

Summer Sales Internship: An Agent of Personal Change?

An Exploratory Empirical Study of the Southwestern Company's Summer Sales Program

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ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities, to better prepare their graduates for the world of work, are increasingly using internship/work experience programs. This is true in all the functional areas of business including accounting, finance, economics, and especially so in the field of marketing. Internship programs potentially benefit not only the students, but also the employer and the university. Many of us, as we are interviewing prospective students, are queried about both future job prospects and internship opportunities. Students and their families seem to be attuned to this internship mentality. According to Coco (2002) three out of four students complete internships before graduation, which is up from one in 36 as recently as 1980. Jarvis (2000) reports a study of 1000 students representing 50 colleges. More than 91% indicated that completing an internship is "crucial to getting a good first job." But less than 20% of those answering the study felt they received enough help from their institutions.

Internships, it seems, (as fashionable as they have become) are both loved and hated. Most business professors have had experience with make-work internships that are little more than indentured labors standing at the file cabinet or the copy machine. There is concern among most universities that the internship/work experience programs have integrity and substance (Jarvis 2000; Somerick 2001). But there is strong evidence for the efficacy of internship/work experience programs for those that are done right.

The Southwestern Company Sales Program

The Southwestern Book Company based in Nashville, Tennessee has had a long-standing summer sales program that gives colleges students first hand experience "working in the sale trenches." Hundreds of college students from around the United States participate in the program each year, many of them from Christian-based institutions.

Based on anecdotal evidence and our personal experiences, the students who survive and thrive come back as changed persons. They are noticeably more self-confident, more

self-assured, more verbal, and generally have a more positive attitude that translates into a better student. From an academic viewpoint this poses an interesting question. What happens to these students during three short months that seems to accelerate their maturity and self-confidence?

Is there a measurable change in the students after completing the summer internship/work experience with Southwestern? If so, what are those changes and what are the independent variables involved. This exploratory study utilized a number of techniques including in-depth interviews, a pre and post survey instrument and a debriefing of several students.

The session discusses preliminary findings of potential interest that not only apply to the Southwestern experience but also have the potential of applying to many internship experiences. Of particular focus is the intersection of work style analysis and Queendom.com's "Self-Esteem" Index. Besides looking at the data, the session will provide three compelling stories of change and development from present and past graduates of the program.

Finally, from these preliminary results several hypotheses have been generated for future confirmatory research.

Kimberly J. Roach
Biography

Kimberly J. Roach is an undergraduate marketing major at Abilene Christian University.

Originally from Abilene, Texas, Kim has been active in the McNair Scholars Program for the past two years, has completed research studies and presented at national conferences.