

5 questions to ask yourself before posting 2021 summer internships



Internship

opportunities typically rev up during the summer months. As the season approaches, many organizations are evaluating how to handle internships. After all, internships have been changing. Most interns expect to work on projects and build skills, not just fetch coffee for the team. Beyond that, unpaid internships are becoming less common, and in some cases may be illegal.

Beyond that, the remnants of the pandemic still linger over 2021 summer internships. Many businesses are not back to in-person work and others may have tighter budgets than normal. This leaves questions about how, and even if, companies should implement summer internships in 2021.

Before you choose to post internships this year, consider these 5 questions to make sure it's the right choice for you.

Are internships at our company possible or worth the effort at the moment?

The pandemic threw businesses for a loop when it hit last March. Companies scrambled to set up remote operations, and existing interns often became telecommuters like others on staff. The future of internships, like everything else, was questionable. By May 2020, Glassdoor reported a 49 percent [drop in internship listings](#) on its site compared to May 2019.

Now that the dust has somewhat settled, companies must decide what they want to do given current conditions. Influential factors include:

- Industry. Some fields lend themselves to productive remote internships better than others.
- Budget. Companies struggling to stay afloat and pay existing employees may lack funds for internships.
- Objectives. Organizations with other pressing concerns may need to devote time and effort to those things rather than to bringing interns aboard.
- Safety. Places that have reopened may face limitations on the number of people allowed in the building at a given time.

Companies that maintained internships during the pandemic often look at the outcomes of that experience when evaluating what to do next,

“We've decided to put our internship program on hold for 2021,” says Ronen Yemini, founder of the SaaS company [Eyedo](#). “Our program is typically an immersive experience that hasn't translated well remotely. We've found that the training process was prolonged and candidates were not able to attend our usual in-house group training sessions, which is an important part of our training process. The interns have reported feeling disconnected, and subsequently, there is a lack of company culture and involvement. We hope to restart our internship program at the start of 2022.”

What are the potential benefits of maintaining internships despite the pandemic?

Internships provide a reliable way to keep the talent pipeline flowing. Thus, leaders may be reluctant to abandon this recruitment tool.

“Our organization has reduced the number of internships but not totally eliminated them,” says Charles McMillan, entrepreneur and founder of [Stand with Main Street](#). “I still believe and hope that this crisis will pass, and I am still looking for potential employees. The pandemic is not an excuse to not notice talent.”

With fewer companies offering internship opportunities than in the past, those that continue their programs report an increase in the quality of applicants. Likewise, remote internships can promote diversity by removing geographic barriers.

“Being able to intern from home presents the opportunity to a far more extensive population, including people with baby care needs, disabilities, and those without dependable transportation. It reduces a broad spectrum of difficulties that earlier kept candidates out,” says Will Cannon, CEO of [Signaturely](#).

While many companies struggle with the remote arrangement of current internships, others have found the set-up conducive to improving the experience.

“During COVID-19, interns are performing real work,” says Jeff Cooper, manager of [Messagely](#). “There’s no drink to fetch or dry cleaning to deliver when everybody is operating from home. Alternatively, interns get tasks to move concrete projects ahead, giving them the hands-on practice that makes internships truly valuable.”

What can we do to make remote internships successful?

Companies have had to live and learn a great deal over the past few months. Helping experienced employees become productive telecommuters proved quite challenging for some employers. Now, add to the mix the situation posed by interns — individuals not familiar with the people and policies of your organization and potentially new to the world of work in general.

“In a traditional setting, interns learn more quickly about the culture and professional norms of the organization

because they're submersed in it," says Shayleen Stuto, vice president of human resources at [TechnologyAdvice](#). "When virtual, many of these aspects can take time to learn, or be missed all together. Cross-team collaboration or meeting other team members requires much more intentionality when virtual."

Making the experience better often involves thinking about topics such as:

- Thorough training on remote technology (don't assume inherent knowledge because someone is young).
- Clear communication procedures so that interns understand expectations and where to turn for help.
- Virtual mentoring.
- Opportunities for social engagement.
- How supervisors can provide regular feedback.

Do we need to pay interns?

Whether by law a company *must* financially compensate interns depends on the specific arrangement. Who mainly benefits from the internship in question? If the intern gains the most, compensation is not legally necessary. However, if the internship is to the employer's advantage, the Fair Labor Standards Act considers the intern an employee. At for-profit establishments, this means he or she is entitled to minimum wage and overtime pay. (The rule does not apply to public sector and nonprofit organizations.)

To help label the relationship, the U.S. Department of Labor created a seven-point [Primary Beneficiary Test](#). Employers (ideally with help from their legal counsel) can use this assessment tool for guidance on proper classification. Note that some states have their own requirements that companies should take into consideration, too.

Even if a company can get away with not paying interns, there are reasons to reconsider. Since paid internships are more desirable, they attract a greater applicant pool — including higher-caliber candidates with the luxury to be choosy. Likewise, offering payment levels the playing field. Some individuals depend on summer income to keep themselves financially afloat and cannot afford to take an unpaid internship. Offering compensation removes that barrier and promotes diversity.

How have recent social movements affected internships?

Events of this past year have prompted many companies to take a hard look at their workplace practices and culture. Concern over representation and treatment have led organizations to make changes, including some pertaining to internships.

In addition to the aforementioned issue of paid internships, other topics being examined include:

- Recruitment bias. Do we advertise internships in ways that bring them to the attention of a diverse population? Do we make an effort to work with a range of schools, including ones where the student body contains a significant number of older individuals, minorities, or people from lower socio-economic backgrounds?
- Selection bias. Do we immediately favor candidates from certain institutions? Does our internship program consist of too many students who have an "in" through people they know? Are there ways to make the selection process fairer?
- The intern experience. Are interns treated respectfully? Are we regularly holding conversations with them to ensure they aren't being harassed or bullied? Are we inadvertently promoting gender or age stereotypes by the tasks we assign certain interns?

Thoughtfulness about these issues brings hope that 2020 was not just a year that altered the internship experience — it was the time the process improved.

Additional Resource: [The top 7 trends you need to know when hiring in 2021.](#)