

# Patterns of Productive Beliefs, Attitudes and Behaviors

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## ABSTRACT

The importance of internships in the education and future careers of advertising and PR students is well established. Although other research on the topic confirms the expectations and outcomes of successful internships, this study sought to explore in what ways certain patterns of assumptions, attitudes and behaviors function to produce successful internships from the perspective of its principal participants – interns and their supervisors. The patterns emerging from the data provide insights into how the participants work together to accomplish a successful internship.

Internships are one of the most important ways advertising and public relations students can make the transition from college to career. The "deciding factor" for most entry-level jobs is relevant work experience or an internship (Rowland, 1994, p. F15). As a result, most programs offer students some assistance in locating an internship (Basow & Byrne, 1993, p. 48), and almost 80% complete one prior to graduation (Kosicki & Becker, 1995).

Prior research has demonstrated that students can expect a variety of personal, interpersonal and career-related outcomes from a successful internship (Beard & Morton, 1999; Campbell & Kovar, 1994; Horowitz, 1996; Perlmutter & Fletcher, 1996; Verner, 1993). Successful interns are more likely to have established goals for the experience, possessed accurate expectations before they started, and treated the internship like a real job (Basow & Byrne, 1993; Beard & Morton; Campbell & Kovar; Verner). Among the benefits to employers are having an extra set of hands and exposure to recent ideas and thinking (Horowitz; Kaplan, 1994; Farinelli & Mann, 1996).

Although researchers have often used quantitative research to validate relationships between intern and internship characteristics and successful outcomes, the literature lacks a process-level appreciation for how these factors impact interns and supervisors on a deeply personal and interpersonal level. The qualitative research reported in this article addresses several significant issues and questions that may help academic internship advisers, students and onsite supervisors work together to help ensure a successful internship.

## METHOD

### Research Procedures

The author conducted a series of "long interviews" (McCracken, 1988) with interns and their onsite supervisors. The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to one hour. They were audiotaped and transcribed, producing more than 200 pages of textual data. The procedures suggested by McCracken—in which an analyst moves from data, to observations, to meta-observations, and more general observations, while simultaneously keeping a careful eye on the data and the background of the research problem—were then used to analyze the data. Qualitative research with small samples is often used in applied communication research as a post-

research technique designed to "amplify, explain, or further explore points emerging from" quantitative studies (Davis, 1997, p. 196).

### Description of the Sample

The sample included nine for-credit supervisor/intern dyads, with four in PR and five in advertising.

The PR supervisors included an assistant director of university sports information, a municipal water utility business manager, a radio station promotions director, and the manager of corporate communications for a large regional restaurant chain. All the PR interns had completed introductory courses in journalism and mass communication (JMC) and PR. Three of the interns were lacking only the capstone course. The students ranged in age from 21 to 24 years, and this was the first internship for all four.

The advertising intern supervisors included an ad agency production manager, media director, traffic manager, and account manager, all representing the same, large regional ad agency; and the group sales manager for a theme park. All the advertising interns had completed introductory courses in JMC and advertising; however, the account services intern had completed all her advertising courses, lacking only the capstone. This was the first internship for all but one of the interns, and all were either 21 or 22 years old.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

1. *What do interns and their supervisors believe are the most important goals and outcomes of an internship?*

All the participants recognized the importance of interns gaining "real world" experience from their internships, obtaining technical job skills and having tangible evidence of their experience for portfolios. However, many interns reported a newfound appreciation for the importance of interpersonal and communication skills. As one PR intern observed, "You've got to establish a good relationship with the people that you work with. Or else all the pamphlets and brochures and newsletters and media guides and press releases you do ... they really don't matter anything if you can't get along with people." Although Campbell and Kovar (1994) note the importance of such skills as internship outcomes, students' lack of

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appreciation for these at the outset suggests they could be emphasized more in college courses.

The findings from this study support conclusions from prior research that employers benefit from the "free work" performed by interns. However, they also reveal that the more supervisors invest time and effort in the student's development and learning experiences, the less they benefit from the actual work interns do. As the literature also suggests, professionals can benefit simply from exposure to interns. One ad agency supervisor described his belief in the following way: "... the agency personnel, because they've been immersed in the quote real world, can do well to come up for air now and then and ... remember what the other side had to offer."

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Related to this issue, employers and supervisors need to recognize that they are legally obligated (Kaplan, 1994) to provide training in exchange for interns' work if they don't pay them.

2. *What is the importance or relevance of academic preparation, and how is it related to a successful internship?*

Beard and Morton (1999) found that academic preparation is a powerful statistical predictor of a successful internship. However, the findings of this study provide a much more fine-grained interpretation of this issue. For instance, the single most important category of academic preparation in this study was found to be computer skills. All the interns in the sample spent substantial amounts of time working on computers, most performed desktop publishing tasks, and Adobe's PageMaker was mentioned in almost every interview. As one PR intern recalled: "There were so many ... things that I felt that I was very much prepared for. But I'd say the computer was most of all because I was the only intern that really knew how to do any of that."

Interns revealed that the importance of academic preparation differs substantially by type of internship. For PR interns, writing skills is a key area of academic preparation. As one intern observed, "You know, I've done a bill stuffer. I've just written all the articles for the annual report. Writing comes up every day. I think the writing is very important." Likewise, when asked what students should be prepared for, a PR supervisor responded: "rule number one, drive home writing, writing, writing." Internships within a

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single ad agency can vary substantially, with media and account services interns reporting that an understanding of both advertising and media planning concepts and terminology is very important. This finding suggests that students should take care to match

internship opportunities with their stage of study. As examples, advertising internships in agency creative, media, and account services departments, and PR internships that offer writing and desktop publishing opportunities, should all come later in the student's program of study, or at least following the appropriate courses.

Another important finding is that academic preparation often leads to more and better opportunities for interns. As the ad agency account manager explained, "When an intern comes in and already has that under their belt, the concept or the grasp of the concept, we can really move forward, and they can start moving on client projects almost immediately." In contrast, a PR supervisor observed that "I stopped giving some projects to interns when I found that it was more effort for them to write something and for me to re-write it ... they became filers. They became label-stuffers and errand-runners." This finding also emphasizes the importance of students matching specific internships with their level of skills and academic preparation.

3. *What are the patterns of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that lead to a successful internship experience?*

Beard and Morton (1999) found that quality of supervision was the strongest predictor of a successful internship. The findings for this study support the same conclusion, indicating that the good internship supervisors in the sample are simply good managers. They provided specific direction and examples, some autonomy and independence, positive and constructive feedback, and the physical and personal resources needed to accomplish the work. Perhaps the most important category of supervisor management skills, however, was the provision of feedback, or work-related information. As one PR intern observed, "She always let me know where I stood, how I was doing. And if she thought there was something I needed to work on, she'd let me know. I think that's really important."

Students recognized the value of being given real world technical tasks on which to practice and hone their skills. A PR intern described his work in the following way, obviously appreciative: "I wasn't working for somebody, handling her paper work, stapling papers, making copies. I was doing actual work. I feel lucky that I got the opportunity to really get hands-on experience. . . ." Such work is related to beneficial outcomes because it provides tangible evidence of experience from the internship.

The literature on internships clearly suggests the importance of students taking a proactive role in the shaping of their internship experiences (Basow & Byrne, 1993; Beard and Morton, 1999; Verner, 1993). The findings from this study indicate that some supervisors also recognize the value of this and attempt to adapt the internship to the wants and needs of their interns. One important way ad agency supervisors accomplished this was by circulating their interns around the agency. As one agency supervisor remarked, "If they ... know where they want to go, I will talk to a supervisor and send them in there.... I've had a lot who want to write copy, and I'll send

them in there, and they'll write some headlines and stuff. It really depends on the individual student.

Across all the interviews, supervisors and interns consistently emphasized the importance of interns accepting any task as a potential learning experience. An ad agency supervisor described the importance of "taking the attitude of, what can I learn from this? From this stack of filing I'm doing, there's something in it for me." Supervisors who have this attitude seem to encourage their interns to do so as well.

4. *What are the underlying assumptions and difficulties associated with interns demonstrating initiative by finding things to do and asking questions?*

Beard and Morton (1999) found that interns being "proactive and aggressive" is a statistically significant predictor of a successful internship. The results of this study also support the value of interns being assertive and trying to stay busy by volunteering for assignments. As one ad agency supervisor commented, "I think they need to come to work ready to work, ... whenever there's any downtime ask, 'what else can I do?' ... Do what is asked of you. See if there's any more, ask for feedback." However, the findings also reveal at least one significant obstacle interns face when trying to stay busy. Their lack of technical knowledge makes it difficult to volunteer for assignments, and, not surprisingly, can produce a sense of apprehension. For instance, an ad agency intern recalled that "[On a previous internship] I wanted to just file and type and that's all I wanted to do. And I kind of felt like that this time, like I'd ask for stuff to do, and she'd say something or whatever, and I'd be afraid to work on it." She added that "Fear gets involved a lot of time. I don't want to do something and mess it up. I'd rather not touch something and find something to file...."

Although they did not explicitly recognize this as a problem, supervisors reported a number of strategies that can help interns stay busy. One PR supervisor reported setting up a "to do" box, containing materials needing to be filed, background research to be done on stories, contacts to be made. A successful strategy on many ad agency internships was for supervisors to let others in the agency know they could, on occasion, borrow their interns. Such a practice has the added benefit of getting the intern into other areas of the organization.

Basow and Byrne (1993) note that interns should be encouraged to ask questions – a conclusion supported by the findings of this study. As one supervisor put it, students need to "not be afraid to ask questions so they are understanding the larger implications and the reasons, the policy reasons behind what's going on." Similarly, one ad agency intern offered this observation: ". . . the only thing you can do is just roam and ask questions. Otherwise, you're not going to learn anything."

A variety of strategies for overcoming difficulties associated with asking questions also emerged from the analysis. Many interns attempted to establish good relationships with their supervisors and co-workers. As an advertising intern observed, ". . . you have to get to know everybody in the agency. Just

so you can go up to them and say, 'can you help me with this?'" A rather unique strategy used by one advertising intern for overcoming the problem of questioning busy workers was to offer them something of value in exchange, such as volunteering to help out with a time-consuming task.

Finally, it would be helpful for prospective interns to remember what one intern discovered and concluded about questions and ad agencies. "Not

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everybody knows exactly what they're supposed to do anyway. And there were young people there ... so they're still learning too.... So if you know something about a specific area, you can actually help someone out."

5. *In what ways do interns and their supervisors believe the internship experience could be improved?*

A consistent theme emerged from the data suggesting students frequently set the stage for physical and mental exhaustion resulting from combining an internship with one or even two other jobs, as well as college course work. Mental exhaustion can occur from the demands on interns, often from other employers. As one PR intern noted, "I mean I was exhausted.... In the beginning he [other boss] was really understanding, but toward the end, he'd kind of had it." Students should recognize the potential for this problem and find ways to prepare for the consequences of tackling what amounts to a second or even third part-time job. This issue is related to the one that follows—paying interns.

Beard and Morton (1999) found that compensation is a significant predictor of a successful internship. The findings from this study help reveal why this is the case. Monetarily, some interns noted they would have been unable to do their unpaid internships if they hadn't been receiving funds from parents and that compensation would have enabled them to take time off from other jobs. In addition, interns sug-

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gested psychological implications regarding compensation. When you're paid for an internship ... even though you don't make as much money as a regular employee, you can feel like you're on the same level as everybody else.... At the same time, I don't know, it just kind of gives you value to the position ... you feel that your internship's of more value" [PR intern].

However, although interns are dissatisfied with not being paid, they seem to accept it as part of "paying their dues." One ad agency intern explained it in the following way: "It's not like it changed my mind. Just let me have another one, and it's probably not going to be paid either. But that's just something I ...

heard from many people. Just do it, work for free for a couple of years, and then it will pay off."

Several supervisors noted that they would prefer continuing interaction with universities, and need them to recognize their needs when it comes to the placement of interns. As one PR supervisor noted: "One of the things that I want to do is set up things in advance, I mean, like right now, fall's getting ready to start, and I don't have anybody lined up. By the time the kids get back, and we get somebody identified, we're already how many weeks into the semester? ...

*Students need to find ways to prepare for the consequences of tackling what amounts to a second or third part-time job.... Compensation psychologically gives value to the intern and to the internship.*

By the time we get that initial ice-breaking period ... over with, how much are they going to be able to accomplish?"

These findings suggest that advance planning for internships by all three participants—academic adviser, student and onsite supervisor—could help resolve other problematic issues revealed by this study. Working together, internship coordinators and supervisors could establish appropriate pools of candidates two or three semesters in advance. Thus, students could be planning well in advance to take internships at appropriate stages of their course work,

and supervisors would have a consistent, qualified pool from which to select their interns. Such a strategy might also help eliminate the problem of students selecting internships for which they are unprepared, simply in the rush to get the experience on their resumes.

#### FUTURE RESEARCH ON INTERNSHIPS

Future research on advertising and PR internships could address several worthwhile topics. The present sample, for instance, while suitable for qualitative analysis, only touches on the population of potential internship sites. What types of internship sites are most likely to offer which category of beneficial outcomes for advertising and PR interns? Similarly, students often do internships in non-traditional settings. For example, in the present study, PR students did internships in a municipal water department and in a radio station promotions department. What are the benefits, and risks, associated with such internships? Finally, from a policy perspective, how can the troubling issue that many students may not be able to afford internships, given the fact that many are unpaid and clearly require forgoing other income opportunities, be resolved? Issues such as these suggest that the internship is a topic well worth the attention of PR and advertising educators interested in helping students make the most of their educations.

*With advance planning by academic adviser, student and supervisor.... students could plan to take internships at appropriate stages of their coursework when so they are prepared, and supervisors would have a consistent, qualified pool from which to select their interns.*

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