On another note

Seeking diversity? Consider virtual internships

Carina Kraft, Debora Jeske and Leopold Bayerlein

Abstract

Purpose – *The present paper aims to outline the case for diversity gains for employers via virtual internships, while recognizing the role of government and educational support.*

Design/methodology/approach – *In the context of Australian employment statistics about people with disabilities, the actors, key issues and barriers to utilizing virtual internships are explored.*

Findings – *The results of an online survey with 24 career, access and inclusion service officers at Australian universities suggested that the large majority were unfamiliar with virtual internships, as many shared concerns about what kind of learning and mentoring opportunities such computer-mediated internships may provide to their students.*

Practical implications – *Employers embracing new e-HR developments may be particularly well situated to adopt virtual internships and combine these effectively with existing diversity initiatives, many of which already include mentoring and learning opportunities. A closer dialogue with career, access and inclusion services may further support a fruitful knowledge exchange and reduce the concerns of educational representatives about virtual internships and their usefulness to increase the employment prospects of people with disabilities.*

Originality/value – *At present, virtual internship programs remain the exception, and are often not connected with diversity initiatives, nor are virtual internships well known among student services. However, virtual internships represent a promising opportunity for employers who wish to access untapped national (or even international) talent pools and thus candidates that would benefit from and contribute to their diversity initiatives.*

Keywords *Diversity, Recruitment, e-Internship, Virtual internship, Disability, e-HR*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

Carina Kraft is based at the Department of Psychology, Lund University, Lund, Sweden. Debora Jeske is a work Psychologist and former Lecturer at the School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland. Leopold Bayerlein is based at the Business School, University of New England, Armidale, Australia.

Introduction

The transition from school to work is often facilitated by internship schemes. These enable students to gain work experience with an employer while simultaneously learning more about their chosen or prospective profession, the employers and industrial sector (van Dorp *et al.*, 2011). New opportunities emerged with the arrival of e-HR and the emergence of various diversity initiatives to support, benefit and help retain individuals with different backgrounds, skill levels and disabilities. A particularly interesting e-HR-derived opportunity includes virtual internships. These usually computer-mediated internships initially appeared 10 years ago, and have since become more popular and widespread (Jeske and Axtell, 2013, 2016; Bayerlein and Jeske, 2018a). Virtual internships (or e-internships) are one form of computer-mediated internships (Jeske and Axtell, 2018). Another form relies on the simulation of internship experiences without interactions with a real employer (Bayerlein, 2015). Both formats aim to provide students who have previously found it difficult to engage with traditional face-to-face internships with an alternative to obtain work experience

(Jeske and Axtell, 2018). Virtual internships resemble traditional internships in most aspects, except that communication is mainly taking place via messaging services or interactive software communication (Jeske and Axtell, 2014). The present papers focuses on virtual internships (e-internships) because this internship format addresses the geographical location challenges of traditional internships, without reducing the interactions between employers and interns that are highly valuable for students with disabilities. The most distinct characteristic of such internships is that interns will mostly work from home, and therefore, do not have to relocate to gain workplace experience (Vriens et al., 2013).

Despite these developments, virtual internships are still the exception in countries such as Australia or the UK, and while many employers already employ virtual workers, the connection to diversity initiatives may be a tenuous one at best. Similarly, there is no evidence that virtual internships are strategically linked to diversity initiatives, despite the possibilities that this might generate for employers who have these initiatives in place. The present article provides a case for virtual internships and the suggestion that these may be linked to existing diversity initiatives by employers.

An example: education and employment situation in Australia

A brief review of education and employment trends for Australia shows the interplay of education, employment and regional characteristics. In terms of education, 17.0 per cent of people living with a disability in Australia completed a bachelor degree or above (compared to 30.1 per cent of people without a disability; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). In addition, 41.0 per cent of people living with a disability had completed Year 12 or equivalent (compared with 62.8 per cent of those without a disability). This means that the rate of educational success of people living with a disability is substantially below that of the general population in Australia.

The employment situation for people living with a disability in Australia is even less promising. In 2015, 4.3 million (18.3 per cent) Australians lived with a disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Within this group, 2.21 million individuals were of working age (15 to 64 years old). Of those, only 1 million individuals (47.6 per cent) were employed. However, employment rates for people living with disabilities are generally lower than employment rates for the general population. This difference was consistently found across countries and educational levels (Erikson et al., 2012; O'Toole, 2015; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). This suggests that education alone will not lead to improved employment.

These circumstances are not helped by the geographical features of the country. In geographically dispersed countries like Australia, large distances need to be crossed between university, home and the workplace. The challenges created by geographical dispersion are particular felt by individuals living with a disability, 22.3 per cent (535,600) of whom lived in remote areas of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). This means that despite many initiatives by government, universities and businesses, people living with disabilities – in Australia and many other larger and sparsely populated countries – continue to struggle to find employment even if they are highly educated, due to lacking work experience (O'Toole, 2015).

Key actors and issues in the employment debate

Several actors can be identified in this space. The government plays a role in terms of the legislation and funding that is made available to employers to provide the adjustments required for employees living with disabilities. Employers are also an important actor in this domain. Employers may not hire people living with disabilities for a number of reasons. First, the reliance on traditional internships and employment means interns (and future hires) are expected to relocate or commute. Many organizations do not offer virtual or teleworking opportunities to new graduates – reducing the changes of people living with disabilities

(particularly those impairing mobility) to access internships. Second, employers also prefer to hire applicants with previous relevant work experience (Snowden and Grout, 2014), creating a catch-22 situation for people living with disabilities who cannot access traditional internships and are therefore less likely to be hired. Third, many employers are concerned about the costs that may arise when recruiting people living with a disability for permanent employment owing to the need for physical and organizational adjustments (see also Henry et al., 2014). This is, of course, more of an issue when employees are recruited into traditional jobs rather than virtual or teleworking equivalents.

Perspective of Australian career support, access and inclusion services

In addition to the government and employers, educational representatives such as career support as well as access and inclusion services at universities play another important role. If virtual internships are to play a role in supporting the transition of students and graduates living with disabilities into employment, it is important to raise their awareness and preparedness for such initiatives. But this also means that the university's representatives' knowledge about and confidence in virtual internship will either hinder or foster their willingness to promote virtual internships. To this end it is important to identify whether or not representatives of these student services are aware of virtual internships, and which concerns they may share about them.

All Australian universities are by law required to provide special needs support to students enrolled at their institutions, which is usually provided through an access and inclusion division. The authors conducted an online survey aimed at staff charged with providing such support at all 28 higher education institutions in Australia in mid-2018. The survey was completed by 24 respondents with between 2 and 12 years' experience in providing support to students living with a disability. The results indicated that despite their experience, only 2 out of 24 respondents had previously encountered the term virtual internship. Given the emerging nature of virtual internships in higher education, such low levels of familiarity are not surprising. However, only four respondents (16.7 per cent) indicated a strong interest to learn more about virtual internships and their benefits for students and graduates. This suggests that these services may be a key bottleneck in the uptake of virtual internships to support students and graduates living with a disability: if virtual internships are available, students may not learn about them from their university services. This also means the opportunities that such internship schemes present for students living with disabilities are unlikely to be communicated by these professionals.

Lack of commitment to learn more about virtual internships may also be traced to some of the concerns raised by respondents. The drawbacks identified focused on concerns about the potential lack of social integration and networking, the reliance on technology and the need for virtual interns to be highly organized and proactive when encountering problems. Despite these concerns, participants also identified prospective benefits of virtual internships, such as greater compatibility of studies and internships, opportunity to use foreign language skills, possibility of working for overseas companies, lower expenses for students (e.g. travel, accommodation) and finally, the promise of greater flexibility in terms of working hours and locations.

Key benefits for employers

A number of important benefits may arise for employers willing to embrace virtual internships to recruit students living with a disability, and to connect these internships to mentoring and related diversity initiatives.

First, employers open to virtual internships may be able to access talent across national and even international boundaries via virtual internship schemes, compared to competitors who insist on hiring on-site interns and staff. The fact that no additional facilities or physical

adjustments may be needed will remove this potential barrier for many small businesses when they consider hiring an intern living with a disability. Many students already have access to tools via universities or open source sites to help them use computers more effectively during and after their studies. In short, virtual internships provide additional employment opportunities for individuals living with disabilities, while lowering participation costs for interns, higher education providers and employer organizations (Bayerlein and Jeske, 2018a, 2018b; Jeske and Axtell, 2013; van Dorp et al., 2011).

Second, some employers may be better situated to run virtual internships than others. Those open to e-HR solutions when recruiting and hiring new talent may find that the costs of running virtual internships in terms of the infrastructure (such as online platforms for communication, data and project management) and personnel (recruiting, staffing and mentoring) are manageable. These costs are more readily absorbed if the organization has already made similar investments and has experience in managing virtual employment relationships. Current research suggests that virtual internships are typically offered by employers in areas that are highly technology-dependent, such as marketing, (Web) journalism or Web design (Jeske and Axtell, 2013). This suggest more technology-focused companies may be ideally suited to adopt these forms of virtual internships. At the same time, many technology-focused companies could benefit substantially from improved staff diversity.

Third, the presence of existing mentoring mechanisms and role models to meet the social, learning and training needs of virtual interns may create a useful connection to existing mentoring and diversity initiatives. While our survey results suggest that virtual internships may be relatively unknown to many career and disability support staff, employers can certainly take the step to share their own experiences with universities from which they are recruiting. The information and knowledge exchange does not need to be one-sided: there is merit in employers seeking dialogue with student support services that could help companies to recruit more diverse talent. In addition, such connections may be helpful as and when interns or mentors seek assistance related to software and tools (e.g. apps for dyslexia) as many disability or access and inclusion advisors have resources and information at their disposal which are not readily available to employers.

While the present case study was based on Australian trends, the unsatisfactory employment trends for highly educated people lining with disabilities are likely to be mirrored in other locations where geographic dispersion is substantial and access to traditional opportunities is limited. The authors hope that the present article therefore provides food for thought for HR professionals in organizations open to e-HR and seek to increase the diversity in their workplace.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016), "Disability, ageing and Carers, Australia: summary of findings, 2015", available at: www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4430.0Main%20Features202015?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4430.0&issue=2015&num=&view= (accessed 28 March 2018).

Bayerlein, L. (2015), "Curriculum innovation in undergraduate accounting degree programmes through "virtual internships", Education + Training, Vol. 57 No. 6, pp. 673-684, doi: 10.1108/ET-09-2014-0110.

Bayerlein, L. and Jeske, D. (2018a), "Student learning opportunities in traditional and computer-mediated internships", Education + Training, Vol. 60 No. 1, pp. 27-38, doi: 10.1108/ET-10-2016-0157.

Bayerlein, L. and Jeske, D. (2018b), "The potential of computer-mediated internships for higher education", International Journal of Educational Management, Vol. 32 No. 4, pp. 526-537, doi: 10.1108/IJEM-11-2016-0254.

Erikson, W., Lee, C. and von Schrader, S. (2012), "2011 disability status report: United States", Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute, Ithaca, New York, NY.

Henry, A.D., Petkauskos, K., Stanislawzyk, J. and Vogt, J. (2014), "Employer-recommended strategies to increase opportunities for people with disabilities", *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, Vol. 41 No. 3, pp. 237-248, doi: 10.3233/JVR-140716.

Jeske, D. and Axtell, C.M. (2016), "How to run successful e-internships: a case for organizational learning", *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal*, Vol. 30 No. 2, pp. 18-21, doi: 10.1108/DLO-09-2015-0073.

Jeske, D. and Axtell, C.M. (2013), "E-internship prevalence, characteristics, and research opportunities", in Kommers, P., Isaias, P. and Rodrigues, L. (Eds), *Proceedings of the IADIS International Conference on e-Society*, *Lisbon*, 12-16 March, 201-208.

Jeske, D. and Axtell, C.M. (2014), "e-Internships: prevalence, characteristics and role of student perspectives", *Internet Research*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 457-473, doi: 10.1108/IntR-11-2012-0226.

Jeske, D. and Axtell, C.M. (2018), "Virtuality in e-internships: a descriptive account", in Lazazzara, A., Nacamulli, R. C. D., Rossignoli, C. and Za, S. (Eds), *Organizing in the Digital Economy. At the Interface between Social Media, Human Behaviour and Inclusion*, Springer, Lecture Notes in Information Systems and Organisation (LNISO).

O'Toole, G. (2015), "Review of different approaches to work skills development for disabled young people (14-25) and disabled working adults in the UK and internationally", Institute for Policy Studies in Education. London Metropolitan University, available at: www.disabilityrightsuk.org/

Snowden, P. and Grout, I. (2014), "Advice and guidance for departments on placements for disabled students: a perspective from the University of York", *The Proceedings of the 25th Annual Conference of EAEEIE*, *IEEE*, pp. 93-96, doi: 10.1109/EAEEIE.2014.6879395

van Dorp, K.-J., De Egana, A.H.C.A. and de los Monteros, A.H.E. (2011), "Virtual internship arrangements for development of professional skills and competences", *Communication & Cognition*, Vol. 44 No. 1, pp. 33-52.

Vriens, M., Op de Beeck, I. and van Petegem, W. (2013), "Make it work! integrating virtual mobility in international internships", *EDULEARN 2013. 5th International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies*, International Association of Technology, Education and Development (IATED), pp. 5521-5527.