The (dis)connected intern: Career preparation in a remote landscape

Daria Luchinskaya[1], Charikleia Tzanakou[2], Luca Cattani[3], Giulio Pedrini[4], Vincenzo Fasone[4], Dorel Manitiu[5], Wil Hunt[6], Dora Scholarios[1]

[1]University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, United Kingdom. [2]Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, United Kingdom. [3]Gran Sasso Science Institute, L'Aquila, Italy. [4]Kore University of Enna, Enna, Italy. [5]AlmaLaurea, Bologna, Italy. [6]University of Sussex, Brighton, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

Students and graduates increasingly use internships as a way of developing their employability, however, the increased incidence of remote and hybrid work has drawbacks, as well as benefits, for interns. This paper explores interns' experiences of doing 'virtual' internships, focusing on how it helped their employability development, using data from over 60 interviews with stakeholders, interns and employers in Italy and the UK. Building on insights from boundary theory and organisational socialisation, we explore the different kinds of virtual internship activities students do, and how interns can develop their employability in a remote context. Our findings suggest that there are different kinds of virtual internships, each with their own challenges, that can, however, be mitigated with appropriate interventions. Our research underscores the effectiveness of well-designed remote and hybrid internships, emphasizing the need to mitigate anticipated challenges and provide adequate support for a positive intern and employer experience.

Full paper

Students and graduates increasingly use internships and work-related experience as a way of developing their employability (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021). However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many internships turned virtual, and hybrid work arrangements are now widespread (over 80% of organisations in the UK have hybrid working arrangements (CIPD, 2023)). Although remote working can reduce some obstacles to taking part in internships and facilitate widening participation, it may also and contribute to feelings of isolation and a blurring of home and working boundaries (Bowen, 2020). It is also unclear how remote internships develop students' employability. Building on insights from boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) and organisational socialisation (Lo Presti et al., 2023), this paper explores students' and graduates' experiences of doing 'virtual internships' and their perceived employability. Data are drawn from over 60 interviews with interns, employers and stakeholders in Italy and the UK, collected as part of the Digit Virtual Internships project.

Boundary theory suggests that people construct boundaries around domains (e.g., work, home) and roles within domains (e.g. manager, wife) along various dimensions (Ashforth et al., 2000). In a remote work context, delineation between boundaries may become blurred, potentially leading to confusion

and role conflict. Organisational socialization tactics help new employees settle into the organisation. For new labour market entrants, they also provide knowledge and skills about the work environment enabling a broader socialisation into the work process and employability development (Kim & Moon, 2021). Because remote work can contribute towards feelings of isolation, organisational *social* socialization tactics (Lo Presti et al., 2023) may be important to interns' experience.

We complemented desk-based research on virtual internships with interviewing stakeholders (N=13), interns (N=37) and employers (N=13). Stakeholders included representatives from HE Careers Services, university department employability leads, placement aggregators and a virtual job simulation provider. The interviews were transcribed an analysed in NVivo software. Transcription and analysis took place in the source language (English and Italian) following a co-developed shared interview coding protocol and meetings to discuss coding.

Our emerging findings suggest that the 'virtual internship' label contains a variety of work-related activities in both the UK and Italy, united by the fact that they take place at least partly online. Activities ranged from asynchronous short job task simulations to longer remote placements involving at least some synchronicity. Design was sometimes outsourced to recruitment process outsourcing and other times done entirely by the employer. The expected intern contribution over the course of the internship was another differentiating factor between types of activities. Thus, we propose a new typology of internships on the basis of (a) synchronicity as the principal axis, and (b) employer involvement in designing and implementing the internship (Figure 1).

Figure 1
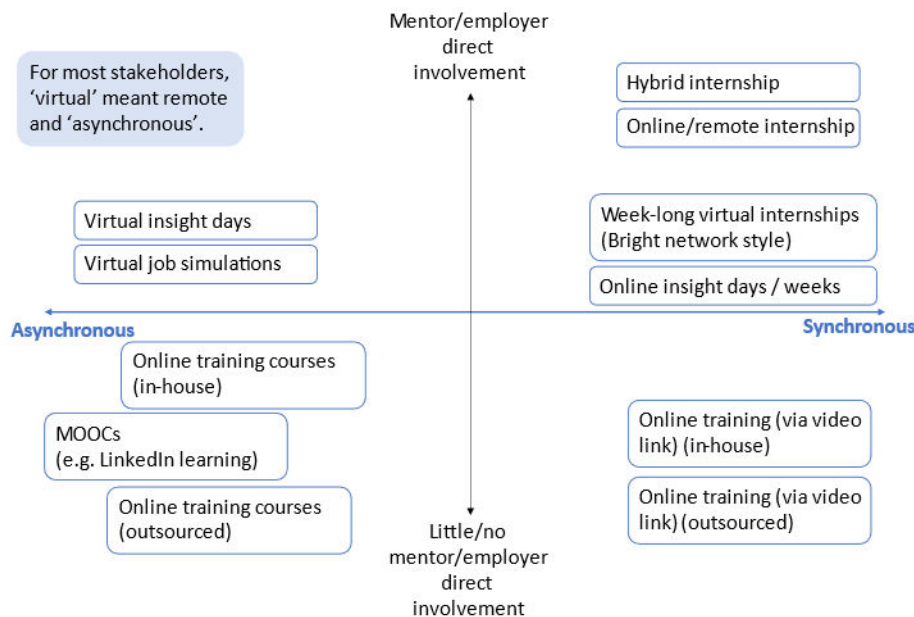
An example of an asynchronous experience with low employer involvement might include virtual job simulations. These are initially designed with some input from an employee at a particular organisation, but once rolled out no further involvement in the delivery of the simulation. In contrast, a synchronous

experience with high employer involvement might be a remote internship on a 9-5 basis with regular interaction between the intern and their manager. The extent of synchronicity may affect role boundary looseness, exacerbated by feelings of isolation and lack of access to organisational knowledge. Employer involvement in designing and delivering internships may mitigate these risks by deliberately building in organisational socialization tactics, including *social* tactics.

We found that, despite a number of advantages, interns faced issues of isolation, blurred work-home boundaries, and a more difficult environment in which to pick up on tacit knowledge, often finding themselves in situations where they were unsure whom to ask for help. However, there were examples of well-designed internships. Interns commented on initiatives such as networking, supervision, and clear expectations, to address drawbacks of remote working.

Overall, we found that interns' experiences of virtual internships were mostly positive, and that some interns viewed the internship as an opportunity to develop their initiative and problem-solving skills. Towards the more synchronous part of the spectrum, remote internships did not seem to affect employer recruitment and selection (R&S) decisions, perhaps with the exception of Italy. Asynchronous virtual work experiences earlier in the R&S process (e.g. virtual job simulations, insight days) may improve reach, increase diversity, and enhance intern engagement during subsequent R&S.

Our research thus underscores the significance of carefully designing remote and hybrid internships, emphasizing the need to mitigate anticipated challenges and provide adequate support for a positive intern and employer experience for improved individual and organisational outcomes.

References

Anderson, V., & Tomlinson, M. (2021). Signaling standout graduate employability: The employer perspective. *Human Resource Management Journal*, *31*(3), 675-693.

Ashforth, B. E., Kreiner, G. E., & Fugate, M. (2000). All in a day's work: Boundaries and micro role transitions. *Academy of Management review*, *25*(3), 472-491. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2000.3363315.

Bowen, T. (2020). Work-Integrated Learning Placements and Remote Working: Experiential Learning Online. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, *21*(4), 377-386. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1271386.

CIPD. (2023). *Flexible and hybrid working practices in 2023.* London: The Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development. https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/flexible-hybrid-working-2023/.

Kim, K., & Moon, H. K. (2021). How do socialization tactics and supervisor behaviors influence newcomers' psychological contract formation? The mediating role of information acquisition. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(6), 1312–1338. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2018.1521460.

Lo Presti, A., Costantini, A., Akkermans, J., Sartori, R., & De Rosa, A. (2023). Employability Development during Internships: A Three-Wave Study on a Sample of Psychology Graduates in Italy. *Journal of Career Development, 50*(6), 1155-1171. https://doi.org/10.1177/08948453231161291.

Anderson, V., & Tomlinson, M. (2021). Signaling standout graduate employability: The employer perspective. *Human Resource Management Journal*, *31*(3), 675-693.

Ashforth, B. E., Kreiner, G. E., & Fugate, M. (2000). All in a day's work: Boundaries and micro role transitions. *Academy of Management review*, *25*(3), 472-491. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2000.3363315.

Bowen, T. (2020). Work-Integrated Learning Placements and Remote Working: Experiential Learning Online. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, *21*(4), 377-386. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1271386.

CIPD. (2023). *Flexible and hybrid working practices in 2023.* London: The Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development. https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/flexible-hybrid-working-2023/.

Kim, K., & Moon, H. K. (2021). How do socialization tactics and supervisor behaviors influence newcomers' psychological contract formation? The mediating role of information acquisition. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(6), 1312–1338. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2018.1521460.

Lo Presti, A., Costantini, A., Akkermans, J., Sartori, R., & De Rosa, A. (2023). Employability Development during Internships: A Three-Wave Study on a Sample of Psychology Graduates in Italy. *Journal of Career Development, 50*(6), 1155-1171. https://doi.org/10.1177/08948453231161291.