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Marketing Internships: The Role of Introspection in Students' Satisfaction Reports

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Despite the learning advantages of internship opportunities, many former interns bitterly complain about the dull tasks they had to perform during the internship. We argue that students' satisfaction ratings with an internship are influenced by the current descriptive approach of final reports. When students list the tasks that they performed (i.e., what did you do?), they only engage in concrete thinking, missing the big picture. We contend that when an introspection approach is used (i.e., why did you do it?), students engage in abstract thinking, realizing the implications of the tasks they performed and hence, rating the internship experience more favorably. An experimental study supports our contention. We propose that colleges should include introspection questions rather than descriptive questions in their final report outlines. By so doing, students will better realize the value of internship opportunities.

Keywords: pedagogy, internships, research students, thinking, learning

Seventy-five percent of the 10 million four-year college students in the United States will work as interns before walking on graduation day (Silverman, 2011). An internship is "any monitored work or service experience in which an individual has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what she or he is learning throughout the experience" (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000). In 2000, Gault et al. showed that business students who interned before graduation had several advantages over students who did not. They conducted a survey of intern and non-intern business alumni of a northeastern U.S. university and compared their early career paths. The results indicated that those alumni who participated in an internship when in college spent less time finding a job, had higher compensation, and reported greater job satisfaction. Despite the benefits associated with internships, many students still feel frustrated about their intern experiences. Students complain that it is not uncommon that companies ask them to do dull tasks such as photocopying, organizing, or scheduling. Many students do not feel that they acquired substantial applicable and transferable knowledge ("My internship," 2010).

The current descriptive structure of internship reports lead to a myopic perception of learning gained during internship programs. Colleges often require students who complete an internship to write a final report, especially if the student attempts to obtain college credit hours for the experience. Colleges provide a guide for the final report which includes questions that are descriptive in nature. For instance, a former intern is commonly expected to describe the organization for which the student interned and the activities performed as an intern. Students' responses to these requirements often results in a laundry list of operational activities such as: photocopy, organize files, input data, call clients, etc. After students provide a list of activities, they are asked to self-assess their learning by answering questions such as: What did you learn? How can you use the acquired skills in your career? How did your education at our college prepare you for the job? The reader can imagine students' thoughts when they are assessing their learning and matching the list of activities with their educational background and aspirations. Thus, students who write descriptive reports question educational value of the skills acquired during the internship. Furthermore, students often feel the work performed was not useful, transferable, motivational or instrumental in achieving their desired career goals.

We argue that final reports that ask questions requiring introspection generate abstract thinking and enlighten students about their learning. The definition of an internship, in fact, includes active reflection as a requirement of the internship process. Introspection refers to the careful reflection on one's actions (Tordesillas & Chaiken, 1999). Introspection is posited as an active learning tool because it requires students to reflect not only about the activities

being performed but also about the purpose of the tasks (Altman & De, 2010; Felton, 2011). Questions aimed to generate introspection include: Why are you doing the tasks you are doing? Why does the company want you to perform such activities? Why is your work relevant for the organization? How do you feel when performing the work? What questions come to your mind about the purpose of your work? The answers to these questions are likely to result in abstract thinking. Abstract thinking refers to the conceptualization of ideas rather than to the description of situationally-specific attributes of a task. Abstract concepts operate cross-situationally and encompass a larger number of phenomena while a concrete attribute is context specific (Mowen & Voss, 2008; Hunt, 2010). For instance, imagine the case of an intern who is asked to print lists of customers according to their zip code. When thinking concretely, a student can report that he or she learned to organize customers and use database software. The intern would then want more training in computer skills. When thinking abstractly, however, interns can realize that they were grouping customers by geographic location. This activity is related to segmentation which is a topic taught in marketing classes. Therefore, abstract thinking helps students relate activities to course material. A great deal of content in marketing courses deals with abstract concepts such as customer segmentation, customer satisfaction, customer needs, and so on. Hence, we propose that introspection rather than description will lead to higher evaluations of internship opportunities. Thus:

H1: Students who think abstractly about an internship will report higher satisfaction with their internship experience than students who think concretely.

Method

A hundred and thirteen undergraduate students at the University of Texas at El Paso participated in an online experiment using Qualtrics in exchange for extra credit. The instrument included an internship description, a manipulation check, satisfaction measures, and demographics. The students were first presented with an Internship description. Then they were asked to imagine they were actually going to perform those tasks. Then participants were randomly assigned to a manipulation group: concrete or abstract thinking. If a student was assigned to the concrete thinking group the student was asked to list the activities previously presented. If the student was assigned to the abstract thinking group the student was asked to list the previous activities and explain why those activities were important to the company. After the manipulation, students answered measures of expected satisfaction, manipulation checks, and demographics.

Results

One hundred and forty nine students answered the online survey. We excluded 33 cases due to severe missing data. A final set of 116 responses were included in the analysis (concrete = 57, abstract = 59). We compared the two groups by using a one-way analysis of variance with satisfaction ratings as the dependent variable. There was a significant difference in satisfaction with the internship between the two groups ($F=5.031$ $df=1,111$, $p < .03$). That is, the students in the abstract thinking condition ($M = 5.76$) reported higher satisfaction than the students in the concrete thinking condition ($M= 5.34$), thus, supporting our hypothesis. When we checked the manipulation checks, interestingly we did not find a difference in thinking style between the two groups. Thus, we cannot attribute the findings to abstract versus concrete thinking. An alternative explanation may be that the why question made the association between the internship and the goals salient. Also, we may have primed the desirability and the importance of the internship by the wording of the question.

Conclusion

In sum, our research shows that students who report why the internship is important for the company are more satisfied with the internship than students who solely report the activities performed. We recommend that internship reports should include questions about why the activities were important, rather than just asking students to report what they did. Furthermore, in order to increase the attractiveness of internship opportunities, employers should list the activities to be performed and a state the relevance of such tasks for the company. By so doing, the internship will be more appealing to the students.

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