Autonomy	.18***	.13**	.07	.18**
Task Feedback	.31	.34***	.19*	.38***
Contextual Variables				
Learning Opportunities	.06	.15**	.06	.45***
Career Development	.11	.22***	.05	.50***
Supervisory Support	.25***	.35***	.21**	.46***
Co-worker Support	.17**	.29***	.15	.37***
Organizational Satisfaction	.25***	.43***	.30***	.25***
Flexibility of Work Hours	.01	-.01	-.09	.06
Commute	.15**	.22***	.03	.15*
Desirability of Location	.11*	.11*	-.14	.17**

¹ Correlations among site supervisors' rating of the intern's performance and the supervisors' job characteristic ratings.
² Correlations among site supervisors' rating of the intern's satisfaction and the supervisors' job characteristic ratings.
³ Correlations among site supervisors' rating of the intern's performance and the interns' job characteristic ratings.
⁴ Correlations among the interns' rating of their internship satisfaction and the interns' job characteristic ratings.

* $p \leq .05$
 ** $p \leq .01$
 *** $p \leq .001$

the nature of the job itself (job characteristics) and the presence of task identity, resulted in greater satisfaction for students than site supervisors imagined. Students, for example valued highly task feedback (related to job outcomes in this study) and co-worker support, as critical in their assessment of satisfaction with the internship placement. However, site supervisors did not focus on this dimension. Having a desirable location was also a significant variable related to student's satisfaction ratings, but again an insignificant component for site supervisors. Only task feedback was found to be related to supervisors' assessment of interns' job performance. The only other measures related to intern job performance were supervisory support, satisfaction with the organizational structure, and work location desirability.

Site supervisor and intern alignment regarding intern satisfaction and performance should be enhanced. During the intern selection phase, employers should thoroughly describe the internship duties not only in terms of tasks and assignments, but also with respect to core job characteristics. For example, how does the job provide feedback, how much autonomy does the position allow, and what mix of skills are needed to effectively complete the assigned tasks? Additionally, employers should measure candidates' "higher order need strength": that is, their need to utilize a variety of skills, have autonomy, believe that the assignment is important (task significance), and that job identity exists. Site supervisors can also supplement their periodic job performance reviews with the intern with discussions about satisfaction and how the intern views the work with respect to the job characteristics. Based on these discussions, the site supervisor can adjust the internship assignments to increase intern satisfaction and performance. Finally, exit interviews that focus on intern satisfaction and performance can be conducted so that future internships can be structured to maximize intern satisfaction and performance.

Study Limitations

A limitation of the study is common method variance with a subset of the analyses. For example, interns provided intern satisfaction, core job

characteristic, and contextual ratings. Several of the analyses did not have this limitation (e.g., supervisors' ratings of the interns' performance and the students' perceptions of their internships). A second limitation is generalizability. While the interns were from a variety of different majors and the internships occurred in a wide diversity of organizational settings, a second limitation is that the study was conducted at one school. In order to increase generalizability, future research should replicate the study using students at other schools.

CONCLUSION

The goal of research in this regard is to deal with the reality and the expectations of students and employers so that the value of the overall experience is maximized for both. The research will be helpful to students and employers understanding of what they can do to enhance satisfaction and performance at the internship site. For students having a successful internship experience can result in a job offer, while for employers it can mean the difference between successful project completion or not. This information will also help students understand how to evaluate the job requirements in different internships so that they choose placements that they will produce high levels of satisfaction and exceptional performance. Doing the same for employers is also a way to improve the overall quality of the internship experience. Employers often ask what they can do to help student interns succeed. There is a clear connection between intern success as measured by both satisfaction and performance. But without this information, employers rely on erroneous assumptions about what is of value to student interns. These data suggest the value of requiring a pre-internship orientation workshop for students and creating a parallel one for employers. These could be delivered on-line, in-person, or in some combination and address the knowledge gaps that have been revealed in the present study. Getting students ready for an internship experience today is more than "dressing for success." And, getting employers ready for an intern is more than finding a workspace at the placement.

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