SOLVING THE CHALLENGES OF THE VIRTUAL WORKPLACE FOR INTERNS

Brenna Leath
North Carolina State University

New opportunities exist for students who want internships in writing. With these opportunities, however, come new needs and new preparations to make upon entering the workforce. Internships help students determine whether a career is right for them, give valuable insight into the working world, and help sculpt career development with the rich experience and networking available to the motivated intern. But as the workforce becomes more competitive, more stressful, and increasingly dependent on technology, a new kind of internship has become available to the ambitious student: the virtual internship. For writers, virtual internships can create boundless opportunities to exhibit personal drive and self-motivation. They can also create significant amounts of stress due to the lack of conventional socialization that occurs more naturally in a traditional internship.

Young writers need tools upon entering the virtual workplace, tools technical writing instructors can help provide in the classroom before sending students into the workforce. In a virtual context, though, these tools are nebulous and harder to find. Without proper preparation, writing internships in the virtual workplace can prove disastrous. Thus, writers in virtual internships must be guided from the beginning in order to make the most of their unique opportunity for work experience.

Virtual Internships Defined

Virtual interns receive their assignments from their supervisors by email or telephone, conduct the work on their own time, submit the assignments by a designated deadline, and ideally receive appropriate feedback. Virtual internships are becoming very popular to many businesses, as they are considered a big benefit and can save companies up to and above $100,000 a year in overhead in the first year alone (Pentilla). This, combined with AT&T's recent study regarding "business drivers" for telework in today's marketplace, such as "better technology, globalization, and cost pressures," provides more than enough incentive for organizations to implement virtual internship programs (AT&T). Although the benefits of virtual internships apply to several businesses and their interns may do much of the same work as traditional interns, the lack of face-to-face contact with their employing organizations generally proves disconcerting to virtual interns, particularly for those with no previous work experience. Still, this does not seem to affect businesses' or employees' attraction to working remotely. Just as there are many more people who struggle to work via technology, there are many more interns who have trouble adjusting to the change in work environment. Internships are generally considered a student's first chance to apply concepts learned in the classroom to an actual workplace; but what happens when the actual workplace is the comfort of a dorm room or a house riddled with distractions?

Challenges in Virtual Internships

My first internship was traditional: I went to the office every morning, my boss told me what to write that day, I sat down and wrote it, and I went home. Fast forward a few months. My second intern-

ship was virtual. So, I set my alarm every morning to get up and write. Then, when it went off, I promptly turned it off and went back to sleep. A few hours later, I sent an email to my boss with some excuse about a huge term paper or an Internet interruption, and I'd put off my internship work until I felt like wrestling with it. When I finally got around to doing the work, it was sloppy, and I was never happy with what I turned in. I'm not saying I'm proud of this; I'm just saying I was lazy. That, and I was always confused about what I was supposed to be researching and writing, because I would get one-word emails with a plethora of links and no idea what to do with them. At first, I thought maybe I was just a sub-par worker who would be better suited to a cubicle and a boss with a bullwhip. Then I remembered that I have mild claustrophobia and I really dislike being told what to do all the time, so I probably needed to figure out how to fix this problem.

As it turned out, I found universal frustration with the virtual workplace in discussions with students participating in virtual internships in NCSU's ENG 350 course, "Internships in Writing and Editing." These discussions articulated and elucidated the need for some sort of guide that students could read in order to better prepare them for virtual internships. Dr. Susan Katz, professor of ENG 350, searched avidly for a text she could give her students with helpful tips and information about teleworking, but had little success. When I struggled to adapt to my virtual internship following a traditional one, I also searched for answers. You need only to type "internship" in Google Scholar or CompPile to be bombarded with a bevy of informative articles. Very little of the available scholarship on internships, however, includes any substantial advice or recommendations for students approaching virtual writing internships.

All of the literature I encountered was geared towards employers constructing a virtual internship program, or teachers of internship courses, or students contemplating a virtual internship. But what about us young writers in the thick of it? I found plenty of literature on the theories of learning within an internship; for example, Sides and Mrvica write that "the concept of internship as learning involves four main points: the intern as learner; the trade, occupation, or profession knowledge as fixed; the master as teacher; [and] the idea that learning in the workplace is context bound, not conducive to transfer" (12). This information is helpful in understanding the purpose and dynamics of internships, but it is not tailored to the anomalies of the virtual internship. I found several articles touting the benefits of virtual internships in writing, such as "The Electronic Internship Advisor: The Case for Asynchronous Communication," which alludes to some "particular opportunities and challenges in using and studying these [teleworking tools] for students and scholars of communication" (Bazzoni). Again, helpful, but it addressed no specific possible problems the writer in the virtual workplace might face, let alone suggested any viable coping skills. I found only general snippets here and there to help writing students coping with the internships themselves, like "Take advantage of the transition time at the beginning of your internship and ask lots of questions" from the Berkeley Career Center's *Tips for Internship Success* (University of California) and "Be flexible" from American University's Career Center. However, these few recommendations and pointers weren't enough. To understand this challenge more fully after exploring the published literature, I expanded my research by interviewing five students who had been involved in virtual internships (see Appendix A).

Researching Virtual Internships

In studying the difficulties presented by virtual internships, I researched several perspectives regarding the challenges and benefits of working in the virtual workplace, as well as perspectives regarding the general science of internships. I read articles written from the perspective of employers

who have implemented or are considering implementing virtual internship programs, as well as research based on interviews with interns and their reflections regarding their experiences within virtual internships. Dr. Susan Katz provided the names of several students who had been placed in virtual internships, five of whom answered questions I had devised for interviews (for a list of all of the questions asked in the interviews, see Appendix A). Some of the most interesting research I did came from these student surveys, and this data led me to write an online guide (explained more fully below).

Reflections on Virtual Internships

In all the interviews I performed, students reported dissatisfaction and confusion across the board. In response to the questions "How much criticism and assistance did you receive from your supervisor?" and "To what extent did you feel as though [this criticism] was an adequate amount?" nearly all interns told me they didn't feel as though they'd had enough guidance or assistance. They felt as though they had stumbled through their assignments, writing anything they thought was close to what was expected of them, and hoped for the best. Clearly, students needed something that was lacking in the technical writing classroom to help them figure out how to succeed in and get some satisfaction from their virtual internships.

When I took the course "Internships in Writing and Editing," I learned a lot, all of which was helpful for my traditional internship. Only a small portion, however, was applicable to my virtual internship. In the response papers I wrote to the reading assignments (mostly about drafting, authority, socialization, etc.), my signature phrase quickly became "This condition doesn't really apply to my internship." In fact, in the very first response assignment, I wrote, "I'm disappointed to say my motivation has recently dwindled due to frustration and disorientation. I'm frustrated because I feel constantly unsure of whether I'm adequately completing assignments, due to a lack of reassuring feedback and the difficulty of obtaining information on subjects for articles I've been assigned to write." None of the course's reading assignments, which had been quite relevant to my traditional internship, helped me solve any of the disorientation and dissatisfaction I felt in my virtual internship. They presented plenty of helpful information, but they didn't provide an example of a problem or how to implement any of the techniques for socialization, drafting, or various other issues they described.

In order for students to decide and understand whether or not a virtual internship is right for them, they must first learn the basics of the virtual workplace. To be honest, I didn't exactly know what I was getting myself into when I signed up for a virtual internship. I just thought it would be nice to work from home, around my own schedule, without having to block out whole sections of my day for office work. Well, I obviously got a bit more than I bargained for, because if I had known what a mess I'd make of that job, I might have thought twice. Virtual internships can sometimes seem more appealing than traditional internships, particularly to busy college students with a demanding course schedule; there are no fixed hours, no physical commuting, no personal interactions with supervisors, and there is no required dress code. The benefits of convenience are undoubtedly tempting—I know I'm not the only college kid who ever thought working from home was going to be a breeze. Additionally, there are certainly many benefits to learning how to work more independently, and it is quickly becoming imperative to the modern workforce to develop technological skills and the discipline to effectively work remotely. Virtual internships can provide students with opportunities to turn out many pieces of writing to use for their career portfolios, and the virtual workplace creates a sense of being judged based on the quality of the writer's work rather than the hours the intern has logged. For many first entering the workforce, these are compelling reasons to try a virtual internship; some young adults pre-

fer working according to schedules they can design themselves and can turn out outstanding work independently without needing to punch a clock.

But although there is a tendency for greater accountability in off-site internships, there can sometimes be a significant decline in work ethic among virtual interns. I'm living proof. When I asked interns if they had difficulty getting motivated when working at home and how they handled it, I got some interesting answers. One student said, "No. I just reminded myself this was a real job." Well, she was the only one. A more common answer was, "Yes; without a boss and without any guidance, I felt frustrated, so I didn't want to sit down and work. I knew I'd feel confused and irritated as soon as I tried to write anything, but I had to make myself do it."

In a virtual internship, work must be submitted and documented, but the interns become so uncomfortable due to their lack of organizational socialization that they either neglect the work or develop a high stress level regarding their assignments. In one interview, a student said, "I felt nervous about my work, so I sometimes pushed it off until the last minute, which made me even more stressed." Many students begin their online jobs ill-equipped for the high degree of accountability involved in virtual internships, which require significantly more personal organization, discipline, and motivation than most on-site internships. While virtual internships can in fact be more productive than traditional internships due to the higher volume of work that can be turned out and the reduction of menial tasks such as coffee-fetching and phone-answering, they can also be much more confusing and stressful to the unprepared student.

As most virtual internships are conducted from home, interns may face challenges in simply motivating themselves to do the assigned work. Distractions at home may interfere with sitting down to work, as well as simple frustration about how to conduct the assigned tasks. Young adults just starting out in the workforce may not have had the experience to manage and conduct themselves in a professional manner, which can present several problems. They may not comprehend that a virtual internship, despite the lack of a physically present boss and the need to physically commute to work, is an equally important job opportunity and must be treated as such. One intern stated in her interview that "I was tempted to sleep in sometimes, because I knew my supervisor probably wouldn't check his email until after my check-in time." This case illustrates the strong internal motivation required to handle an online internship; no supervisor sitting over the intern's shoulder and no commute to work are significant temptations to procrastinate, neglect the assigned work, or produce writing of poor quality. Having no formal transition to the workplace, the intern faces a struggle to learn strict time management at home. For most students, this is no small feat.

As for any internship, students need to know the importance of asking questions and obtaining feedback. They should also understand the need for personal organization and personal drive when working mainly online. For these reasons, as well as the obvious isolated nature of the virtual internship, it is generally emphasized that "those who take on [virtual internships] should be motivated to work alone" (Hoak).

Although "interns need supervision," virtual internships rely on the responsibility of the intern (Sides and Mrvica 43). Without supervision and clear expectations, many interns can let the quality of their work deteriorate. Particularly as feedback and criticism can be sparse in the virtual workplace, it becomes the personal responsibility of interns to monitor their own work and actively request feedback when they find the response to their assignments to be ill-explained or inadequate. The interns' organization and scheduling of their own time is critical to effectively managing their work. While supervisors can call and send emails regarding the progress of an intern's assignments, they can find it tedious

to send an "amazing amount of reminders" of approaching deadlines (Pentilla). This highlights the importance of the virtual intern's own knowledge of personal organization and initiatives; without the regular supervision of a boss, it becomes necessary for interns to systemize their assignments and manage their time accordingly.

Another challenge virtual interns may face is how to assimilate to the writing process that their organization's online internship may require. In my internship course, we talked a lot about socialization. Much of the professional literature pertaining to internships also discusses this issue, such as Katz's "Learning to Write in Organizations: What Newcomers Learn about Writing on the Job" and Van Maanen and Schein's "Toward of Theory of Organizational Socialization." It's an important aspect of how writers learn to write. Another aspect for virtual interns to consider is how they might continually conduct research on their company long after the formal interview has ended. Simply doing research on the organization can answer many questions an intern has upon beginning a virtual internship.

Research, however, is not always enough. The main forms of literature available for a virtual interns' reference are materials previously published or written by the organization for which they work, but as this literature may range in topic and audience, interns often have difficulties ascertaining how to conform their own voices and tones to those of their organization. They may have further difficulty overcoming this challenge when it is combined with hesitation to ask for help from their boss, a common pitfall expressed by interns in the interviews I conducted. When I asked the interns if they ever felt awkward asking their boss questions about assignments, every person said yes.

Their bosses sent extremely short emails with vague assignment details, but the interns felt uncomfortable "bothering" their supervisors for help. In a traditional work setting, the supervisor is generally accessible for all questions and will have given the intern a formal introduction and socialization to the organization's writing process, making the intern feel a little more comfortable with how to segue from an academic writing setting to a professional one. Additionally, there's usually a close physical proximity, so asking questions in person is perceived as less of a bother. In a virtual internship, however, the supervisor rarely gives the intern this valuable formal socialization, or even a detailed, comprehensive introduction to the organization and its practices. So how can virtual interns possibly become socialized?

Organizational socialization is defined as "the process by which an individual comes to appreciate the values, abilities, expected behaviors, and social knowledge essential for assuming an organizational role and for participating as an organizational member" (Louis 229–30). In virtual internships, the means of socialization available to the intern differ greatly from those in a traditional internship. It can be considerably difficult for virtual interns to become socialized, determine the "social knowledge" of their organization, and generally adapt their behaviors to their online work environment. While it is accepted that "every organization has a variety of resources—orientation and training programs, people who serve as mentors or teachers, and training or reference materials— that can be used to help newcomers adapt to the new environment," virtual interns often have little to none of these vital socialization devices (Katz, "Part II" 166).

One of the main challenges virtual interns face is the inconsistent accessibility of their supervisors. This, combined with the aforementioned problem of the awkwardness of asking questions, can be quite frustrating to the intern. How can young writers learn to write for their organization if no feedback is provided? College writing courses wouldn't be too effective if professors didn't read and comment on papers, and internships shouldn't be much different. Writers need feedback to improve and to

feel comfortable in their organization. In the process of organizational socialization, "new members must be taught to see the organizational world as do their more experienced colleagues if the traditions of the organization are to survive" (Van Maanan and Schein 211). Virtual interns receive little to no interaction with "more experienced colleagues" through which they would receive informal socialization. They are fundamentally isolated, having little to no contact with coworkers whom they might ask for advice or against whose work they could gauge their own.

This, arguably more than any other factor, influences how the intern is socialized within the internship; with the lack of coworkers and a physically present or immediately available boss, there are rarely any formal or informal means of socialization. Mentoring is one of the most valuable means of organizational socialization, and mentoring through a virtual internship can be quite difficult if interns have no access to experienced coworkers and/or feel uncomfortable in their relationship with their supervisor. Most virtual interns rarely or never physically meet with their boss, significantly decreasing the opportunity for valuable informal socialization through simple conversation and informal orientation, where expectations of the virtual interns are explained to them and can be easily clarified.

By not receiving this basic informal socialization, often taken for granted in traditional internships, virtual interns have difficulties developing a personal relationship with their boss, which usually translates into more problems executing a successful performance within their internship. In one interview, a virtual intern stated that "I felt uncomfortable asking things from my boss, because I never met him and didn't know how he felt about having to answer my questions, or if he thought they were stupid." The lack of informal socialization through face-to-face interaction with a supervisor can result in a weakening of the virtual intern's confidence in the work submitted and an increase of confusion regarding assigned tasks.

Furthermore, asking questions of a boss in emails can feel awkward to virtual interns, particularly if the intern has doubts regarding exactly what questions need to be asked in order to resolve insecurities with the work. Criticism can be sparse or even nonexistent, and as the only contact is through relatively impersonal emails, the complete lack of nonverbal language in an online internship makes criticism even more difficult to interpret, and may cause interns to shy further away from extended interaction with their supervisor.

In any internship, an intern needs to ask questions in order to improve. In a virtual internship, this is almost always difficult. Successful virtual internships depend upon "conceptual coherence and organizational effectiveness," neither of which are possible if the tasks presented to the intern are unclear and he or she feels uncomfortable clarifying expectations (Kaalstrom, Kristensen, and Svenkerud 53). Learning by doing is essentially the goal of any internship, but if the intern does not understand what he or she is doing and doesn't receive guidance, the value of the internship significantly decreases. Most university career centers, such as those at Boston College, Berkeley University of California, and American University, emphasize the value of asking questions and requesting feedback to a profitable internship experience. Thus, the guide discussed below provides several examples of situations in which questions are appropriate, as well as several examples of what questions should be asked.

Since verbal socialization can be an important part of feeling comfortable with a supervisor, weekly or biweekly phone meetings can assist both interns and employers alike. This more personal means of interaction helps to foster more of a personal relationship between intern and supervisor, and thus increases the intern's perception of having a mentor. In addition, research suggests that in the telework situation, "absence of direct feedback from supervisors increases errors and misdirection" (Weincek 269). Ideally, most supervisors should know that they must be particularly clear when des-

ignating tasks to teleworkers and when providing explicit, adequate feedback. However, this is not a perfect world, and interns can't depend on their supervisors or their organizations to have amply researched and properly implemented virtual internships. Therefore, the guide emphasizes the interns' own responsibility to request clarification and organize phone or lunch meetings with their supervisor to obtain constructive feedback.

Working within the Virtual Workplace: An Online Guide

Drawing from this research and prompted by my own experiences, I created a guide for a successful virtual internship experience titled *The Virtual Workplace: How Working Online Can Work for You.* I also produced a website to display the guide in order to make it easily accessible to anyone interested in learning more about how to make the most of a virtual internship. It is available at http://www.virtualinternshipguide.com.

The guide defines working in the virtual environment, discusses the pros and cons of online internships, outlines what an intern needs to know in order to be successful, extensively discusses organizational socialization and the ways in which virtual interns can help to socialize themselves, and offers helpful troubleshooting for common problems interns encounter. It's geared towards prospective and current interns who need to learn more about how to work effectively online, as well as instructors of internship courses who need some relevant literature to assist their students. The guide's ultimate goal is to help other interns become more comfortable in and learn more about the virtual workplace, as well as to help them avoid some of the common pitfalls of virtual internships. The guide itself is comprised of four chapters:

- "*Overview:* What Is the Virtual Workplace and What Is a Virtual Internship?"
- "*Starting Out*: What Do I Need to Know and How Do I Learn It?"
- "*Organizational Socialization:* How Can I Help Myself?"
- "*Troubleshooting:* What Are Common Pitfalls and How Can I Avoid Them?"

The overview defines the virtual workplace and the concept of a virtual internship, while the second chapter focuses on the pros and cons of virtual internships, and the third tackles how students might deal with organizational socialization. Finally, the guide discusses some strategies interns might employ to combat some of the initial confusion, stress, and frustration. By knowing a few key tips to successfully working independently, virtual interns can greatly improve their experience with teleworking.

Interns are encouraged to map out personal goals, report to their supervisors and complete their work in a timely manner, independently research their organizations to learn more about their place within it, keep organized records of their completed assignments, and exhibit their personal initiative and drive to their supervisors. In discussing the importance of questions to a productive internship, the guide also provides suggestions to help the intern become more comfortable asking questions of a supervisor.

The troubleshooting section clearly describes typical problems arising from virtual internships, drawing from the personal testimony of the virtual interns interviewed. It also explains how interns might apply the knowledge gained from the guide in situations characteristic of virtual internships. If interns can identify with these problems and try to implement some of the suggested techniques to resolve them, they are far less likely to succumb to a decline in work ethic and subsequent work quality that may occur due to disorientation in and dissatisfaction with their virtual internship.

The Virtual Workplace: How Working Online Can Work for You has many possible implica-

tions for various groups of people involved in and hoping to become involved in the virtual workplace, and all can learn more about it at http://www.virtualinternshipguide.com. With the use of this research, many employers with no internship programs at all due to a lack of space, funding, or equipment might be able to more effectively take advantage of virtual internships. Ideally, the research can also help soothe some of the qualms organizations have about the virtual workplace and encourage more employers to consider a virtual internship program. With a guide to help combat some of the most common problems that affect virtual interns, programs could become much more effective and run more smoothly for employers. My hope is that this guide will also encourage more students to take on virtual internships as a way to prepare for their future careers and learn to work more independently. It could be a useful supplement for faculty, career counselors, and college career centers to present to students, graduating seniors, and new graduates to boost their confidence and help them to see that starting out in the virtual workplace can be as enriching as beginning their careers in a traditional office environment.

APPENDIX A
Questions Asked of Students in Virtual Internships

- What were some of the initial challenges you struggled with when starting your online internship? Did you resolve them? How so? If not, why not?
- What do you feel you could have done differently to ease your transition into a virtual internship?
- What do you think your supervisor could have done differently? Is this something you could have asked him or her to do?
- Have you worked in a traditional work setting before? If so, how did that compare, and what do you think are the advantages of a traditional work environment??
- What were some of the benefits you derived from an online internship that you feel were preferable to those of a traditional work environment?
- Did you find it difficult not having face-to-face contact with your supervisor? Why or why not?
- Did you ever misunderstand the tasks you were assigned or the criticisms you received? If so, to what extent do you think this was due to a lack of face-to-face contact?
- How much criticism and assistance did you receive from your supervisor? To what extent did you feel as though it was an adequate amount?
- Did you have difficulty getting motivated when working at home? If so, how did you combat it?
- To what extend did you prefer working independently?
- Did you feel as though there was a lack of guidance in your internship? If so, how?
- What kind of questions did you have for your supervisor regarding your assignments?
- Did you find it difficult to ask questions?
- Did you have a difficult time conforming to your organization's writing process? Did you feel they adequately explained or prepared you for it? How do you think you could have better prepared yourself to assimilate to it?

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