

**TAUBMAN COLLEGE  
CAREER & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

# **VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS AND VIRTUAL ONBOARDING**

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**BEST PRACTICES FOR EMPLOYERS**

# WHY VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS AND ONBOARDING?

Virtual and remote work are becoming the norm as employers aim toward flexibility and safety in the workplace, especially during this time of global change. Adaptation is happening across industries, changing the way work is occurring — and Taubman College wants to help you continue these efforts in your organization. Having the capacity to interview, hire, and onboard both interns and full-time hires will help organizations to stay nimble in efforts to engage the best talent to meet needs — especially during this time of increased remote work.

This document provides guidelines designed to help employers set up successful virtual internships — which can still be a rewarding experience for both employers and students — and includes ideas for employers to consider using when onboarding any employees virtually. A stronger onboarding process will result in greater success in remote work, and will help if work transitions to an in-office setting in the future.

## START STRONG: PLAN AHEAD

### 1. GET SET UP

**Plan the appropriate technology to hire, onboard, and train a new staff member.**

- **Be Multi-Modal**
  - Run a virtual interviewing and hiring process that includes several modes of communication: email, phone, and video calls.
  - More than ever, the virtual interview process can provide incredibly relevant insight into how a potential candidate will handle remote communication and work.
  - Questions about hiring international students? [Check out this U.S. Employer's Guide to Hiring International Students.](#)
- **Establish Technology Baselines**
  - Identify software you will use for managing work and communication.
  - Consider whether you will be providing a laptop with the necessary technology loaded or asking the student/new hire to use their own while providing subscriptions or access to necessary technology.
  - Provide training on any new software/systems.

### Technology Resources for Remote Work

- **Face to Face Communication:**
  - GoToMeeting, Zoom, FaceTime, WebEx, Skype, Zoho Meetings, etc.
- **Other Electronic Communication Tools:**
  - Slack, Email, Instant Messenger, etc.
- **Free Project Management Tools:**
  - Monograph, Trello, Asana, OpenProject, nTask, Monday, etc.

- **Online File Sharing:**
  - Google Suite, DropBox, Box, etc.
- **Architecture-specific Free Tools:**
  - Please see [the link](#) for information about Adobe, Autodesk, etc.

## 2. CONCEPTUALIZE

### Create a valuable experience through engagement in office culture and projects.

- **Map Out a Work Plan with Timing**
  - Develop a work plan that includes training materials, activities, and tools that the intern/new hire will need to be successful in the role (see below).
  - Ensure that internships are long enough to make an impact and are project-based.
    - Consider how much time it would take for the student to get a solid, immersive experience that helps them build relationships and contribute meaningfully to the organization.
    - Five-to-six-week, project-based internships are becoming acceptable alternatives as employers shorten timelines for virtual opportunities.
- **Establish Cultural and Professional Expectations and Norms**
  - Define clear goals and expectations before the start and review them regularly.
  - Communication standards and preferences
    - Discuss how the student/new hire should use email, phone, text, chat platforms, etc. based on the purpose of communication and the specific coworker relationship.
    - Identify and clearly communicate response time standards for your organization.
  - Supervisory meeting expectations
    - Identify regular times for meetings.
    - Outline what you expect the intern/new hire to prepare ahead of weekly meetings as a report back on their work.
    - For interns, commit to regular feedback and support to create improvement and learning (through peers, manager evaluations, or online self-assessment).
  - Team culture and project collaboration
    - Give an overview of how project collaboration typically happens and how individual team members work best — but encourage the new hire to ask individual colleagues for preferences, as well.
    - Don't forget to include information about how your organization recognizes each other, celebrates, and bonds as a team!
- **Other Onboarding Considerations**
  - Be creative in your onboarding strategies that would have otherwise been done in person: consider sharing a sampling of past projects completed, final presentations from past interns, and other examples of previous projects.
  - Create new online design charrette formats by using video conferencing and project management tools.

### 3. FLESH OUT THE WORK PLAN

**Carefully prepare and plan initial tasks and projects to set the virtual intern/new hire up to effectively manage the work remotely.**

- For interns, the work plan should cover the full experience: in the beginning, it may be very detailed, but as time moves on, part of the student's experience could be fleshing out the details and tasks needed to complete projects.
- Consider using a Google doc or Excel sheet to create a schedule by the week; add links to important documents and information that you would like them to review at specific points throughout the internship and/or full onboarding process.

#### **Access to Information**

- **Provide organizational information, including an organizational chart and relevant written policies.** Intentionally encourage or assign independent exploration of the organization's website and materials as a way to identify questions.
- **Have instructions and task descriptions well-prepared and available online,** since the intern/new hire won't have the opportunity to experience everyday workplace interactions and will have less access to that information. While it can seem daunting to create these instructions and descriptions, consider sharing this task among all related staff, and it will likely be a helpful exercise for clarifying expectations for all.

#### **Team Engagement & Professional Connections**

- **Supervisors should engage other team members** in the delivery of the virtual internship/onboarding to share the load of onboarding and provide a chance to interact with more colleagues throughout the course of the experience.
- **Have team members committed and available to engage with virtual interns/hires so there is contact at least daily (if not several times a day at first).**
  - Schedule a virtual staff meeting the first week to allow introductions.
  - Plan at least one group virtual lunch the first two weeks to allow an informal interaction.
  - Consider assigning a non-supervisor mentor/buddy who will check in regularly.
  - After a discussion of roles, norms and (possibly) personalities, direct the intern/new hire to contact designated members of the team for brief introductory meetings to learn more about those staff roles and build relationships. (Alternatively, have team members reach out to the intern.)
- **Create Balance**  
Create and deliver a well-balanced experience for your intern/new hire that includes the opportunity 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

# VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP OR ONBOARDING: TWO-WEEK SAMPLE OUTLINE

## WEEK 1:

### **Introductory Meeting — Supervisor**

Start with a quick overview of the scope of engagement, including basic duties, planned work schedule, number of hours, length of internship, etc. Outline communication expectations and agree upon frequency and modes. Discuss organizational culture and norms. Do a brief recap of HR and other policies that you supplied in writing previously. Review the work plan and goals.

### **Introductory Meeting — Staff (all staff or relevant colleague group, if too large)**

Have everyone do a brief self-introduction, including their role; consider having a fun question that each can answer to give a sense of the staff's personality and interplay. Try to hold the introductory staff meeting in the early part of the week so the intern/new hire has a better sense of where to direct questions.

### **Project Meeting (Project manager leads this call, other relevant team members optional)**

Talk through a detailed outline of the first project and the relevant subtasks for that week, including a description of expected successful outcomes. Identify any other staff or outside entities engaged in this project (including contact information) with whom the intern/new hire should interact.

### **Networking Opportunity — Virtual Staff Coffee or Lunch**

Encourage a casual shared social time where staff get on a call and have coffee or lunch together to get to know each other better.

### **Focused Work Time**

For interns new to the work, outline specific subtasks that will fill the independent work

and project time and discuss the estimated time for each task. Encourage the intern to reach out if they have questions.

### **End-of-week Check-in**

Review the week's progress and assess project status: discuss the estimated time and whether adjustments may need to be made to the detail of the work plan. Ask if the intern/new hire has all of the resources they need to do their work. Preview the upcoming week and answer any final questions to help the intern prepare for week two.

## WEEK 2:

### **Focused Work Time**

Continue to outline subtasks for the independent work and projects and estimated time needed for completion. Encourage outreach for questions or ideas.

### **Supervisor Check-in**

Schedule a brief mid-week check-in to triage any questions, concerns, or challenges.

### **Networking**

Consider engaging a colleague to host a virtual brown bag lunch with an informational presentation and Q&A. Encourage the intern/new employee to start scheduling calls with colleagues for individual relationship-building and questions about how their role interacts.

### **End-of-Week Check-in**

Review project progress and answer questions. Provide constructive feedback to help course-correct or redirect the work as necessary. Close the meeting with a preview of the next week's subtasks and other emerging projects.

# FAIR COMPENSATION

Our position at Taubman College is that internships should be paid, which adheres to guidelines of several industries and the AIA. Supervisors/hiring authorities should discuss compensation at the start of the recruiting process for transparency and the student's planning purposes.

- Pay rates for our interns range from \$10-22+/hour depending on the type of internship, level of work, type of organization, and skills required.
- Taubman College will post unpaid internships in nonprofit or governmental settings for urban planning experiences, but we recommend payment if at all possible.
- Taubman College strongly recommends paying interns for the following reasons:
  - Unpaid internships often propagate inequality. Privileged and wealthy students are more likely to be able to take unpaid internships, which can reproduce social inequalities since internships are known to impact employment prospects.
  - If the work is truly meaningful for the organization, then it is likely to be worth compensating the student intern for their work.
  - Exploitation of student interns (particularly in the private sector) has been documented around the world, where unpaid students perform important duties for an organization. Paying student interns avoids this problem.

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We understand there are challenges in evolving to working virtually, and we hope this can offer guidance on how to begin that process with new hires. Please do reach out if we can provide support in thinking through the process.

Go Blue!

**Lou Ecken Kidd, Director**

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This guide was adapted from the following virtual internship resources:

University of Michigan, LSA Opportunity Hub:  
<https://lsa.umich.edu/content/dam/opportunityhub-assets/opportunityhub-documents/A-Guide-on-Virtual-Internships-and-Remote-Work-for-Interns.pdf>

The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions, UW-Madison:  
[http://ccwt.wceruw.org/documents/CCWT\\_report\\_COVID-19%20Internships.pdf](http://ccwt.wceruw.org/documents/CCWT_report_COVID-19%20Internships.pdf)