Participating in a Technical Communication Internship

ROGER MUNGER

INTRODUCTION

Academic internships have long been an important component of many students’ college education. Although internship programs have been around for over a century at some colleges, the importance of the academic internship has increased significantly in the past few years (Coco 2000). Employers today are seeking to hire people who can jump into a position and make an immediate contribution. They expect new hires to not only have a solid academic background but also workplace experience related to their profession. Students who have both are in demand.

Internships offer students a chance to get work experience and gain a competitive advantage in the job market. In fact, internships often become full-time jobs when students graduate. For example, in a recent Wall Street Journal article, Szuchman and colleagues (2005) report that the percentage of interns at major employers in 2004 that went on to full-time positions with the company was 38% compared with 25% in 2001.

The tight job market, the dynamic nature of the technical communication profession, and feedback from industry has encouraged academic programs to develop a variety of approaches such as service learning (Rehling 2000), mini-internships (Hager 1990), and experiential learning (Southard 1988) for students to gain workplace experience before they graduate. Although service learning, for example, with its focus on civic engagement and community citizenship, has been gaining attention as an effective way for technical communication students to get hands-on work experience and meet pressing needs in their communities (Munger 2002; Sapp and Crabtree 2002), there is little question that traditional academic internships provide a valuable learning experience (Cook, Parker, and Pettijohn 2004) and should be an important component of students’ career preparation.

Internships are standard in technical communication programs outside the U.S. (Alred 2001), and common in U.S. programs (Harner and Rich 2005; Norman and Stohrer 1990). Over the years, several authors have addressed the benefits of technical communication internships to students and technical communication programs (see, for example, Coggin 1989; Emerick 1994; Gaitens 2000; Little 1993; Savage 1997; Tovey 2001; Winsor 2001; Wyld 1983).

Businesses and organizations also benefit from internships. Reports from employers representing not only the technical communication industry but also professions likely to employ technical communicators suggest that internships are a great way to address current needs within an organization (Liddy and Thomas 2001), establish strong relationships with academic programs (Sutliff 2000), and identify promising students before they graduate (Crumbley and Summers 1998). Lurkis (2001), a student STC member, reports that interns bring to a company enthusiasm, up-to-date knowledge, hard-to-find technology skills, and low salary expectations. For example, the outsourcing director for Sara Lee Household & Body Care describes an internship as “a tradeoff of giving people a good experience for their career, good coaching, in exchange for good work, a lot of work, and not a real high salary” (Hickey 2003).

Although the benefits of internships seem clear, the path to participating in a successful technical communication internship experience is not always clear and advice is often scattered across many articles and Web sites. If you are a current student or a practitioner who is considering a return to school, you might have questions about finding internship opportunities, evaluating your options, and getting the most out of the experience. If you are a new internship coordinator, you might wonder how to manage...
30–50 separate internships over the course of a semester. If you are an employer, you might have questions about how to establish an effective internship program at your company. Because an internship is a three-way partnership, this tutorial is divided into three sections providing advice to the major participants in this collaborative partnership: students, internship coordinators, and agency sponsors.

**ADVICE FOR STUDENTS**

To find a job, students will need more than just a college diploma. They will also need work experience in a technical communication field. Many students experience the frustrations of trying to find a job with no experience. Unfortunately, they discover that they cannot get any experience until they are hired. Internships are one way to address this job-search dilemma. Technical communication internships provide students lacking “real world” experience with an entry into the workplace. The sections below focus on the steps students will need to take to participate successfully as an intern.

**Trying out career options**

Some students make the mistake of taking the first internship that comes along just to meet a graduation requirement. These students view the internship experience as just another requirement to be checked off. Far from just another requirement, internships allow students to try out different career options. Students get a chance to experience life, for example, as a medical writer, editor, or Web designer in ways that their coursework cannot easily duplicate.

Even if a student’s major does not require an internship, he or she should consider one or more internship experiences. The benefits of an internship include the following:

- Explore or confirm a career option.
- Gain practical work experience and gain a competitive edge.
- Learn new skills.
- Build self-confidence.
- Network with technical-communication professionals.
- Apply course concepts to workplace communication problems.
- Build a professional portfolio.
- Obtain work references.
- Meet department or university graduation requirements.
- Earn academic credit.

With so much to gain, students should carefully plan their internships. If students plan effectively, their internship experiences might turn into their first full-time job or provide them with the workplace experience necessary to land their first job as a technical communicator.

**Locating an internship**

Students should start planning their internships well in advance of the semester in which they wish to register for an internship. Finding internship opportunities, preparing application materials, and successfully navigating the hiring process can take months. Some highly competitive internships require as much as 12 months of advance planning. Many students who begin their search the week before classes are disappointed to find that the good internships, especially the ones with reasonable compensation, were filled weeks or months ago. Students will also need to plan to incorporate their internship hours with their class schedules.

Some strategies for students searching for an internship include the following:

- **Visit school’s career center.** Many career centers maintain a searchable database of internship opportunities and offer e-mail notifications for internships posted in a specific area of interest.
- **Talk to department’s internship coordinator.** Companies seeking interns often contact a department’s internship coordinator.
- **Consider places at which students already work or volunteer.** Students might be able to arrange an additional project as an internship.
- **Be entrepreneurial.** Students should look around their community and identify companies and organizations that might benefit from their technical communication skills.
- **Attend career fairs.** Employers are often looking for interns as well as full- and part-time help.
- **Ask classmates for leads.** Students should talk with classmates about their internship experiences and ask whether they have any recommendations.
- **Meet with faculty advisor and classroom instructors.** Faculty might know of internship opportunities.
- **Network with people in local community.** Students should let people know about their technical communication skills.
- **Read advertisements posted on campus and in the community.** Employers sometimes post internship opportunities on campus and community bulletin boards.
- **Schedule informational interviews.** Students can learn about companies at which they would like to intern in the future.
- **Use search engines.** Using key words such as intern and internship, search the Internet for resources.

Read employment ads in local papers. Students might be able to convince employers to hire them as interns.

Students should treat their search for an internship as they would a traditional job search. They should do their research, prepare letters of application and resumes, and establish their professional persona in all of their communications with an organization. Successful students use all the resources that are available to them. The more resources they use, the better their chances will be of finding a valuable internship.

Once students have located one or more internship opportunities, they should consider whether each opportunity is a good fit. When evaluating an internship opportunity, students should ask themselves the following four questions:

1. Will my work environment be safe? Students should investigate whether they will be exposed to any dangerous conditions or hazards. The organization must provide interns with necessary safety training and equipment.

2. Do the people I will work with seem genuinely interested in working with me? An internship is a two-way street. Interns provide labor and expertise for organizations, and in return, they should have opportunities to grow as technical communicators. The best internships include colleagues willing to serve as mentors and career advisors. At the very least, there must be someone at the company to whom interns can turn for advice and assistance.

3. Will this internship provide me with the experiences I seek? Students should think about what experiences would complement their classroom education and then seek out internships that will help provide such experiences.

4. Do I have the knowledge, skills, abilities, and time to complete this internship successfully? Students should seek a challenging internship. However, they need to be realistic about their qualifications, training they might receive, and time commitments.

If a student can answer yes to these four questions, he or she has likely located a quality internship experience.

Making a good impression
Students should treat their internships as jobs, even if they are not being compensated for their work. Unlike jobs students take just to pay their tuition or give them some summer travel money, the stakes are higher for internships. Effective internships focus on potential career options within the technical communication profession and often serve as bridges between academic life and a professional career. As a result, student will want to make a good impression.

To present themselves effectively, students should do the following:

- Arrive on time and be prepared to work.
- Dress as their supervisors are dressed.
- Get to know their colleagues and the culture of the organization before suggesting a “better way” to do something.
- Spend more time actively listening and observing than they do talking, especially at the start of internships.
- Demonstrate that they are committed to helping the company meet its goals and not using it as a “stepping stone” for bigger and better things.
- Establish themselves as dependable people by doing what they say they’ll do, on time.
- Use company resources only for company business and not personal use.
- Practice proper business etiquette, including not contributing to office gossip or telling offensive jokes.

Making a good impression goes beyond a good first impression. Students need to think of their internships as 10- or 16-week job interviews. If working in an office is new to students or if it has been several years since they last worked in an office, they should read a few recent articles on workplace etiquette. For example, Intercom, the magazine of the Society for Technical Communication, often publishes articles on workplace topics such as communication etiquette (Smith 2005), business meeting tips (Smith 2000a; Sullivan 2000), e-mail etiquette (Hay-Roe 2001; Rogers and Perri 2000), cubicle etiquette (Smith 2000b), and cell phone etiquette (Robart 2001), as well as networking advice for students (Ganske 2005).

Concluding an internship
Internship responsibilities do not end when a student completes his or her final internship hour. Sometimes the excitement and chaos surrounding graduation or the end of the semester distract students so much that they forget to leave their internship in good standing or they forget to take care of the academic requirements associated with the internship. To get the most out of an internship, students need to make sure they tie up loose ends at the organization and submit all required paperwork to their internship coordinator. Figure 1 provides a checklist for students to use at the conclusion of their internship.
ADVICE FOR INTERNSHIP COORDINATORS

The role of an internship coordinator is to identify and help create possible internships, serve as a resource for interns and agency supervisors, and evaluate interns’ efforts. The size of an internship program and department resources allocated to the program largely determine how involved coordinators are in each of these activities. For example, coordinating a small internship program of 5–8 students per semester allows for much more frequent and sustained interactions than coordinating a program with 30–50 interns per semester. However, regardless of the size of an internship program, all internship coordinators generally must help their students find suitable internships, address legal and safety issues, regularly communicate with interns and agency supervisors, evaluate interns, and manage the paperwork associated with academic internships. The following sections provide advice and ideas for effectively coordinating an internship program.

Helping students find internships

“I need an internship” is a statement internship coordinators regularly hear from students. Some students think coordinators have a special file of internships that precisely match a student’s skills, salary requirements, and schedule. Students are disappointed to learn that coordinators do not have an infinite supply of high quality, paying internships—available at the last moment. The responsibility for locating a suitable internship rests squarely with the student. Finding an internship requires students to take responsibility for their own education and allows them to practice job-search skills they will need when they graduate. However, the internship coordinator should be available to help them with the process. Typically, the coordinator can alert students to internship opportunities and help students decide whether an opportunity represents an appropriate technical communication internship.

Strategies for helping students locate internships include the following:

- **Maintain a “New Internship Opportunities” electronic mailing list.** Each time a coordinator receives a request for an intern, he or she can send an e-mail (see Figure 2) with the pertinent information to interested students. When a new student contacts the coordinator about locating an internship, the coordinator can offer to add his or her name to the mailing list.

- **Post ads for internships and career fairs outside the office and on appropriate bulletin boards in the department.** This approach enables the coordinator to reach students who are not yet on the mailing list or prefer not to be.

- **Maintain a folder of past internship positions.** Many students find it valuable to browse through descriptions of past internships to get ideas for internships and leads on recurring internships.

- **Keep colleagues informed about internship positions and upcoming career fairs.** Coordinators can ask faculty to announce pertinent information to their classes.

- **Provide strategies for locating an internship.** Coordinators can create handouts listing steps for students to follow and frequently asked questions. Coordinators can make these available outside the office and on a Web site.

- **Offer referrals to other resources.** Coordinators can provide handouts outside the office and external links on a Web site directing students to their school’s career center and other resources.

- **Organize panel discussions featuring past interns.** Coordinators can invite past interns to discuss their internship experiences.

Once students have identified possible internships, coordinators can help them decide which, if any, are appropriate for academic credit. A coordinator’s attention and diligence at this stage in the process can identify most problems that characterize unsuccessful internship experiences. When deciding whether to approve a technical communication internship, intern coordinators should ask themselves three questions.

1. **Will the intern work with a qualified supervisor?** Someone with the appropriate qualifications to provide guidance, training, and feedback to the student must agree to supervise the intern.

2. **Will the intern perform appropriate work?** Appropriate job duties for a technical communication...
Below is an internship opportunity in which you might be interested. If you wish to apply for this internship or have specific questions about it, you should contact the organization directly. If you have general questions about internships or the internship-application process, please e-mail me.

Intern Title: Web intern
Start Date: Spring 2006
Agency’s Name:SkyVoyageurs / Salmon Lodge
Agency’s Mailing Address: P.O. Box 555, Pollock, ID 83547
Agency’s Phone #: 208-555-3021
Web site/URL: www.skivyoyageurs.com
Contact Person: Sara Smith
Contact’s E-mail: sara@skivyoyageurs.com
Contact’s Phone #: 208-555-3021
Contact’s Mailing Address: same as above

Brief Description of Internship:
Our web intern is responsible for updating our websites, developing new pages, and writing copy. Other duties include evaluating our existing sites and making recommendations on how to improve them (and then implementing those improvements).

Specific Qualifications or Skills Required/Preferred:
Intern must have good html skills and experience with web-authoring software such as Dreamweaver. Creativity and graphic design skills are a plus. Number of hours and schedule are very flexible, based on program requirements.

Paid: No

... If you would like to be removed from this mailing list, reply to this message (reply to sender only) and include “unsubscribe” in the body of your message.

**Figure 2.** Sample e-mail message announcing an internship opportunity.

Intern include writing, editing, revising, researching, designing, evaluating, and tutoring.

**3. Is the intern prepared for the work?** The intern must be able to apply appropriate principles, concepts, and skills learned through coursework or prior work experience.

If a coordinator can answer yes to these three questions and confirms that the student will work in a safe environment, the student has likely found an appropriate internship. Table 1 applies these three questions to four sample situations.

**Addressing legal and safety issues**

Technical communication internships represent activities that are outside the relatively controlled environment of the university classroom. As a result, all participants should consider legal and safety issues before starting an internship. By following the general guidelines below, intern coordinators can reduce the potential liabilities and risks inherent in technical communication internships.

- **Maintain regular contact with interns and their agency supervisors.** Students should know what to do if they have a concern about their internship experience. Identifying and addressing potential areas of concern before they become full-blown problems is often the best strategy. Periodic site visits and face-to-face meetings might also be appropriate.

- **Meet with agency supervisors before internships begin.** During this meeting, an intern coordinator can, if appropriate, tour the location at which an intern will work, discuss safety and liability issues, and learn about confidentiality requirements.

- **Educate interns about sexual harassment and other types of workplace discrimination.** Intern coordinators can include information and guidance on this topic in handouts, on their Web site, and during (either a face-to-face or a self-paced online) intern orientation. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (http://www.eeoc.gov/index.html) offers descriptions of and guidance on several types of workplace discrimination; internship coordinators in other countries should consult the appropriate governmental agencies responsible for these matters.

- **Educate interns about the importance of following an organization’s non-disclosure or confidentiality agreement.** As part of an intern orientation, an intern coordinator should review the basic purpose of such agreements and emphasize the intern’s critical role in protecting an organization’s sensitive technical or commercial information, even if such an agreement is not required.

- **Recommend that interns carry health insurance and liability insurance for their own protection.** Coverage may take the form of personal or professional liability insurance, protection under a parent’s health insurance policy, student health insurance, or worker’s compensation from the sponsoring organization. The type of insurance available to an intern is largely determined by the intern’s relationship to the sponsoring organization and the intern’s personal preference.

- **Establish who is responsible in the event that someone suffers injury or damage as a result of an internship.** Intern coordinators should work with their university’s legal counsel and the sponsoring organization to determine the extent of each participant’s responsibilities. Ultimately, all questions concerning rules of law and liability should be addressed by legal counsel familiar with the specific details of a coordinator’s internship program. Intern coordinators, if they have not already done so, should discuss their own legal responsibilities and their university’s legal responsibilities regarding academic internships with their chair, dean, director of risk management, or university legal counsel.

**Agreeing on responsibilities**

Once a student has located a suitable internship experience and identified an agency supervisor, the internship coordinator needs to make sure that all parties involved understand their responsibilities. Problems occur, for example, when an intern expects to do one thing and the agency supervisor has a different idea. The best practice is to put the responsibilities of each party in writing and have each
person sign the agreement. Then, if questions arise, a coordinator can refer to the written agreement. Such agreements also help coordinators stress the importance of the learning component. Some programs use a university-wide form (see Figure 3). Other programs ask interns to create an internship proposal in collaboration with the internship coordinator and agency supervisor (McDowell 1997) or custom learning agreement documenting the details of the internship (see Figure 4).

**Evaluating interns and the internship experience**

Because each student participates in a different internship experience and because an intern coordinator has significantly less control over the experience than in a traditional classroom, internships are often graded on a pass/fail or credit/no-credit basis. Often, the only required evaluation on the coordinator’s part is a final grade. However, for the benefit of all involved, many coordinators choose to go beyond this minimum evaluation.

Corey and Killingsworth (1987) recommend requiring a retrospective internship report. Such a document, they note, helps coordinators evaluate an intern’s effort and adds structure to the internship experience. Progress reports, internship journals, final reports, portfolios, evaluation letters written by agency supervisors, and surveys are other tools coordinators may use to evaluate interns and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Internship #1</th>
<th>Internship #2</th>
<th>Internship #3</th>
<th>Internship #4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualified Supervision</td>
<td>A proposal writer for a medical school’s grants and research office will supervise the intern.</td>
<td>A literature professor with no Web-design experience will supervise the intern.</td>
<td>A customer-support manager will supervise the intern.</td>
<td>An instructional designer will supervise the intern.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate Work</td>
<td>Intern will help medical faculty prepare grant proposals.</td>
<td>Intern will design a site presenting professor’s research on Herman Melville.</td>
<td>Intern will handle customer calls, photocopy documents, and complete rental agreements for a car rental agency.</td>
<td>Intern will develop online help for DVD-authoring software.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepared Student</td>
<td>Student has studied and written proposals in several technical communication courses.</td>
<td>Student has taken a course on web design.</td>
<td>Student is a senior majoring in technical communication.</td>
<td>Student is a writing major but has never taken a technical communication course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision</td>
<td>Approved. The intern will be overseen by a supervisor with expertise in proposal writing, will perform work that is typical of what practicing technical communicators perform, and will be able to apply academic experience to the internship.</td>
<td>Denied. The faculty member has no experience designing Web sites. Consequently, the supervisor could not likely provide adequate guidance or feedback.</td>
<td>Denied. Many internships involve some administrative and “grunt” work. However, the majority of hours worked must focus on professionally appropriate tasks.</td>
<td>Denied. Although the student would gain practical work experience, the student has no academic or workplace preparation for this internship.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the internship experience (McDowell 1997).

Coordinators should evaluate not only the interns but also the agencies offering the internships as well as the coordinator’s own efforts. The feedback will help interns grow as professionals and it will help a coordinator improve internship experiences and improve the internship process. Table 2 describes several evaluation methods. Figure 5 and Figure 6 show examples of evaluation forms.

Managing the paperwork

Unless coordinators manage small internship programs, they likely deal with a lot of paperwork related to internships: correspondence with prospective agency supervisors and interns, internship advertisements, internship application forms, learning agreements, start-of-the-internship letters to interns and agency supervisors, activity logs, journals, progress reports, self-evaluations, agency evaluations, portfolios, reflective reports, end-of-the-internship letters to interns and agency supervisors, contracts for a grade of incomplete, and grade sheets. Unlike a traditional course in which an instructor can distribute policies and assignments on the first meeting of the semester, students register for and start internships over the span of several months or weeks. In my department, for example, students can register for a fall internship from March through October, and they can start a fall internship from mid-August through mid-October. Interns also do not all finish at the same time. Consequently, each intern and his or her agency supervisor are at a slightly different stage in the internship process.

Coordinators need to have a plan to control the resulting chaos. Below are three strategies for managing the paperwork associated with coordinating an internship program.

1. Track internships using a spreadsheet application. In addition to contact information and internship details, coordinators should note when they send and receive materials. Using a spreadsheet, I can quickly tell, for ex-
ample, which interns have sent me a progress report and to which supervisors I have already sent an evaluation form. Tracking information in this manner also makes it easy to gather data for program assessment.

2. Make checklists for interns and agency supervisors. To help interns and agency supervisors submit all required materials by the posted deadlines, coordinators should distribute print and electronic checklists with deadlines listed.

3. Create boilerplate for recurring situations. With each new semester of students and agency supervisors, coordinators will find themselves answering the same questions and using the same documents. In addition to providing a handout answering frequently asked questions outside my office and on a Web site, I maintain a Word file of passages I can easily customize and cut-and-paste to address situations such as queries by students seeking internships, organizations looking for an intern, missing assignments, new internship opportunities, procedure for completing internship application, and deadline reminders.

Staying organized will help coordinators keep their sanity, and help them to provide a consistent, fair, and effective technical communication internship experience for each intern.

ADVICE FOR AGENCY SUPERVISORS
Sponsoring an intern provides practitioners with opportunities to collaborate with university faculty to encourage curriculum that provides the next generation of technical communicators with the skills an organization needs (English and Jareb 1995; Rosenquist and Staples 1994). For junior-level employees, supervising an intern is also a great way to gain first-time supervisory experience (Farinelli and Mann 1994). Moreover, as an intern sponsor, employers essentially get a 10- or 16-week interview. They get to know the intern’s work habits, communication skills, collaborative skills, and people skills—all of which they can’t easily assess by looking at a portfolio. The sections below describe how to participate in an internship as an agency supervisor.

Designing an effective internship
There are two main routes to finding an intern: through a school’s career center or directly through a department’s internship coordinator. Staff at the career center can answer general questions about university-wide requirements for internships and an organization’s responsibilities. They can also help practitioners advertise internships and put them in contact with internship coordinators for departments that might have students with the skills they seek. Department internship coordinators can work with practitioners to design a specific internship position as well as recruit qualified students for the position. Practitioners can also recruit interns by developing promotional materials, visiting college campuses, attending career fairs, and advertising in print and electronic media (Arnold 2000).

Internships come in many different forms: paid, unpaid, full-time, part-time, on-site, telecommute, semester long, year long, special project, routine work. However, all internships share common characteristics. Knowing these characteristics can help an agency supervisor design an effective internship. Internships have seven major characteristics:

1. Includes structured learning goals. Often, learning goals (what the intern expects to learn) are described in a document called a learning agreement, which is collaboratively produced and signed by the intern, agency supervisor, and internship coordinator.

2. Focuses on career development. Technical communication internships typically focus on work related to the creation, design, and transmission of technical information.
Is directed by a qualified and enthusiastic agency supervisor. An intern should be supervised by someone who has expertise in the skills the intern will use and who is interested in contributing to the intern’s education.

Is monitored by a department internship coordinator. Regular communication by the coordinator with an intern and his or her agency supervisor is required.

Provides opportunities for evaluations by all parties. Assessment and timely feedback is critical to any learning situation. All parties involved—intern, agency supervisor, and internship coordinator—need to understand their areas of strength and those areas needing further development.

Requires a specified number of hours. Typically, students must work 40–50 hours for each hour of academic credit. For example, 150 hours of work by an intern equals a three-credit internship.

Fits an academic calendar. Students typically cannot earn internship credit for past work or prior life experiences. Such experiences exclude the active role for the student, faculty member, and agency supervisor in planning for and reflecting on the learning experience. Consequently, students usually must complete internship hours in the semester(s) in which they are registered for internship credit.

An internship fulfills a two-fold mission: (1) to provide a student with practical work experience and opportunities to reflect on what he or she is learning and (2) to provide an organization with the skills it needs to solve workplace communication problems. To accomplish these goals, an internship must be structured, involve appropriate work, be carefully supervised and monitored, include mechanisms for feedback, meet university requirements for work hours, and take place during an academic term.

### Identifying the legal aspects of internships

Identifying and managing the legal aspects of an internship before an intern begins work is a good business practice. Legal questions surrounding internships that affect agency supervisors include the following (Kaplan 2003):

- What are the rights and responsibilities of my organization?
- What are the legal risks and obligations for my organization?
- Can my organization fire an intern?

### TABLE 2: METHODS FOR EVALUATING INTERNS AND INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To evaluate . . .</th>
<th>Internship coordinators can . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interns</strong></td>
<td>1. Require interns to complete a self-evaluation, write a reflective essay on lessons learned, submit a portfolio or samples of work completed, and document their activities and hours worked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Ask agency supervisors to submit an evaluation of the intern’s performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Observe an intern during a site visit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Meet with intern to discuss internship experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizations</strong></td>
<td>1. Require interns to submit an evaluation of their supervisor and their internship experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Observe an intern and agency supervisor during a site visit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Meet with agency supervisor and/or intern to discuss internship position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internship program</strong></td>
<td>1. Ask interns to anonymously evaluate and make suggestions for improving internship process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Ask agency supervisors to comment on the internship process and offer suggestions for improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Ask graduates to comment on the value of their internships.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Is my organization liable for acts committed by the intern?

If an intern is injured or sexually harassed while working for my organization, who is responsible?

Because employment and liability laws vary from region to region, agency supervisors should discuss with the legal counsel for their organizations what their legal obligations are toward interns. Although thinking about the possible legal risks associated with internships can be scary, the good news is that businesses and organizations hire thousands of interns every semester. The university offering academic credit for the internship as well as the internship coordinator can help an agency supervisor identify and manage the legal risks. For example, waivers, release forms, and insurance can help to minimize the legal risks for the agency supervisor and his or her company. Figure 7 provides a checklist for agency supervisors to use when discussing the legal aspects of participating in an internship (adapted from Kaplan n.d.).

![Figure 5. Sample intern self-evaluation form.](image)

Figure 5. Sample intern self-evaluation form.

- Is my organization liable for acts committed by the intern?
- If an intern is injured or sexually harassed while working for my organization, who is responsible?

Because employment and liability laws vary from region to region, agency supervisors should discuss with the legal counsel for their organizations what their legal obligations are toward interns. Although thinking about the possible legal risks associated with internships can be scary, the good news is that businesses and organizations hire thousands of interns every semester. The university offering academic credit for the internship as well as the internship coordinator can help an agency supervisor identify and manage the legal risks. For example, waivers, release forms, and insurance can help to minimize the legal risks for the agency supervisor and his or her company. Figure 7 provides a checklist for agency supervisors to use when discussing the legal aspects of participating in an internship (adapted from Kaplan n.d.).

![Figure 6. Sample agency-supervisor questionnaire.](image)

Figure 6. Sample agency-supervisor questionnaire.

**Working with an intern**

Internships are more than just jobs for students. Students participate in internships to learn about the technical communication profession or a specific company. For students, internships are learning experiences. Consequently, the intern’s agency supervisor often becomes his or her teacher, mentor, and career counselor. Serving as a mentor will require a time commitment on both the agency supervisor and the intern. Robart and Francis (2001) recommend that both parties request a lightened workload at the start of the relationship. When working with an intern, an agency supervisor can include a learning component by doing the following:

- Take intern on tour of facilities.
- Introduce intern to company personnel and clients.
- Invite intern to participate in or observe meetings, planning sessions, client presentations, and special events or projects.
- Plan opportunities for intern to interact with senior personnel.
- Provide formal and informal feedback on intern’s work.
Agency-supervisor’s checklist for discussing legal issues of sponsoring an internship

Before sponsoring an internship, discuss the legal aspects of an internship with legal counsel to learn how state and federal laws apply to your specific situation. You should find out answers to the following questions:

- What is an intern’s employment status (e.g., employee or independent contractor)?
- Should our organization pay an intern? If so, should he or she be paid hourly, a salary, or a stipend? Are interns entitled to minimum wage and overtime pay?
- What responsibility does our organization have for an intern’s liability and worker’s compensation insurance?
- What precautions should be taken to provide for the safety of an intern?
- Should we require an intern to sign hold-harmless, indemnity, or release-of-liability agreements?
- Should we require an intern to sign confidentiality, non-disclosure, or non-compete agreements?
- How should our organization maintain the confidentiality of an intern’s records?

Figure 7. Checklist of questions to discuss before sponsoring an internship.

- Schedule regular opportunities to meet face-to-face with intern.
- Include intern in relevant training classes and company-related social events.
- Take intern to meetings of professional societies and organizations.

Agency supervisors can also modify the evaluation forms (see Figure 5 and Figure 6) discussed earlier to create their own in-house assessment documents. Such documents would provide an organization with feedback on the effectiveness of the internship experience and provide a way to provide the intern with feedback. Admittedly, doing these activities requires more resources than if a company just hired another employee. However, by agreeing to supervise an intern, an agency supervisor has expressed an interest in and made a commitment to helping educate the next generation of technical communicators. Frequently, the time they spend working with an intern will pay off the next time the company needs to hire.

Planning for the future

An agency supervisor should work with the outgoing intern to make sure that company staff have all the necessary materials to keep working. For example, an agency supervisor should do the following:

- Ask the intern to submit a written progress report on the status of unfinished projects.
- Obtain electronic files of all documents and a list of file locations, names, and if applicable, passwords.
- Collect from the intern ID badges, company keys, confidential or proprietary materials, and company equipment.
- Contact the internship coordinator to discuss the recent internship experience and, if they wish, arrange for a new intern.

Agency supervisors can also modify the checklist students use at the end of their internships (see Figure 1) to create their own in-house checklist for concluding an internship. By paying attention to the details at the conclusion of an internship, agency supervisors can provide for a smooth transition for both the company and the intern. Such a transition makes the supervisor look good and will help the company recruit the intern (and his or her friends) for a full-time job.

CONCLUSION

Technical communication internships are win-win-win situations. Internships are one of the best ways for students to determine the types of work that they might like to do and to get an advantage in a competitive job market. Companies that offer internships gain access to knowledge and skills they need and have access to an effective recruiting method. Programs that include internship experiences help meet needs in the community and establish strong connections with the companies that hire technical communicators. When all this happens, the technical communication profession wins as well.

REFERENCES


**ROGER MUNGER** is an associate professor of technical communication at Boise State University where he coordinates undergraduate and graduate internships for the English Department. His teaching and research interests include service learning, healthcare documentation, publications management, and proposal development. Contact: rmunger@boisestate.edu.