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Companies including HubSpot, Salesforce, and PwC are reimagining internships for the remote and hybrid workplace

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Abstract

None available.

Full Text

- Companies are reimagining their internships for the new world of work.
- This includes experimenting with new formats, approaches, and programming.
- They aim to equip students with skills to innovate and promote inclusiveness in a remote workplace.
- This article is part of a series called "Culture of Innovation" exploring how companies are setting the stage for innovation, transformation, and growth.

The coveted corporate internship has long had multiple purposes. For organizations, the programs are a chance to tap young minds for fresh ideas while building their pipeline for future hires. For students, internships are a way to earn some extra income and college credit, and gain technical competence before they hit the job market.

Companies today are focused on providing the next generation of employees with the independent skills and leadership experience necessary in the hybrid and remote office. The goal is for students to acquire a sense of how to drive innovation, cultivate creativity, and promote inclusiveness within an organization when colleagues aren't all in the same room — or even the same time zone.

It's a tall order, especially at a time when many interns have a negative view of remote work. Internships in the past were jam-packed with activities and events designed to immerse students in the company culture and draw them back to post-graduation as full-time employees. But in the pandemic era, many of those in-person events have gone virtual or have been curtailed.

But therein lies the opportunity, according to Kyle Emich, an organizational psychologist at the University of Delaware whose new research looks at how companies can resolve tensions to be innovative. "The challenge for companies is to differentiate themselves as employers even when interns are not exposed to the communicators of culture — stories, symbols, rituals, and language — in quite the same way," he said.

Insider spoke with three companies that are reimagining their internships by experimenting with new formats, programming, and credentials to prepare students for careers in the digital workplace and establish their employer brands.

New formats and approaches

HubSpot, the Boston-based marketing software company, is experimenting with a new internship format. Through a partnership with Parker Dewey, a job board for project-based internships, the company is subsidizing roughly 200 "micro-internships" at companies around the world. The projects last between five and 40 hours and involve everything from competitive analysis to social media content planning and data cleaning.

Students complete the short-term projects remotely with assistance from in-house mentors and coaches. The format gives students experience communicating in a distributed workplace, exposes them to different corporate structures, and helps them learn how to collaborate across cultures, according to Julia Gueron, education partner program manager at HubSpot.

"They may be living in Boise all summer, but they're working with people from Spain, Slovenia, Columbia," she said.

The format also "democratizes the opportunity" for students — and allows host companies to expand their potential hiring pools down the road. "You don't need to live near a major metropolitan area to gain relevant career experience or to make meaningful contributions to an organization," she said.

Salesforce is also trying out new and different approaches with its 1,200 interns this year — its biggest cohort to date. For the first time since 2019, the cloud-software giant is bringing interns back to the office one to three days per week, similar to most Salesforce employees.

"We've heard from our employees that flex is the way forward, and we knew we needed to approach our internship program this year with flexibility first," said Alex Murray, director of the company's Futureforce program.

To ease the transition, the company has a three-pronged support system for students. Each intern is assigned a hiring manager or boss, a "trail guide," an onboarding buddy who helps familiarize the company and its culture, and onsite office delegates, who handle administrative concerns —such as IT questions or where they can find the coffee.

This year, the company is introducing a new community service component to its programming. All Salesforce interns will participate in paid Volunteer Time Off (VTO) activities with Seal Rescue Ireland in their own countries and time zones. The service will be both virtual and in-person. The goal, said Murray, is for interns to come away from the program with a deeper understanding of Salesforce's values as an employer. Research shows that Gen Zers care deeply about political and social issues and want to work for companies that share their beliefs.

"Giving back is core to our culture at Salesforce," said Murray. "We know how important it is for our interns to come together to give back to the community. It allows them to network, have fun, form deeper relationships, and attach more meaning to the work they do."

Critical skills for the 21st century workplace

PwC, the global consultancy and accounting firm, plans to hire over 5,000 interns this summer across its businesses. Interns, like employees, have the option to work virtually, in-person, or a combination of the two. "We are providing flexibility because we want interns to get a real introduction to our culture and to experience and feel what it's like to work in a hybrid team," said Rod Adams, PwC talent acquisition and onboarding leader.

For the past couple of years, PwC interns have had the opportunity to earn badges, recognition for the knowledge and skills they acquire on the job. These badges are a valuable qualification inside PwC, and Adams said they can also be helpful credentials if interns decide to pursue jobs elsewhere.

In the past, badges were given for achieving technical competence, but this year PwC is introducing a new badge for having an "inclusive mindset." Earning the badge, which involves self-paced learning modules combined with live coaching, simulations, and practice conversations with colleagues to better understand each others' lived experiences, signifies that the intern has gained expertise in collaborating with a diverse team.

"Internships have always been about learning on the job," said Adams. "We are still focused on our core traditional training, but we're also trying to teach core human skills, too."

The aim is to help students become more empathetic and effective leaders, he said. "Knowing how to coach people of all different backgrounds and lead virtual and hybrid teams are critical skills in the 21st century workplace."

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