



# VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS & WORKING REMOTELY

## *A Guide for Employers*

### **WHAT IS A VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP?**

A virtual internship is like an in-person internship, except that it's done entirely online or remotely. The student gains valuable experience while working from whichever locations are most convenient to them, and work hours are often more flexible. Virtual internships are usually for a minimum of 6 weeks and maximum of 6 months (2 quarters at Cal Poly); though durations vary.

### **WHAT IS A MICRO-INTERNSHIP?**

A micro-internship is a short-term, professional assignments that are similar to those given to new hires or student interns. These projects enable the student to demonstrate skills, explore career paths, and build their networks as they seek the right full-time role. Unlike traditional or virtual internships, micro-internships typically range from 5 to 40 hours of work, and projects are due between one week and one month after they are initiated.

### **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BENEFITS OF A VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP?**

The primary benefit of a virtual internship is that they can provide students with a work-based learning experience and allows the student to explore career options. Depending on the nature of the project, the student can also develop technical, inter-personal or intra-personal skills by successfully completing one or more professional assignments.

For organizations, virtual internships are a strategy for attracting and retaining top talent. Traditional internships tend to create barriers for talented low-income students, LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, student parents, part-time students, and other populations. Flexibility is one of the reasons why virtual internships support greater accessibility to talented candidates. Remote work can be done outside an 8-5 work day, completed at a location convenient to them, initiated anytime of the year, and can be more affordable for the student and the organization. This can also be very beneficial to organizations when the need for flexible work arrangements arise.

### **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE DRAWBACKS OF A VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP?**

The drawbacks of a virtual internship include the lack of in-person relationship building, immersion in the physical and cultural spaces of an organization, and fewer opportunities to engage in the ad hoc interaction that typically arise during an on-site experience. In a remote environment, there is an extra emphasis on communication between the student and supervisor, which can take more time or lead to misinterpretations on either side.

### **HOW DO STUDENT INTERNS COMMUNICATE WITH A SUPERVISOR IN A VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP?**

In a virtual internship setting, a student primarily communicates with a supervisor or other employee through email, phone and video calls. Some organizations may use an internal messaging platform such as Slack, Webex, or Google Hangout Chat, among others. Organizations should consider what they are communicating to the student and what the best method for communicating that information.

## **GUIDANCE ON STRUCTURING A VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP**

### **INTERNSHIP DURATION**

Ideally, virtual internships are a *minimum of 6 weeks long* and have *at least 10 hours of work per week*. This helps ensure that the student walks away with an immersive and robust experiential learning opportunity but also allows them the opportunity to contribute to the organization in a bigger way.

### **INTERVIEW**

Virtual internships should include an interview as part of the hiring process. Ideally, the interview is conducted via video but if not, a phone interview will suffice.

## **ORIENTATION AND ONBOARDING**

Just like in-person internships, virtual internships should include an orientation program and onboarding process to introduce the student to the organization and any staff they would have regular interactions.. This should consist of meeting other staff members, learning about the organization, reviewing organization-wide communication standards and org chart. Time should be set aside to cover HR policies and workplace expectations and reviewing the student's learning goals. This will provide the student the chance to ask clarifying questions, as this might be their first professional work environment, and is likely their first virtually-based position.

In addition to facilitating a virtual internship, supervisors may consider integrating the student into the organization's work culture including client visits, attendance at select team meetings, use of tools and resources, and any other forms of access to other staff members.

## **SET GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS**

At the start of the internship, supervisors should work with the student to identify learning goals to be completed during the course of the internship. These could incorporate industry-related knowledge, skills, and abilities for educational progression in your professional industry. Supervisors should check in with the student regularly throughout the internship to see if the student is on track to meet these goals.

Although a key feature of remote internships is the flexibility of the work schedule, the supervisor and the student should agree upon a definitive time allotment per week and per day for internship activities. Defining the amount of time allotted for any given task is strongly recommended to avoid unreasonable work demands on the student and any conflict with reported internship hours.

## **PROJECT-BASED INTERNSHIP**

During a virtual internship, the student's work should be project-oriented instead of smaller, day-to-day tasks. By focusing on projects that are significant to the organization, the student will have a more robust learning experience. This ensures that many people in the organization are invested in their success, and it widens the scope of available mentors who are knowledgeable about the project.

Great internship projects tend to be items which are largely seen as "nice to haves" by full-time staff. These are projects that everyone recognizes would benefit the organization, but do not rise to the level of priority necessary to demand senior staff attention.

## **PROFESSIONAL CONNECTIONS AND MENTORING**

Although the student can pursue their own networking, organizations should consider facilitating informational meetings with other staff within the organization on their behalf. A virtual brown bag lunch, for example, is a casual setting for students to strike up conversations with other co-workers. Also recommended is providing a mentor to the student intern.

## **FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT**

Regular feedback and support is pivotal in any internship but it's even more relevant for virtual internships because of the absence of in-person connections. The student needs ongoing support and feedback so that they can continually improve. This may be in the form of peer-based feedback, manager evaluations, or online self-assessments that identify areas for improvement.

Supervisors should review the student's deliverables and provide timely feedback on a regular basis. Consistent one-on-one feedback meetings should be scheduled between the supervisor and student with pre-planned topics to discuss. Synchronous meeting platforms should be used for this portion of the internship, including video conferencing or telephone, not email or messaging platforms.

## **ONGOING COMMUNICATION**

It's imperative to clearly set expectations around communication. These can include:

- Clarifying the organization's preferred modes of communication, whether that would be email, phone, or instant messenger. Let the student know what technology platforms are used and grant them any access they might need.
- Ideally, the supervisor and the student should have the opportunity to check-in weekly. This ensures the chance for the supervisor to review the student's progress and provide constructive feedback, and for the student to ask questions.
- Consider having the student submit a regularly-scheduled report that informs their supervisor on things such as challenges or problems encountered, progress toward project objectives, and any questions they may have.

- It is helpful for the student if the supervisor sets expectations around response times, such as an email response within 24 hours or by the next business day.

## TWO-WEEK SAMPLE OUTLINE

Here are the elements of the first two weeks that will help to get the virtual internship off to a good start and provide structure for going forward.

### Week 1

- **Introductory meeting:** This is the meeting where the supervisor outlines communication preferences, modes of communication and frequency, as well as provide a rough overview of the internship.
- **Introduction to relevant staff members:** Schedule an introduction to relevant staff members and share more perspectives on the work the student will be engaged in.
- **Project meeting:** Provide a detailed outline of the first project and the relevant subtasks for that week, as well as internship learning goals and what successful outcomes look like.
- **Student-focused work time:** Since the project work is new and less familiar to the student, it is helpful to outline specific subtasks that will fill the independent work and project time and discuss estimated time for each task. Encourage the student to reach out if they have any questions or thoughts.
- **End-of-week check-in:** Schedule a check-in to assess the status of their projects and to review the progress from the week. Discuss the estimated time for each project and if these times need to be adjusted and if expectations are accurate. Review if the student has all the materials and resources they need to do their work. Preview the upcoming week and answer any final questions to help the student to prepare for week two.

### Week 2

- **Student-focused work time:** Continue to outline subtasks for the student’s independent work and projects and estimated time needed for completion.
- **Supervisor check-in:** Schedule a brief mid-week check-in with the student to triage any questions, concerns, or challenges they may be facing.
- **Potential networking opportunity:** Consider engaging colleagues and host a virtual brown bag lunch with informal presentations and Q&A, or creating other opportunities for the student to connect with co-workers. If possible, brief the student on who’ll be attending and help them brainstorm insightful questions they could ask.
- **End-of-week check-in:** Review project progress from the week and answer any questions the student may have. At this point, it’s critical to provide constructive feedback that will help course-correct or redirect their work. Close out the meeting with a preview of the what’s coming down the pipeline for next week in terms of subtasks and other emerging projects.

## CONCLUSION

Cal Poly Career Services is here to help along the way. There are a number of **services** that can elevate your brand and highlight your open positions. Our dedicated team can answer additional questions including how to post your position so students can apply.

### How do I post a job or internship that will offered remotely?

To post virtual internships on **MustangJOBS powered by Handshake**, the appropriate way to create your posting is:

On the ‘Details’ page of the job posting



Select ‘Allow remote workers’

Allow remote workers

Once the job posting is completed and submitted, Cal Poly Career Services will review the position for accuracy and relevance before approving the position to be seen by students. Please allow two business days for positions to be reviewed.

Still have questions? Please contact a member of our **Recruiting Team**.

## REFERENCES

<https://www.parkerdewey.com/faq>

<https://naceweb.org>

<https://lsa.umich.edu/opportunityhub>

<https://www.swarthmore.edu/career-services/swatworks-2020-funded-micro-internships>

<https://www.up.edu/career/files/virtual-internships-guidelines-for-employers.pdf>

<https://ocs.yale.edu/narrative/tips-guidelines-employers-create>

<https://about.gitlab.com/company/culture/all-remote/internship/>