With mandatory closures of many organizations, social distancing requirements, and “shelter in place” orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unlikely that many interns will be able to complete their summer 2020 internships on-site as planned.

What about internship programs for the rest of 2020? Many postsecondary institutions and employers are advising students to reconsider in-person internships (if they remain an option) -- to postpone internships or to begin planning for remote internship assignments. Given the importance of internships to employers as part of their recruiting processes and the value of experiential learning for college students, some employers are planning to offer remote or virtual internships.

In many cases, employers who host internships are planning to assign projects that can meet learning objectives. This could mean home-based research projects and similar types of learning experiences. An internship may be relatively easy to transform to a remote modality, using tools such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams to facilitate meetings between staff members and interns, and a clear plan for projects and deliverables.

Students can reach out to current internship hosts to ask if they would be interested in and able to support a remote internship or use third-party organizations that broker relationships between students and organizations.

What are online, remote, or “micro” internships? Virtual internships are internships that are done online or remotely. You are placed with an organization and report to a supervisor. You are in regular contact with the supervisor/team via virtual methods such as video call, phone call, email and instant messenger. (https://virtualinternships.com/faqs/)

Micro-internships are short-term, professional assignments that are like those given to new hires or interns. These projects enable college students and recent graduates to demonstrate skills, explore career paths, and build their networks. Unlike traditional internships, micro-internships can take place year-round, typically range from 5 to 40 hours of work, and projects are due between one week and one month after kick-off. Micro-internships are used by employers ranging from those in the Fortune 100 to emerging start-ups, and across departments including sales, marketing, technology, HR, and finance. (See https://www.parkerdewey.com/faq for more information).

What are the benefits of an online internship given the current situation? The primary benefit of a remote internship now is that they can provide students with a safe, work-based learning experience that is grounded in an authentic task or project for an employer. Depending on the nature of the project, students can also develop skills and professional competencies by successfully completing professional assignments on behalf of the organization. Additionally, a remote internship can provide students experience with engaging in online project management and communications, which are common modes of project- and task-performance in many organizations. Lastly, a remote internship includes no travel or housing costs, and thus may be a solution for those who cannot afford to relocate to expensive cities for extended periods.

Depending on the quality and character of the experience, a remote internship may also provide additional benefits including new professional contacts, an introduction to professional norms, and deep knowledge about a field or area of interest. But for these benefits to be experienced in a remote setting, the employers need to carefully design an experience that is more than a mere short-term project outsourced to college students.

What are some of the drawbacks of a remote internship? The drawbacks of remote internships 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 interactions that typically arise during an on-site experience. In addition, while many employers are using remote internships as pathways to hire prospective full-time employees and students are using them to gain experience, both need to be sensitive to risk of “normalizing” this type of relationship. In particular, the professional development, relationship building, and other benefits of an employee/employer relationship are especially meaningful for early career professionals, so both parties need to be sensitive to viewing these models as a replacement.
Best practices for employers considering delivering an online (virtual) internship. Virtual internships, when properly delivered can be a rewarding experience for both the student and the employer. For organizations that are considering hosting virtual internships for the summer of 2020, allocate enough time before the start of the virtual internship to:

- Select and test the right software for managing work
- Train staff on how to use the new software/systems (if students are expected to use new software or information technology, training should be provided free-of-charge)
- Develop a work plan for the intern, training materials, activities and tools that the intern will need to be successful
- Clearly define expectations for both the intern and the supervisor/mentor. These need to be agreed upon before the start of the internship. Goals and expectations should be reinforced on a regular basis

It is essential that all tasks and projects are carefully prepared and planned for the remote intern to be able to manage the work effectively by themselves. The creation of a written workplan that covers the entirety of the experience is suggested because the intern will not have the opportunity to have the everyday interactions of the workplace; the materials, instructions and task descriptions need to be well prepared and available online so that the intern has access to that information when it is needed.

For the supervisor, it is suggested that you engage the rest of the team in the delivery of the remote internship experience. This offers the intern the opportunity to interact with several individuals throughout the course of the experience. Team members need to be committed and available to engage with remote interns daily (and sometimes multiple times a day). Create and deliver a well-balanced experience that includes the opportunity for the intern to:

- Learn about your organization
- Focus on professional development
- Engage in meaningful projects and work that will help to develop their overall ability to become a valuable team member in the future

Resources for delivering a remote internship experience:

- Face to Face Communication – GoToMeeting, Zoom, FaceTime, WebEx, Zoho Meetings, etc.
- Other communication tools – Slack, Email, Instant Messenger, etc.
- Free Project Management Tools – Asana, OpenProject, nTask, Monday, etc.
- Online file sharing – Dropbox, Box, GoFile, etc.

Resources for remote internships and other forms of experiential learning

NOTE: Different vendors have varying approaches, and precisely who pays for what and other financial constraints or arrangements should be closely and carefully scrutinized.

Third-party facilitators of online internships between employers and students

- Virtual Internships: https://virtualinternships.com/
- Parker Dewey: https://www.parkerdewey.com/
- Virtual Internships Abroad: https://www.ceastudyabroad.com/blog/mojo/2020/03/31/introducing-cea's-virtual-internships-abroad

Other resources on online internships

- Intern Bridge: https://internbridge.com/
- InternQube (resource guide for online internships): https://www.internqube.com/articles.html

Acknowledgments: This is an adaptation of a guide prepared by Dr. Matthew Hora of the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions, with the generous help of Michael True (InternQube, Virtual Internships), Jeffrey Moss (Parker Dewey), Beth Settje (University of Connecticut – College to Career Transitions and Alumni Engagement), and Dr. Robert Shindell (Intern Bridge).