

Continuation of the Study of the Benefits of a Human Resource Internship Through Appreciative Inquiry

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The continued effort to improve the internship program has been the focus of this study. The reflection of additional student interviews identifies the importance of the internship program. The interns were interviewed during the internship process through appreciative inquiry techniques. This qualitative study continued to look at the benefits of the internship program and how the student perceived the experience as related to the human resource program and their transition into the corporate world.

Keywords: Internship, Appreciative inquiry, Benefits

Over the past decade, human resources has changed tremendously and an experienced, knowledgeable student has a definite advantage in the career field. It is important to reflect on the results of current practices and to recognize that the field is still in transition. It is crucial that academicians and HR professionals work together for the ultimate benefit of the students. This article reflects the results of a continuing effort to gain insight into the perceptions of students who have personally experienced a structured internship.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), found that employers rated their internship programs as the most effective recruiting method for the third straight year (Echoes/SHRM, 2004). Marilyn Mackes, executive director of NACE recently stated that an internship gives the student and employer time to see if the culture and student are compatible. She suggested that valuable information may be supplied to employers through the assessment of student on-site job performance.

In 2003, Jan Simon reviewed several programs that prepared students for the workforce. One successful program in particular was conducted during the summer of 2002. This intensive program focused on career development, instruction from industry leaders, an internship experience with relevant world-of-work aspects, the transition from education to career, and awareness of opportunities in a chosen field. This program demonstrated the necessity of an internship for making wise career choices and obtaining real world experience.

While only minimal research has been completed, significant benefits have been identified for those who have participated. Rubin (2000) stated that all students can benefit from experiential education that enables them to learn about and experience cultures other than their own. Many times students feel disconnected from the faculty and the community. An internship can alleviate this problem and help the student become involved, not only in the corporate world, but also in a volunteer or service project. The author felt that personal experiences and reflection on these events combined to give students a new understanding of their relationships in the larger scheme of things.

Bernard and Goodyear (1998) focused on a developmental model of supervision for graduate students who were interning in psychology. Blanton (2001), designed and evaluated a model to supervise undergraduate interns. Using the theory of college student development developed by Chickering and Reisser (1993), Blanton's model focused on the primary tasks of increasing self-awareness, managing emotions, increasing integrity, and developing purpose. The model required students to arrange their own placement, record activities in a log, meet with a site supervisor regularly, maintain a self-reflection journal, and share experiences with other interns in group sessions.

Many factors lead to career choices by students. The internship is crucial in the decision-making process according to Brown (2004). The author reviewed many factors that facilitated a better understanding of post-college activities. Applying a framework for wisdom development, Brown (2002, 2004) stated that the conditions that help students make informed career decisions were an orientation to learning, personal experiences, interactions with others, and environment. Interviews with students revealed

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that many were influenced by the internship or the supervisor of the internship through formal and structured activities as well as informal, unplanned, and spontaneous events. Significant individuals provided support to students by connecting them to people, ideas, resources, and opportunities.

Statement of the problem

This study is a continuation of a research project completed in Fall 2003 at the University of Tennessee, seeking factors that would impact the internship. Although the human resource internship has improved since its inception, a continuation of the studies may reveal how students integrate their internship experiences with post-college decision-making. In addition, academicians and employers are able to examine the curriculum for factors that add to the success of the internship. As stated in the previous studies, appreciative inquiry is designed to document the benefits of an internship program and the necessity of the experience with implications for the modification of program policies and practices. Comparisons of perceptions from former students will be made to identify strategic components of the internship.

Typically, researchers tend to focus on a problem and the intervention. In this study however, the researchers used appreciative inquiry to assist students in reflecting on the positive aspects of the internship to bring out the best in the experience. Appreciative inquiry can be defined as the study and exploration of what gives life to human systems when they function at their best (Whitney and Bloom, 2003).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to continue to explore and describe how students perceive, organize, adapt, and benefit from the experiences encountered in a focused internship within the context of the human resource program. Students were asked to examine issues and experiences of the internship as they related to fulfilling their educational goals. The transition between the classroom and the corporate world becomes smooth when the student completes a successful internship. This study was conducted to ascertain what was working well with the program and to make recommendations for future program improvement, using this participatory approach to empower all the parties involved. It was designed to highlight the importance of the special relationship that evolves among the students, faculty, and the corporate world.

Theoretical Framework

This study was framed within the learning and humanistic theory from Gilley and England and the appreciative inquiry process by Cooperrider and Srivastva. Gilley and England (1989, p. 120-121) posited that within organizations, learning can be defined as “knowledge obtained by study and/or experience the art of acquiring knowledge, skills, competencies, attitudes, and ideals that are retained and used, and a change of behavior through experience (Gilley and England, 2000). The humanistic theory is based on the idea that every individual has potential to learn and each individual should be encouraged to develop to his/her potential (Gilley and England, 2000).

Appreciative inquiry (AI) involves the systematic, cooperative identification of effective components in an organization that focus on positive outcomes. It was developed primarily by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva (1987), professors at Case Western University’s Weatherhead School of Management. More than a decade later, Cooperrider and Whitney (1999), described the process as a “cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them”. This theory is firmly rooted in a variety of fields including chaos theory, organizational development, and action-oriented research. AI is the study and exploration of what gives life to human systems when they function at their best (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2002). The principles underlying AI are :

- Constructionism - Creating reality through patterns of storytelling and self-disclosure
- Simultaneity – Learning and change happen simultaneously
- Poetics – Human systems are stories that are open to interpretation
- Anticipation – Looking forward to a pleasant experience
- Positive – Transformation into what should be

The word appreciation means to value, recognize or appreciate. The appreciative inquiry interview is designed to assist in showing the interviewee his/her value in the organization and how success can be achieved through positive change. The inquiry, begins with the framing of what Cooperrider, Sorenson,

Whitney, and Yaeger (2000) call the “unconditional positive question”. The process continues through the 4-D Cycle to accelerate the power of appreciative inquiry (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2002). The four parts to the cycle are: discovery, dreaming, designing, and destiny.

- Discovery is reviewing events that have taken place, the best of what is, and the identification of exceptional (peak) moments.
- Dreaming is a time for the student participant and/or employee to envision what may be if the “peak” moments were the norm, not the exception; to reflect on hopes and dreams for their work, relationships, organization and the world.
- Designing can be completed through reviewing statements of what “should be” including elements from discovery and dream; developing ideas to achieve the vision and strategies to implement the plans.
- Destiny is the process of actually implementing the plans, establishing new and better conditions while mobilizing resources to accomplish goals. This may be identified as *delivery* in some references. Barret and Fry, in their introduction to the book, *Appreciative Inquiry and Organizational Transformation*, describe AI “as a type of study that selectively seeks to locate, highlight, and illuminate what are referred to as the life-giving properties of any organization or human system” (2002, p. 6). It is this possibility of using that knowledge to envision and create a better future that drives this research effort. Questions for the present study were developed based on the four phase construct.

Research Questions

This study addressed several questions using the Appreciative Inquiry methodology:

1. What are the benefits of an internship program as identified by students who are presently enrolled in a human resource program?
 - Peak performances/highlights
 - Discovery of personal traits
 - Becoming part of an organization
 - Identification of leadership traits in others
 - Key factors in successful internships
 - Lessons learned/reinforced
2. To what extent does an internship contribute to the overall success of an HRD program?
3. What are the factors that facilitate and/or encourage student learning within the internship program?
4. What are the overall benefits of appreciative inquiry interviews?
5. Do perceptions of the present cohort of interns differ from past cohort interns?

Methodology

The appreciative inquiry interview process was used to obtain accurate and reflective comments from each student in the internship program during that particular semester. Specifically, narrative interviewing techniques were used to elicit student comments. The students were placed in a human resource department of a corporation that seemed to match their interest during the internship. Each student was visited and interviewed at the intern site. Appreciative inquiry interviews were structured to permit instructors to inquire about personal experiences during the internship, allow students to elaborate on topics, and to comment on the potential for transformation in the organization they visited (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The questions created for the interview were designed to bring out the positive experiences of the exercise; however, negative comments were not dismissed but explored. Students were asked to provide remedies/solutions for perceived weaknesses in the internships or the HRD program. The results of the study were reviewed and categorized into tables for the purpose of brevity.

Survey Subjects

Identical interview techniques were used with each intern during the final week of the internship in the spring and fall 2004 semesters. Each intern was visited at his/her intern site and a private office setting or conference room was selected for each interview to avoid any distractions. The students were asked the same questions and in the same order each time. Responses were transcribed and recorded. The interview was confidential and students were advised that their comments would never be attributed to an individual student. Each respondent had his/her own unique personal history which must be considered with the findings. Reflections and perceptions were communicated with varying degrees of sophistication. One notable difference in the response rate was in the degree of philosophical analysis contributed by the students. Most of the respondents appeared to have previously considered many of the issues raised by the researcher and readily offered observations while a few had not and simply provided short answers. Attempts have been made to faithfully represent individual perceptions even though the final analysis seemed to dictate a synthesis of the collective findings. There were 25 interns, 23 undergraduate and 2 graduate students enrolled in the HRD internship program. One of the graduate students was working toward a masters degree and one toward a doctorate. The students were placed in a variety of companies. Ages of the students range from 21 to 35 years. There were 19 female and 6 male. These students were placed in a company or organization in the human resource and/or training department. Each student spent at least one semester at the intern site. Table I indicates the different types of intern sites and how many students were at that particular type of organization.

Table 1. Type of Human Resource Internship Sites

Intern Site Description	Number of Interns	Undergraduate	Graduate
Corporate Training and Development	6	5	1
Corporate Recruiting	1	1	
HR generalist	10	10	
University training and development	2	2	
Health system training and development	2	2	
Consultanting	2	1	1
Government training and development	2	2	
Total	25	23	2

Findings

The findings of the study provided answers to the research questions. Appreciative Inquiry was the basis of the qualitative study. Students were able to reflect during the interview process and answer each question with answers that proved the internship was beneficial. The students verbalized how much they had learned during the internship program and how the curriculum had been implemented during the internship process. In most cases, the intern referred to his/her supervisor as a mentor giving them invaluable information. Although there mainly positive comments, there was a wide variety of answers. Many answers were unique to the particular company.. The following is a list of questions that were asked of each student:

- Tell me about an exceptional (peak) experience during your internship that made you feel proud of yourself and your performance as an intern. Who was involved? What did they do to make this a remarkable experience? What did you do to make this a remarkable experience?
- Without being humble, what have you discovered about yourself during the internship and how could you use these traits to improve the organization?
- Can you think of a time when your presence was acknowledged by allowing you to participate in the implementation of corporate strategies? Were you impressed by the leadership? Did you feel as if you were a part of a “solution” rather than a “problem”?
- What are some experiences or lessons you would like to add to the internship?
- How would the program be different if you were in charge?
- How has the internship heightened your knowledge of human resources?

As researchers conducted the interviews, it became increasingly clear that the current HR program, specifically the internship component, was meeting student needs and expectations. Although students were positive in the majority of their responses, they candidly revealed concerns and offered solutions to problems. Students contributed new ideas regarding the integration of new methods/ideas that are being used in the workplace. They also recognized the transferability of their accumulated knowledge and skills as well as how “marketable” they had become. Students expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to work in the “real world” and overwhelmingly agreed that the overall experience had contributed to their education immensely. Tables 2 through 6 indicate the results from each of the questions. Efforts have been made to break down the complex responses into concise statements.

Table 2. Peak Experiences Identified by Students During the Internship

Led the whole training class.
 Answered associate relations questions.
 Presented project on cost benefit for two areas of the country.
 Surveyed former employees to obtain positive feedback.
 Organized job descriptions and presented policy book to senior management.
 Interviewed potential employees.
 Jumped in to help speaker who was missing materials and assisted the trainer.
 Contributed my ideas in a company presentation.
 Assumed responsibilities of a trainer.
 Reviewed resumes and assisted with interviews.
 Given a variety of human resource experiences.
 Worked with the expatriate program.
 Hired a new employee.
 Created a code of ethics.
 Led a small morning training session.

Table 3. Identification of Personal Traits of the Intern

The following personal traits were recognized by individual students as reflecting the way they may contribute to the success of an organization:
 Worked independently as well as in teams.
 Observing “real-world” processes gave added insight.
 Self-motivated.
 Communicated well with others in the workplace.
 Ability to complete a project independently.
 Completed a challenge for the company.
 Initiative to complete policy book.
 Energetic and able to contribute new ideas.
 Applied curriculum items to the real world.
 Worked with vendors outside the company.
 People skills.
 Problem-solving situations fostered creativity and application of knowledge.
 Interviewing skills were tested.
 Work in different environments.
 Applying new information.
 Excellent communication skills.

Table 4. Leadership Traits Exhibited by Mentors during the Internship

The following leadership traits were identified as significant events by the interns:

- Prepared interns by introductory assignments and increasing complexity of tasks.
- Personal attention by the staff member.
- Supervisor assumed the role of mentor if assigned mentor was unavailable.
- Exhibited leadership to the intern.
- Sincere interest in making sure an intern learned hr skills.
- Detailed tour of the company in other locations.
- Able to fly to another company location to provide basis for comparison of functions.
- Offered quality consulting experiences.
- Offered continual updates on hr information.
- Contributed career counseling.
- Mentored in a variety of roles including technology, interviewing, and training.
- Invitation to attend professional experiences and conferences.
- Offered student a full-time job.
- Spent time with the student on a regular basis.
- Demonstrated a great hr experience – not only through instruction but also as a role model.

Table 5. Requested Additions to Future Internships

The following items/events were perceived as being valuable additions to future internships:

- Observe actual interviews.
- Spend time in compensation and benefits.
- Longer duration of the internship.
- Provide pre-internship class.
- Provide HIPPA training.
- Look closely at legal issues.
- Time to interact with other interns.
- More training time in the corporate world.
- Rotate through other departments.
- Additional recruitment information.

Table 6. Valuable Knowledge and Skills Gained Through the Internship

Feedback from the interns indicated knowledge and skills gained through the experience:

- Real world experience in the corporate world.
- Exploring different functions of hr.
- Safety audits, more than firing and hiring.
- Application of the curriculum to the corporate world.
- Consultants cover many areas.
- HR is strategic.
- HR can be in many areas of a big company.
- HR affects the bottom line.
- Compensation and benefits is a whole new area.
- Policy development.
- Legal issues are crucial.
- Motivation to learn even more.

HR is my career goal.
Specific information to study for the PHR.
Application of the training in ethics.

Conclusions

The continuation of this study provided a wealth of information through the appreciative interview process. Students willingly shared stories of success and failure but most all reflections were positive. They provided key insights into elements of the internships through their reflection of the events/activities incorporated in the internship. Students used the path to discovery, dreaming, and designing to find their own version of destiny. In the end, the project was deemed to be a huge success. Interns were able to form cognitive connections from the classroom to authentic experiences gained during the internship. They were able to demonstrate that they had internalized subject matter content and could effectively apply it in the workplace. It is felt that this ongoing research has contributed greatly to curriculum modification and the refinement of a practical teaching model. The researchers used accepted methods of appreciative inquiry to test concepts and strategies to assess the overall effectiveness of the internship. Although some may argue that this process would not be called “research”, surely such design, implementation, and evaluation efforts will yield important knowledge concerning the viability of classroom instruction and the corresponding internship. This ongoing study has assisted the researchers in making improvements in the internship. While some may question the “bottom up” approach to curriculum design, the findings from this study have considerable implications for the future refinement and development of the human resource program which is heavily influenced by “top down” learning theories. In summary, the researchers have demonstrated that the unique combination of theoretical abstractions and the specificity of a real-world internship have greatly improved the effectiveness of the program. Indeed, positive changes have already been made in the structure of the internship and the delivery of course content. The changes have led to an increased awareness of the program in the community which has led to full-time jobs and new internships. A variety of experiences can assist the student in making a career decision and making the student marketable for the full-time job market. These studies continue to indicate that the internship process is crucial and demonstrating the overall benefits of the process will help students, employers, faculty, and mentors.

Recommendations

Based on the results and limitations of this study, several recommendations for curriculum modification and future research are offered:

1. While the curriculum delineating the events in the internship should remain flexible and responsive to student needs, a clear vision and mission for the course should be constant.
2. Replication of the study should be done on a regular basis. Perceptions of students enrolled in an HRD internship should be gathered each semester to accumulate more data. Considerations should be given to developing a longitudinal study to follow the current students as they expand their careers.
3. Future research efforts should be expanded to include taped interviews of student responses. Comments should be captured and recorded in their entirety. The present study fails to demonstrate the obvious development of communication and higher-order thinking skills the interns gained, which is essential in today’s workplace.

The continued effort to study and improve the internship program has been the focus of this study. Using appreciative inquiry, a powerful positive influential force, student interns were asked to reflect on their experiences for the purpose of identifying successful elements to emphasize and incorporate in the future. This qualitative study continued to look at the benefits of the internship program, how the students perceived their experiences as related to the human resource program, and how it may effect their transition into the corporate world.

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