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Going global in small steps: E-internships in SMEs[☆]



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Employment relationships are undergoing rapid change as organizational, industrial and technological change influences how, when, and with whom we work. Virtual work, teleworkers, international freelancers, outsourcing of research and development all represent developments that would not have been possible prior to the onset of the Internet and sophisticated social interaction and media software. Virtual workers may be employed on a long-term or permanent basis for an organization. Their employment as virtual workers is often preceded by regular employment within the same organization. Many virtual workers are also experts in their field who are sought after for their expertise and skills.

As job forms have evolved, so have the forms of internships. Virtual or e-internships represent learning experiences that are often fully computer-mediated, with supervisors, interns and their colleagues in different locations. We prefer the term 'e-internship' in line with e-recruiting, e-mentoring and e-HRM. E-interns, in common with some virtual workers, are likely to work on temporary and project-based activities. Both types of workers are also unlikely to work in close proximity or face-to-face with their immediate supervisors and colleagues. In both virtual work and e-internships, all interactions are facilitated by—but also heavily dependent on—technology, software, and good communication skills of all individuals involved. They also offer greater autonomy for the worker although building relationships and developing trust with colleagues can be more challenging.

The similarities often end there. In contrast to virtual workers, e-interns may not be as skilled or experienced. In addition, they may not be paid. Nevertheless, e-internships offer many advantages. Recent trends and press reports provide an important insight into why these e-internships are increasing in both numbers and popularity. Following this,

we discuss a number of themes that emerged in a series of interviews conducted with e-interns and host organizations in relation to evidence from the academic literature and popular press.

FOCUS OF THIS PAPER

The overall goal of this paper is to discuss how the increasing adoption of e-internships within SMEs is linked to developments in e-HRM, technology and global as well as competitive talent needs. The discussion utilizes different sources of information. We reflect on the emergence of these e-internship based on evidence obtained from SMEs, global talent management, facilitators of global and virtual team performance as well as predictors of innovation and knowledge management. This discussion is combined with information we collected from interviews with 19 experts in the field. The experts included former interns, experts on internships (including organizational representatives who developed and ran internship schemes, consultants, academic staff and advisors with experience in supporting interns). The organizations in the study ran e-internship schemes located in several countries, including the USA, India, Ireland, Romania, the UK and Australia. About half (7 out of 13) of the organizations recruited in their own countries as well as abroad, while the other half focused on recruiting interns only from their own country.

All but two of the representatives came from SMEs with up to 49 employees, including for-profit and not-for-profit (education and non-governmental) organizations. This is significant in that SMEs have the most to gain and face the largest challenges to compete for talent, compared to larger and multi-national organizations. SMEs in the non-financial sector account for almost 66.8% of total employment in Europe according to the 2014 annual report on European SMEs produced by the European Commission. Similarly, small private businesses with less than 20 workers employed 17.9% of

[☆] This article was accepted by the former editors, Fred Luthans and John Slocum.

employees in the USA according to the Small Business & Entrepreneurship Council.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we explore and demonstrate the popularity of e-internships by examining statistics and features particular to this type of internship. In the next section, we explain how these e-internships are facilitated by developments in e-HRM and technology. In the third section, we explore how specific organizational and HR practices contribute to selection and knowledge management in these e-internships. The fourth section considers the potential benefits that result from selection and knowledge management in terms of diversity, intellectual as well as social capital. The fifth section considers how these benefits may facilitate strategic development and change, particularly within organizations that need to reinvent themselves or explore new markets. The sixth and final section considers the challenges that arise, particularly in terms of the investments required relating to HR practices, technology, supervision and resources.

STATISTICS AND TRENDS

Virtual or e-internships have been around for over ten years. The organizations seeking e-interns include any number of industrial, non-governmental and virtual businesses. From libraries to museums, educational institutions, or consultancies, multi-national organizations and customer service providers, internship providers come in all shapes and forms. According to a 2011–2012 study conducted with more than 7,300 respondents by Internships.com, a third of employers advertising on the sites hire e-interns, an increase of 20% from one year to the next, with more than 8,000 listings for virtual internships. In addition, 71% of students indicated that they would be willing to consider taking up a virtual internship. According to CEO Rishabh Gupta from LetsIntern.com in India, his company has seen an increasing number of virtual internships over the last 2 years. The numbers of virtual internships increased by 60% over the course of 12 months (November 2013 to October 2014). By October 2014, virtual internships already made up 15% of almost 13,000 internships advertised via LetsIntern.com. Based on the trends of the past few years, the numbers of virtual internships are likely to increase further in the foreseeable future. In particular e-internships in countries such as India are rising fast. The number of e-internships is increasing and their popularity is spreading across more countries with each year, as technology and office applications increasingly facilitate the virtual office and interactive collaborations.

Not only are e-internships frequently discussed on blogs and in the press, professional organizations and institutions are getting involved in the debate as well. Many educational institutions reference the guidelines by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), U.S. Department of Labor in the USA, or seek information about how to make virtual internships rewarding from websites such as the European Association for International Education (or other national institutions providing legislative information). More and more internship sites also emerge which provide guidance on, as well as information and vacancies about, virtual internships, with internship sites emerging in many countries and languages, but particularly in the USA and India.

Attractiveness of E-internships

The popularity of these internships is due to several circumstances, as outlined by press reports and our interviewees. First, many students find such internships easier to combine with their studies. This is a finding observed across many different programs and countries. Related to the first reason, e-internships represent a financially affordable alternative to traditional internships that do not require long-distance travel or relocation. This is especially beneficial in large countries with young and motivated but rural populations and with a large number of graduates such as India. Financial concerns, especially with rising tuition fees and debt, often make such e-internships more attractive for the candidates, especially when they face potential unemployment even after successfully graduating college. Concerns about overheads, office space, insurance and technological provisions in many online, small and medium-sized organizations (SMEs) further increase the popularity of e-internships.

Third, many organizations realize that e-internships allow them to access talent pools across the world. Many businesses suffer from skill shortages, particularly in terms of creative new talent or talent that is multi-lingual. Several press reports from prominent news outlets such as *Wall Street Journal* in the USA, the *Times* and *The Guardian* in the UK have outlined the benefit of e-internships for accessing talent. The more specific the intern requirements, the greater the likelihood that an e-internship may help provide the organization with the candidates with the required skills. A variety of government institutions in different countries have implemented e-internships, in recognition of this fact. Not surprisingly, SMEs and online businesses are increasingly utilizing this option to access and compete for talent. With many more SMEs than large organizations, graduates actually have better chances of getting internships with SMEs in their chosen field than with larger organizations.

Coming a close fourth, the intern of the future is not just a high school or undergraduate student. Interns may be seeking to change careers, whilst at the same time not wanting to move from their current location. They may bring many skills from previous job experiences in different domains that employers are unlikely to find locally via traditional internships. Fifth, e-internships are often popular options for virtual businesses and small and medium-sized companies, as well as non-governmental organizations. Being able to offer e-internships is often more feasible than traditional internships when the business is very small, run in a family home, or geographically distant from the most likely candidates for such internships. At the same time, the greater dispersion of potential talent may support creativity and innovation when different e-interns come together to brainstorm solutions for local issues.

However, the popularity of e-internships is not necessarily mirrored by enthusiasm amongst academics and career professionals, many of whom believe that more hands-on internships are preferable. The main criticism is that the e-internships do not provide the same access to support and opportunities that traditional internships do. In addition, e-interns may not experience corporate culture, etiquette, and learn about professional expectations. However, this may be counterbalanced with greater accountability as well as competition for internship positions with desirable employers. The

fact is that e-internships are not necessarily better or worse, and nor do they represent an equivalent replacement for more traditional internship schemes. Instead, the e-internships might be particularly suited to interns seeking experience in industries that rely extensively on information and communication technology in all areas of business, such as online businesses, social media and customer service support, IT and software development, marketing and branding.

FACILITATORS E-HRM AND TECHNOLOGY

Similar to large national and international organizations, small and medium-sized companies try to align their HRM practices more and more with their strategies, adapting their HRM practices to consider both external and internal constraints. Traditionally, SMEs focused at local or national business markets may have the least developed HRM practices. However, this is changing with the advent of the Internet, increasingly enabling SMEs in many countries, including developing countries such as India, to utilize digitized recruitment and selection via Internet job boards, database and applicant tracking technology, online testing and assessments. Using these new tools, setting up and recruiting e-interns in online internships have also become an increasingly attractive option for SMEs as a means to locate qualified candidates beyond their immediate vicinity to fill certain positions.

The leaders of newly founded SMEs are often challenged to implement their HR strategies in a way that facilitate their future development most effectively. Especially with micro-sized companies, managers often find themselves in need of an expert in marketing, an expert in recruiting, an expert in finance. As organizations grow, many SME leaders seek support from competitors. This may include other SMEs and those organizations that appear to have developed successful internships. The increasing adoption of e-HRM approaches within SMEs has made it easier for these organizations to compete with larger organizations by establishing an online presence, becoming aware of what kind of unique learning experiences they may be able to offer candidates. This new confidence has supported a variety of new developments in SMEs.

Communication Tools and Skills

One outcome from our interviews was the finding that many of the supervisors had been extensive users of online technologies due to working as freelancers, teleworkers or virtual workers in the past. Internship managers and supervisors with this background appeared to favor more interactive and often more regular online meetings than supervisors with a more traditional background. In other words, prior experience and good communication skills may be essential in e-internships in that these give them the essential expertise to select appropriate and effective communication tools. The move towards using more and more sophisticated software, virtual media and databases is not surprising. For example, research on virtual teams has shown that today's modern coordination tools enable teams to coordinate knowledge transfer and help them integrate each other's capabilities to most effect. Via freely available or open source programs,

our interviewed SMEs now often have the means to create shared databases, use shared documents, utilize interactive video, chat and joint working programs to work on tasks together simultaneously regardless of location. Project management software enabling everybody to access task descriptions, tools, handbooks/templates and other useful documentation can help reduce delays and make it easier for supervisor to track progress and provide feedback. It furthermore means interns have the resources they need around the clock, thus reducing email traffic/chat queries and the reliance on supervisors to be available during all hours. Online appointment calendars can also help supervisors and interns to connect. Depending on the nature of the organizational business (e.g., marketing, advertising, and social media), performance metrics may also become available as part of the tools and software used within their work. This can further help interns and supervisors gauge progress. Since job shadowing is out of the question compared to traditional internship settings, providing training materials and sessions can be helpful as well as providing a virtual peer mentor. Having the right tools can also help with crowd sourcing of new innovative ideas and stimulate creativity by posting challenges and (group) exercises to interns.

Since discussions around the water cooler are unlikely to occur, good communicators are necessary to keep everybody up to date and ensure that no e-interns fall through the cracks. Our interviewees also suggested that e-interns are more likely to succeed when they are motivated, have good communication skills, are self-driven and have the right technological skills. These variables weigh more heavily in e-internships due to the reliance on interns' ability to self-manage, and work in a virtual environment. A good strategy is to consider selecting communication tools that will facilitate the best possible selection of e-interns from different corners of the country or continents.

Getting Ready to Manage Global Talent

While most of our interviews shared their success stories, we came across at least a similar number of businesses whose e-internships had not been successful. This was largely due to the fact that managing global talent online presents its own challenges. Our organizational interviewees reported that many initially underestimate the time and planning needed to set up and develop their programs. This pertains to the selection but also effective utilization of resources, technology, supervisory support and feedback programs. The increasing number of applications, even if handled using digital programs, is nevertheless time-intensive and can be costly for SMEs. In addition, the working day may change dramatically when interns work very different or irregular hours.

MANAGING KNOWLEDGE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Selecting for the Job, the Team, the Organization that an Intern Never Meets

Selection of e-interns may be just as difficult as selecting regular employees, especially when the candidates need to have specific skills. Candidates may have diverse backgrounds,

located in different geographic regions and have very different skill sets. These circumstances can make it difficult to locate and select the most highly skilled and suitable interns without an appropriate recruitment and selection strategy. Assessing an intern's suitability virtually may prove particularly challenging, especially when projects require trust due to the intern having access to confidential information or intellectual property. Almost all of the organizational interviewees conducted at least one (online) interview during selection with their candidates to further test how well they coped with electronic communication, completed work samples and demonstrated competence (especially if the internship is very technical). A related point considers intern-supervisor fit. Interns' commitment and expectations may not mesh well with those of the supervisors. Moreover, some interns may need more support than others due to lack of experience. Therefore, selection techniques need to be adapted to the virtual environment to ensure that the persons with the right skills and personal attributes are selected. For example, several of our interviewees required applicants to submit video clips and goal statements that help advisors to get a better sense of the person's ability to summarize who they are, how they present themselves, and what learning goals they hope to achieve. Almost all interviewees also used interviews as well as resumes, goal statements, and trial assessments. To improve the candidate pool, these individuals also use person-to-person recruitment (e-interns nominate potential candidates and promote the internship scheme), or announce vacancies on websites of professional associations and college sites. However, regardless of these different approaches, intern-supervisor fit can be more difficult to assess when the e-intern has no prior experience with cultural differences and hierarchies related to status and gender. As many of these smaller organizations are unknown entities for applicants as well as academic advisors, credibility may be an issue when the organization has not considered the impact of how they present themselves and their business online.

Managing Knowledge

Organizations depend on the individual knowledge of their workers as well as how they use this information in organizations, which may depend on the individual characteristics of the workers (e.g., motivation and willingness to share) and the norms in the workplace. From this perspective, employees are not necessarily substitutable. Mansour Javidan and David Bowen proposed the "global mindset" as reflecting an individual's capability to influence others unlike themselves". The global mindset is what supervisors need to possess when managing global talent. Achieving each successfully is not an easy task, especially when the composition of the team of e-interns changes repeatedly. This therefore raises the difficulty involved in selecting e-interns that will work together in teams.

In addition, some individual knowledge is unique. This is also the case with e-interns, especially when they have non-traditional background skills and competencies. These circumstances can make e-internship selection and management a lot more challenging than traditional internships. Meetings around the water cooler represent important opportunities to exchange information, news and get to know

one's colleagues. This is harder to accomplish online. One approach advocated by several of our interviewees is the development of social media groups specifically designed for their e-interns. Here e-interns can meet, chat and exchange news independently. Research and evidence from virtual team management and selection of global managers can be helpful in this debate. Virtual team management practices can be useful as many of the challenges would also apply to teams of e-interns. For example, this includes mentoring of new team members, creating shared databases and interactive portals that allow all members to contribute and support each other openly. This allows managers of such teams to better assess progress, knowledge sharing and participation of all members. These approaches also reduce isolation and uncertainty about who to contact for specific queries. Interactive portals that record team interactions and team conferencing can further promote a sense of a common purpose and identity. Research on how to solve challenges of managing diversity and increase cohesiveness in teams at a national or international level may provide insight to how to manage e-interns spread across large geographic distances.

Successful management of e-interns will require supervisors to provide informational, technical and emotional support to e-interns. Managers and supervisors in larger organizations are not necessarily better equipped to handle the challenges that arise when working with a global team. To address this concern, several of our interviewees used peer coaching in their SMEs in order to ensure that e-interns had access to peers when the supervisor was not available. In line with work by Polly Parker and colleagues, we also found that some of our organizational interviewees utilized peer coaching to increase access to support. In addition, two organizations also employed e-interns as peer coaches to help support other e-interns (these e-interns usually had prior experience within the company). Becoming a coach was an option offered to those e-interns who also wanted to develop interpersonal skills or supervisory experience as part of their e-internship. These peer coaches are responsible for ensuring all participants in a team are aware of each other's roles and bring all their knowledge to the task. At the same time, by facilitating knowledge exchange and collaboration, coaches learn to relate and influence other e-interns to support effective and timely task completion. This means these individuals not only become facilitators of 'mindshare', but they also get an opportunity to develop the 'global mindset.'

DIVERSITY, INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

So what do the SMEs gain after putting in all this effort, resources and knowledge into establishing and managing these internship programs?

Greater Diversity

In addition to supporting SMEs, many e-interns have also indirectly increased diversity within SMEs. This diversity is the result of intern qualifications, their cultural and language diversity. E-interns may come with different experiences, backgrounds and needs that are not immediately available at

a (regional, national, political) level to an organization, thus enabling the organization to gain a new perspective on issues where this diversity can be helpful (e.g., when organizations need help with market research amongst diverse target groups). This is also a bonus when the organization would not normally have access to a more diverse workforce due to location (e.g., isolated, rural or poorly populated areas). For example, not all e-interns we interviewed fit the college student profile. Some were parents working part-time or professionals who sought experience and confidence to change their current career track. When language skills and local knowledge are not accessible to the company due to geographic or cultural distance, interns located in other countries can provide new insight into marketing campaigns and better capture the cultural nuances that are so important in marketing and branding campaigns. This essentially enables companies to learn from their e-interns about local stakeholders, customer requirements and draw on local knowledge about political, cultural, ethnic and even institutional characteristics. Multinational companies are no longer the only ones seeking to get closer to their customers and satisfy their different needs across different locations. Especially in geographically sizeable countries, having e-interns from different regions can increase SME knowledge of different domestic markets. Moreover, if they are working across national boundaries, international e-interns can provide similar benefits.

Increase (Temporary) Intellectual Capital

Not only does diversity increase the opportunities for learning about each other, it may also help SMEs to avoid groupthink due to isolation. In addition, it enables them to set up crowd sourcing of ideas, provides a means to test the suitability of proposed solutions and new business processes. These procedures may also enable SMEs to learn and develop business practices from local as well as global perspectives. All these developments suggest that e-internships can increase (temporarily at least) an organization's intellectual capital. While traditional internships also benefit the organization with an increase in intellectual capital, the realm of possibilities for SMEs employing e-interns may be wider. For example, given the online resources, e-interns enable SMEs to work on projects with clients across the globe and test opportunities in new markets. In other words, e-interns can make a significant and positive contribution to the intellectual capital and growth within an organization. Supervisors and their effective use of electronic media facilitate this. Being small but with talent and ideas on board, some SMEs have increasingly reached out to new talent with specific skills to help them take the first steps towards meeting new strategic objectives. We discuss one unique contribution in the next section.

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE

Recent work by David Lei and John Slocum differentiated between reinventors and pioneers in terms of the strategic approach that businesses take to change their situation. Several organizations involved in our research were in the process of reorienting their customer focus, expanding their business or testing the market. Some of these developments

were externally motivated—the organization faced challenges (keeping customer interest). Developing e-internship schemes to support strategic re-development and change was often part of the process.

For example, some of the organizations we interviewed face the challenge and the need to reinvent themselves in order to stay interesting for their audience, sponsors and supporters. Such organizations include small non-governmental organizations, museums and libraries. Many of these businesses develop new strategies to change or update their image and increase their appeal to a wider and often younger audience. Their means are often limited. However, due to their expertise, they can provide unique mentoring experiences to e-interns. As such, we know of e-interns who have been recruited to develop publicly accessible databases and a stronger online presence for these organizations. In addition to taking on operational roles that focus on product or service delivery, some e-interns may also become representatives on the ground and across different locations for these organizations, in some instances also helping them to recruit future interns. Many supervisors of e-interns have the advantage that due to the flat hierarchy of most SMEs, they are able to influence HR practices to fit organizational strategies, which can help increase congruence between selection and organizational goals. This then enables them to link HR and recruitment to the strategic needs of the business.

Other organizations we interviewed needed to expand their horizons to stay competitive or develop a distinct brand and identity to set itself apart from competitors. Others needed to provide better customer services but were not equipped to do so without taking new steps. In other words, we came across new SMEs who are pioneers in the business, starting off a new and unique business in their area. These include software pioneers, specialist marketing and/or translation services, specialized recruitment websites, and new design and branding companies. Many of the SMEs we interviewed are located in countries with large young talent pools such as Eastern Europe and India. Global talent pools are often key to maximizing mindshare, according to Mary Teagarden and Andreas Schotter. In order to overcome the advantage of location, finances and office space, many of these SMEs have started to recruit talent directly from college. Given the high number of student and graduates available to companies located in such large economies, these SMEs can select from many different candidates to develop their client base, marketing and communication strategy. By seeking candidates from specific college programs, SMEs in both India and the USA have found that they can effectively recruit motivated, educated and interested e-interns who bring their newly acquired skills to the companies. This then generates an important opportunity for knowledge and skill exchange for both SMEs and interns, while some interns also get hands-on experience. According to Gregory Dess and Steve Sauerwald this provides the access to knowledge, and hence the means for unique value creation and the starting point for competitive advantage.

Knowledge Exchange and Organizational Learning

Strategic HR practices contribute to knowledge management capacity and via this variable also foster innovation. The

temporary nature of e-internships enables SMEs to increase their access to knowledge and stimulate innovation on specific projects. Our interviews also revealed that e-interns provide another avenue for organizational learning and feedback. Their diversity and different experiences can be invaluable. Interns can be an excellent source of feedback on processes and structures, another avenue to evaluate online communication practices, social media use or presence. For instance, interns can also present new staff mentoring opportunities and staff may appreciate the opportunity to share their knowledge with interns. The presence of new and keen interns will help keep the staff motivated and gives them a unique e-mentoring experience as well.

The benefits also translate into an increase of staff expertise. The skills and knowledge of e-interns can complement staff expertise and increase the amount of knowledge and skills available to the staff. Interns may also support processes as subject-matter experts, especially when they have previous work experience. These circumstances can also translate into managerial learning. E-internships may represent a great training and feedback opportunity for managers. Interns can provide an external point of view, and add a different perspective to the process.

HIGH INVESTMENT REQUIREMENTS FOR SUCCESS AND MUTUAL BENEFITS

In the words of Gregory Dess and Steve Sauerwald, “individuals who interact with a diverse set of other people will also be exposed to a diverse set of problems”. Work on cross-cultural encounters demonstrates the difficulties that arise when several cultures met, as people from different backgrounds often behave differently across diverse situations. This means the merits of e-internships for SMEs, and the opportunities they can offer to e-interns cannot be viewed in isolation from the challenges that arise for organizations. In terms of communication, past evidence in global virtual teams suggests that cultural differences may either become more salient or not be given due consideration in online communication. Some technologies, especially those not allowing for interactive and face-to-face online exchanges, may filter out those cues that normally aid interpretation. Past work on e-team formation has demonstrated the importance of employing technology in a way that allows all individuals to share and contribute information, enhance collaboration and promote problem solution in a team. Beyond these more general concerns, we need to consider the challenges that arise when running new e-internships. We consider a few of these in the next paragraphs.

Selecting and Motivating the ‘Best’

HR practices tend to vary significantly in SMEs and sectors. The selection of e-interns often utilizes both traditional and alternative models of selection. Rather than relying on resumes and portfolios, interns are also recruited using online interviews, how well they can present themselves on video, and by how well they complete trial assignments. Such trial assessments may be a good opportunity to assess applicant’s abilities and problem solving. This requires significantly more effort in the preparation phase, but also

consideration as to how cultural influences affect selection. Many internships require such creativity, problem solving and new insights and perspectives, particularly if the organization specializes in marketing, branding or selling services. In order to facilitate a fair selection process, most organizations did provide some guidance on what they require applicants to submit. Nevertheless, making selection less predictable for the interviewee, thus reducing the option to just simulate or fabricate responses, is important. Psychometric testing was not part of the selection process in any of the organizations. Organizations that recruited e-interns to support customer interaction and social media often used more interactive and less predictable formats, reducing the possibility of faking experience, skills and personality. This included their use of unstructured interviewing including experience-based questions, observing how an applicant interacts with other e-interns online and how effectively and timely he or she communicates with various staff involved in the selection process; giving applicants work samples to complete, or having applicants submit video clips where they introduce themselves, outline their skills and show how they engage with a potential audience they cannot see. These approaches also make it easier for managers to get a better sense of the applicant’s personality, skills, experience and their authenticity. Many e-interns will also have to learn new software, learn how to use templates, and how to present for and share information effectively with different audiences. As a result, most e-internships also assumed a significant interest in learning new skills. Commitment to learning has also been shown to be associated with open-mindedness, but also administrative and technical innovation. In addition, not all internships will offer applicants the exciting possibilities that they may have envisaged. A realistic job preview can help set and define expectations.

Giving individuals a unifying goal and a sense of achievement is important as it can help them become part of a team, an important consideration for e-interns as well. Although computer-mediated, some form of induction to the mission and goals of the organization can be helpful, in form of online events, webinars and video chats. This is standard for many companies and also common in other virtual work. This can help establish and set the socio-emotional dimensions of the relationship, including expectations, ambitions and shared visions. This is also a good way to introduce e-interns to their role as ambassadors for their organizations and is particularly important when the work involves public representation or client contact. Especially with not-for-profit organizations and in the case of unpaid internships, it is vital that the interns understand how their contribution fits into the work. If e-interns see a connection between what they do and the company’s goals, their tasks become more meaningful. In addition, many of the SMEs we interviewed recognized the value of retaining members of the talent pool they created via their e-interns. As a result, half of the SMEs we interviewed have also offered employment opportunities to their interns.

Availability and Resource Access

The virtual nature of e-internships often means managers need to put in more effort in order to deal with the barriers for teamwork which may be novel or take different forms.

Emilio Bellini and Paolo Canonico also reported that project-based organizations experience significant obstacles in harnessing knowledge and benefitting from previously learned lessons because of the idiosyncratic as well as temporary nature of most projects. These concerns are certainly also valid concerns in e-internships. Knowledge management has been defined as requiring formalized creation, but also retention and utilization of both explicit and tacit knowledge assets. Facilitating this may be more of a challenge, both in terms of technology but also supervisory support.

The requirements for greater availability may on occasion exceed the ability of the supervisor to provide support and hence result in managers feeling overwhelmed. Many managers we interviewed recommend a response time of less than 24 hours for emails to avoid delays due to asynchronous working hours and communication (which can be exacerbated due to different working hours and time zones). Some also sign into chat services so that they can see which interns are online and are able to respond to their queries right away, occasionally also working in tandem with another supervisor to provide support and access to help 24 hours day. In order to alleviate the workload for supervisors, some invest time and effort into developing relatively self-sufficient peer coaching programs, develop libraries of training materials and blogs, provide discussion groups for team projects, and utilize analytics to keep track of key performance indicators (such as number of retweets, number of users visiting blogs and product reviews, etc.). Getting e-interns involved in social networks can help them access information and resources but also connect to stakeholders and prospective clients or consumers. In addition, as the numbers of e-interns grow, such resources also enable interns to communicate with one another, get support, share experiences, and “socialize” autonomously. In addition, this social infrastructure enables employees and e-interns to learn about each other’s skills and the resources available for collaboration. Direct ties and personal relationships between team members can increase both the amount of information shared in teams, but also the perceived helpfulness of knowledge shared. Similarly, social cohesion can increase knowledge transfer. These strategies can maintain motivation and create organizational slack, which facilitates experimentation and innovation.

However, these e-internships schemes often are the exception. Many e-internships appear to be relatively impoverished in terms of the amount of support, contact hours, social media or technology that is involved. Indeed, some internships appear to focus on minimizing communication, development or interaction. The interpersonal component and options for skill development are thwarted by the limited opportunities being presented to e-interns, making such internships often less satisfying for the interns. Dropout rates may rise to 25% in such internships. Whilst other virtual workers are likely to be paid, e-interns may have no such additional incentive to stick to their commitment. If a mismatch occurs between what is expected by the supervisor and intern (e.g., in terms of support, skill development, task

diversity), the dropout rate may be even higher. As a result, it would be inappropriate to suggest that e-internships represent a cheaper and more effective alternative to traditional internships. The investment that needs to be made by organizations, in terms of labor, hours, technology, training, communication and interpersonal skills is considerable. Reducing the relative anonymity of the virtual environment and increasing the perceived commitment to supervisor, organization or peers (by offering paid internships, ensuring peer interactions and frequent performance feedback) can become very important for retaining interns in e-internships compared to traditional internships. Nevertheless, the benefits for SMEs can be considerable—given the right conditions.

One issue that can be difficult relates to the fact that for studying e-interns, obtaining academic credit for completing an internship relevant to their degree is not always an option. This is in part the result of the lack of familiarity of academic tutors with e-internships, which often also explains their reluctance to recognize e-internships as appropriate learning experiences worthy of academic credit points even when the traditional internship equivalent would be acceptable. These circumstances may therefore lead to fewer candidates considering e-internships during their studies, possibly disadvantaging those who are not able to take up traditional internships for various reasons. Many of the organizational representatives we interviewed value the opportunity to help their interns obtain academic credit, which they view as an incentive for e-interns. In several cases, interested organizations were unable to meet the stringent requirements of a college or university for academic credit as the legal or educational guidelines of the particular university may be very different from those in the country in which the organization is situated.

CONCLUSIONS

The present paper tried to link the development and adoption of e-internships within SMEs to various important developments over the last ten years, including e-HRM practices, technology and increasingly global talent recruitment. Evidence based on knowledge sharing and management as well as innovation further explains why SMEs increasingly see the merit of recruiting from a wider pool of candidates, both nationally and internationally. Nevertheless, these benefits are not easy to accomplish. Some organizations experience high dropout rates and discontinue their e-internship schemes soon after implementing them, perhaps due to not having the right support and infrastructure in place. In addition, not all press reports are positive, and many career advisors in educational institutions are hesitant to endorse students’ ambitions, especially in new start-ups. We hope that this discussion of benefits but also requirements for upfront investment in time, resources, and technology will help to increase the success rate of future e-internships in SMEs.



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A number of researchers have examined the benefits of internships for the career of individuals. Most of these focus on traditional internships but may still represent useful sources of information. A useful resource and applied perspective on internships can be gained by reading the e-book by Michael True called *InternQube: Professional Skills for the Workplace*, by intruention, LLC (see also online at internqube.com). We can also recommend a number of general resources on internships such as G. Beenen and D. M. Rousseau, "Getting the most from MBA internships: promoting intern learning and job acceptance," *Human Resource Management*, 2010, 49(1), 3–22. A related article is the work by H. Zhao and R. C. Liden, "Internship: a recruitment and selection perspective," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2011, 96(1), 221–229. Another resource is the work by G. Callanan and C. Benzing, "Assessing the role of internships in the career-oriented employment of graduating college students," *Education + Training*, 2004, 46(2), 82–89. Stuart Woollard outline how technology, policy and talent management relate to "Managing talent across a global workforce," *Strategic HR Review*, 2010, 9(5), 5–10. The work by David G. Collings and Kamel Mellahi looks "Strategic talent management: a review and research agenda," *Human Resource Management Review*, 2009, 19, 304–313. Recruiting talent effectively is discussed by Alex Linley and Nicky Garcea, "Engaging graduates to recruit the best," *Strategic HR Review*, 2013, 12(6), 297–301.

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