

Starting your career during a pandemic: The experience of remote and hybrid working

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Starting out during the pandemic

In 2020/21, graduates, school-leavers, and interns entered a new world of work that is devoid of cues that we can too easily take for granted.

Work environments and the way they are used set expectations for office etiquette. The size and organization of space can provide insights into hierarchy, culture, and politics. Navigating these aspects can be crucial for employees as they seek to thrive in their work.



The research

Since June 2020 we have been researching students undertaking paid 9-12 month internships, to understand the specific barriers and opportunities they have experienced while remote and hybrid working.

22

22 interns were interviewed to gather detailed experiences of remote and hybrid working. Interns were working across sectors, with different kinds of roles and living arrangements, and with different working arrangements.

175

175 interns essays were analysed. They were asked to reflect on the development of their competencies, workplace values, goals, and consider their key achievements.

175 interns completed questionnaires at three time-points during the internship which tracked the development of their competencies, the prevalence of remote and hybrid working, and patterns in work experiences.

The findings

On average, interns spent less than 15% of their overall placement co-located with work colleagues. Most of the communication was through scheduled video meetings and "quick online chats". The experience of remote and hybrid working varied.

Some interns had strong, polarised views on remote working, while others reported a balanced view of the upsides and downsides. Our results showed that:

Workplace learning is affected by remote working.

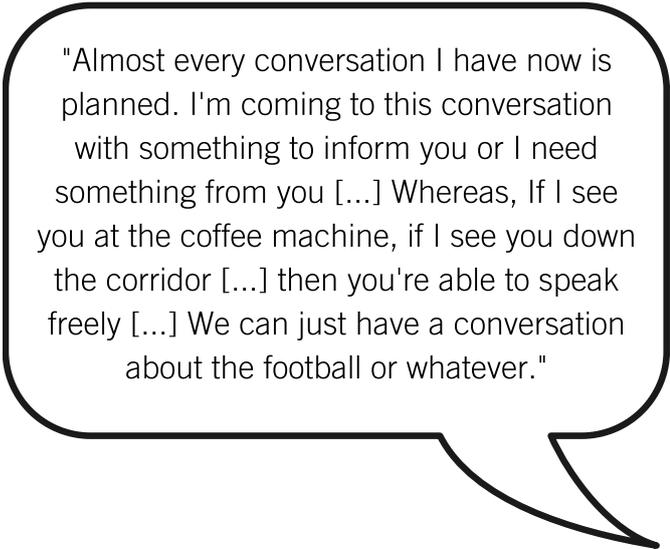
Interns referred to different types of learning. Generally, they reported being well prepared to complete their key tasks and were well trained in this regard by their employers. However, they often felt that it took much longer to learn the culture of the organisation, with some remote workers reporting that they still had little understanding of workplace norms and etiquette nearly a year after starting.



"I feel that my mentoring was not as strong as it would have been had I been sitting in an office. There was no scope for the serendipitous knowledge transfer that a 'normal' workplace produces, and that would have been so crucial to my further development."

The built environment is valuable.

For some, the value of the built environment was immediate, and helped them to feel part of the organisation. Some described the site visit as the "decider" in helping them to choose between multiple job offers, and talked of the "excitement" and "pride" they felt at being able to work in that building. The built environment also helped interns make sense of organizational politics and culture, boosted motivation and mood, and helped social learning.



"Almost every conversation I have now is planned. I'm coming to this conversation with something to inform you or I need something from you [...] Whereas, if I see you at the coffee machine, if I see you down the corridor [...] then you're able to speak freely [...] We can just have a conversation about the football or whatever."

Remote communication brings new challenges.

There are positives to remote communication, but interns also reported challenges. There are fewer social cues for interns to pick up on; fewer opportunities for impromptu discussion that might lead to a development opportunity; access to more senior colleagues and other teams occurred less frequently; conflict and criticism can be harder to resolve; miscommunications can happen more easily, and conversations often felt restricted to being task-related.

It's important to be proactive.

Interns frequently gave examples of proactive initiatives and actions that had helped them to manage a difficult or uncomfortable situation, or to get more from the placement. Where they reported such proactivity, they also reported positive outcomes for their wellbeing, work-task variety, and professional development.

What can employers do to help their interns?

Help interns navigate the culture of the organization.

Offer some additional guidance on etiquette and norms - aspects such as the norms of communication, the degree of formality in place in the company, and examples of the company's values in practice.

Help interns to understand how job tasks fit within the wider business.

They may be unclear about why particular reports are important or how they affect the work of others. Introduce them to other teams that supply or receive work from them, and encourage them to ask questions.



Help interns to 'learn through osmosis'.

Put channels in place to enable questions to be answered quickly. Add interns to meetings where they can observe and hear a wide range of people from across business functions, and make sure they are visible within the team they work in.

Help interns develop their understanding of 'networking'.

Interns with limited work experience can find remote networking challenging. Help them see the value in everyday conversations, with people from across grades and departments.

Facilitate peer relationships.

New employees work hard when they feel committed to their job, their colleagues, and their employer. Interns spoke of the value they had found in 'buddy' systems, where they were paired with a peer at their level who had more experience of the company. If there are multiple interns working across the organization, connect them to each other.

Consider hybrid arrangements so they encourage impromptu interactions.

Interns benefit from seeing and hearing office interactions, and asking questions in real-time. Hybrid arrangements should be carefully thought through, as these benefits rely on interns having impromptu conversations. Office rotas, rigid seating arrangements, and movement restrictions can affect this.

Provide tools for remote interns to help develop their networks.

Tools might be technological (e.g. access to messaging platforms and online networks). Processes can also be useful (e.g. acronym busters, role directories or organizational charts) to help interns understand who to contact, and how.

If it's possible to be in the office, make it a place your interns will want to be.

Given the choice, interns reported varied reasons for attending the office; these were often unrelated to the completion of work itself. e.g. being able to access office 'perks', experiencing the commute, meeting with colleagues for lunch, or shopping after work.

How can universities better prepare interns?

If remote and hybrid working practices are here to stay (at least to some extent), then graduates may need new employability skills. Universities may need to rethink training in this area, as well as providing more detailed training that helps interns and graduates to work effectively when remote. There is a need to help interns:

Develop strategies and techniques to **improve their visibility**, without being intrusive or overly demanding.



Develop the confidence to **ask the right questions**, at the right time, and of the right people when working remotely.

Learn about **different types of remote working platforms**, when and how they are being used in organizations, and the likely etiquette.



See that there is a value to **informal, social interaction** with colleagues, as well as purposeful communication about work projects.

Manage their online presence – not just for building networks and approaching people, but also managing this day-to-day. They need to develop techniques that help them keep in touch with colleagues and interpret cues from the organization’s culture.

Refine **techniques for focusing**, when there might be personal distractions.



Develop techniques for **effective hybrid working**, so that they can think ahead to the signals and opportunities that they will lose and gain through different modes of conversation.

Prepare for **peaks and troughs in workload** by normalising this, and helping interns develop strategies for seeking support when needed.

Understand how to approach **uncomfortable topics** with colleagues and resolve conflicts when working remotely.

What can interns do to help themselves?

Develop your understanding of networking.

Think about what it actually means to network. It is not just about knowing people who are higher up the chain than you. People in your network can offer you different things – e.g. social support, motivation, learning, and social capital too. All of these aspects are valuable to your performance and development.

Do not assume that your employer will build your network for you.

They might build-in social activities that help you to build connections – but equally, they might not. Join clubs, groups and networks, and ask if there are projects you can get involved in to develop yourself.

Ask questions at every opportunity -

but also know the resources that are available to you. Use other people's time wisely and check your question has not already been answered elsewhere before you ask them.

Make your projects visible.

If you report to several people, make sure each one knows what you have been asked to work on, and tell someone if you are overwhelmed or do not have enough work to do.

Be proactive.

Students who are proactive report improved placement experiences. If you



feel that something could be done better, suggest it, and offer to lead on it. If you identify a development need, speak to your colleagues or manager to see how you can address it.

Act with confidence.

You have got your placement because you impressed your employer during the selection process.

Resources

Visit our webpage for further information, including the full report, podcast and blog posts:
bit.ly/understandingworkplacements

Get in touch:  H.Hughes@leeds.ac.uk

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