

# Beyond regular employment contexts: The transferability of pay, satisfaction and performance linkages to internships

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Internship participation has undergone rapid expansion over the last three decades, to the point where today many interns and host organizations regard internships as the preferred pathway into entry-level professional positions. However, organizational research has largely neglected the investigation of internships as an employment context, thus a majority of established predictive relationships in the workplace remain untested within the context of internships, including, fundamental workplace causal relationships between pay, performance and satisfaction. This study collected data at three time intervals from 303 intern-supervisor matched pairs (n=606), to establish the transferability of these relationships to the unique employment setting of internships. Findings indicated that although payment level influenced intern satisfaction it did not play a significant role in influencing interns' in-role performance, whereas internship satisfaction did positively impact intern performance. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2015, 16(4), 267-278)

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Globally, a growing number of undergraduate students complete internships as a component of their university education (Coco, 2000; Cook, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2004; Dessinger, 2006; Zawel, 2005). To a point where today in the United States, for instance, internships are now regarded as a principle entry point into the workforce, for graduates (Perlin, 2012). Within the Asia Pacific region, internship participation has also shown a substantial and upward trend, for instance, in China a majority of university students participate in internships prior to graduation (Liu, Wang, & Chen, 2010; Rose 2013), whilst in Australia, there are calls for increased student participation in internship programs across university disciplines (Billet, 2010; Universities Australia, 2007). Hence, based on current trends in internship participation, internships are becoming an employment context of increasing significance to both scholars and practitioners alike.

Turning to the current body of internship literature, there is a lack of available empirical work testing established workplace relationships within the workplace setting of internships. Thus, past reviews of the internship literature have highlighted the dearth of empirical work testing any organizational theory within the context of internships (Bartkus, 2007). There is an emerging stream of recent literature which has begun to address this deficiency within the literature, by testing applicability of extant organizational theories within the context of internships (Beenen, 2014; D'Abate, Youndt, & Wenzel, 2009; Rose, Teo, & Connell, 2014; Zhao & Liden, 2011). However, to date a vast majority of established organizational theories remain untested within the context of internships.

The lack of work establishing the generalizability of established organizational theories to internships is a notable deficiency, as other non-regular employment contexts have been shown to have unique implications for organizational theories developed in regular employment settings; for instance the context of temporary employment (Guest, Oakley, Clinton, & Budjanovcancin, 2006; Parker, Griffin, Sprigg, & Wall, 2002). However, due to the lack of empirical work extending theories developed in other employment contexts to internships

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little is known about how contextual variables present within internships influence established organizational theories. Such variables may include interns' unique role expectations, as they are in transition between student and employee roles (Miller & Form, 1951; Ng & Feldman, 2007), the short duration of internships, which requires interns to learn and adapt to the workplace differently from regular employees (Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2009), or the predetermined conclusion of the internship, and hence the employment relationship (Zhao & Liden, 2011). Given that a vast majority of organizational theories remain untested to date within the context of internships, this study attempts to establish the transferability of some of the most fundamental predictive relationships in the workplace to internships, in order to provide the fundamental building blocks for developing internship specific theory.

## THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

The examination of job satisfaction within internships presents an obvious starting point for testing the transferability of extant organizational theories to internships, as job satisfaction has proven to be one of the most durable constructs in organizational research (e.g., Ariani, 2012; Chen, Ployhart, Thomas, Anderson, & Bliese, 2011; DeTienne, Agle, Phillips, & Ingerson, 2012; Ziegler, Hagen, & Diegl, 2012). Locke (1976) defined job satisfaction as a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences. The seminal Hawthorne studies established the importance of emotional responses in the workplace (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). Today, job satisfaction remains one of the most widely studied organizational variables in both antecedent and outcome roles (Gabriel, Diefendorff, Chandler, Moran, & Greguras, 2014; Hilla, Kang, & Seob, 2014). Despite job satisfaction being one of the most widely studied phenomenon in regular employment settings, its role remains relatively unexamined within the context of internships, with the exception of a sparse number of recent studies (D'Abate et al., 2009; Rose et al., 2014).

The enduring interest in job satisfaction in the workplace is largely due to its established links with desirable organizational outcomes including job performance (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001). As with job satisfaction, intern job performance has received limited attention from internship researchers until recently (Beenen, 2014; Rose et al., 2014), which is surprising given that employee performance is one of the most widely-studied variables within the workplace, and given that employee performance has consistently been linked to important organizational outcomes, including productivity (Batt, 2002; Brown & Medoff, 1978). Although job performance can be defined along many dimensions, all definitions incorporate the dimension of task performance, or in-role performance, which refers to performance in the activities directly related to the assigned job rather than discretionary extra-role performance (Campbell, 1990). This study will focus on the in-role dimension of intern performance, which is more likely to become evident during the short duration of an internship rather than extra-role performance.

The association between job satisfaction and job performance is one of the most widely researched relationships in the workplace (Bowling, 2007; Herzberg, Mausner, Peterson, & Capwell, 1957; Judge et al., 2001). The history of this research can be traced back to the seminal Hawthorne studies, which linked job attitudes to employee productivity (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). The causal direction in this relationship has previously been proposed to exist in three directions: from performance to satisfaction (Naylor, Pritchard, & Ilgen, 1980; Vroom, 1964), from satisfaction to performance (Riketta, 2008), and

to be bidirectional (Schwab & Cummings, 1970). However, despite the extensive body of research investigating the linkage between job satisfaction and job performance, findings have not been conclusive (Judge et al., 2001). Furthermore, this core workplace linkage has not previously been investigated within the context of internships.

This study proposes a casual linkage from intern satisfaction to intern performance, as the alternative causation from performance to satisfaction, is founded on the expectancy motivation theory, whereby it is claimed that good performance leads to rewards which in turn lead to satisfaction (Naylor et al., 1980; Vroom, 1964). However, due to the nature and length of internships, interns are unlikely to receive substantial rewards for their performance, as in the short term, tangible rewards including monetary or career progression are less likely to manifest themselves, thus an intern's increased performance is more likely to originate from the satisfaction associated with intrinsically-motivating characteristics of an intern's work (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Steers & Porter, 1991). Consequently, in the context of internships, it is more plausible that increased internship satisfaction will lead to increased intern performance. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*Hypothesis 1:* The interns' level of internship job satisfaction is positively related to their in-role performance.

An additional organizational variable, which has been largely neglected within the context of internships, is the predictive role of pay in internships. Pay is a particularly crucial variable to understand within internships, as interns' pay has considerable variability, from un-paid to pay levels approaching that of regular-employees. Furthermore, within regular employment settings, pay has been shown to play an influential role in predicting key outcomes including job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and performance (Heywood & Wei, 2006; Vandenberghe & Tremblay, 2008; Williams, McDaniel, & Nguyen, 2006). Within internships pay influence has produced inconclusive results, as Beebe, Baylock, and Sweetser (2009) found a positive relationship between pay and internship satisfaction, whilst D'Abate et al. (2009) found no significant relationship in their study. Thus, given the potential importance of the antecedent role of pay within internships further empirical work regarding the predictive role of pay on core organizational outcomes of intern satisfaction and performance is required. Thus, the two following hypotheses are proposed.

*Hypothesis 2:* The interns' level of pay is positively related to their in-role performance.

*Hypothesis 3:* The interns' level of pay is positively related to their internship job satisfaction.

## METHOD

### *Participants and Procedures*

The study's intern participants were recruited through the careers offices of three universities located in the South-East of China. All participants were undergraduate business school students who were required to undertake internships of three to four months in duration, as a component of their degree program. Participants were selected from the business school undergraduates, as this facilitated sampling from a wide range of internship experiences, relative to more narrowly defined degree courses such as engineering. Undergraduates also provided a more homogenous sample in terms of previous work-experience prior to the internship. The interns provided the researcher with the contact details of their immediate supervisor(s) during the internship. Data was gathered with a combination of paper and

TABLE 1: Study's sample characteristics

Intern's Characteristics		Host Organisation's Characteristics		Internship Characteristics	
<b>Age</b>		<b>Ownership</b>		<b>Length (months)</b>	
Mean	21.43	State-Owned Enterprise	25.9%	Mean	3.21
S.D.	.63	Domestic Privately Owned	54.7%	S.D.	.35
<b>Gender</b>		Foreign-Owned		<b>Payment (per-month)</b>	
Male	35.6%	Joint Ventures	8.1%	No Payment	46.6%
Female	64.4%	Government Departments	4.2%	0-500 RMB	6.5%
<b>Major</b>		<b>Industry</b>		500-1,000 RMB	17.8%
Accounting	16.4%	Manufacturing	13.6%	1,000-1,500 RMB	14.6%
Finance	9.1%	Information Technology	3.6%	1,500-2,000 RMB	8.1%
Banking	26.9%	Finance/Banking	29.7%	Over 2,000 RMB	6.5%
International Business	22.3%	Sales (non-retail)	16.7%	<b>University Arranged</b>	
Marketing	4.2%	Hospitality/Tourism	14.2%	University	11.3%
Logistics Management	6.5%	Civil Service	5.5%	Non-university	88.7%
Electronic Commerce	3.2%	International Trade	9.1%	Obtaining Internship	
Tourism Management	2.3%	Retail	3.6%	Guanxi used	77.0%
Business Management	9.1%	Education	4.2%	Guanxi not used	23.0%
<b>Supervisor's Characteristics</b>		<b>Location</b>			
<b>Age</b>		Fujian	91.0%		
Mean	34.33	Guangdong	2.6%		
S.D.	7.35	Zhejiang	1.8%		
<b>Gender</b>		Jiangxi	1.6%		
Male	61.8%	Beijing	1.0%		
Female	38.2%	Other	2.0%		

online surveys. With regard to the variables of internship satisfaction and pay these were collected from interns during the internship (Time-1), the data regarding the intern's in-role performance, was gathered from the intern's immediate supervisor (Time-2).

At Time-1 a total of 1019 surveys were distributed with 506 responses. Of the 506 surveys distributed at Time-2, 309 supervisors responded, and at Time-3 of the 309 intern-supervisor dyads, 306 responded. This provided a final sample of 306 intern-supervisor dyads on which analysis could be conducted. The final sample consisted of 306 interns of which 64.4 % were female, and their mean age of interns was 21 years. Among the 306 supervisors, 38.2% were female, and the mean age of supervisors was 35 years. Potential non response bias amongst the supervisor's responses was examined by inspecting the 202 unmatched Time-1 intern responses for differences with the matched surveys using t-tests, and no significant differences were found. The internship host-organizations represented a diverse range of industries and ownership structures. Further, descriptive data was collected regarding other basic characteristics of the internships in the sample, presented in Table 1.

#### *Measurement Instruments*

Internship satisfaction was measured using a three-item scale adapted from Hackman and Oldman's (1975) scale, which had previously been modified to reflect internship satisfaction by D'Abate, Youndt, & Wenzel (2009). Sample items are, "generally speaking, I was very satisfied with my internship", and "I frequently thought of quitting my internship". Responses were indicated on a seven-point Likert scale, from '1' (strongly disagree) to '7' (strongly agree) ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

In-role performance was measured using a four-item scale adapted from Farh and Cheng's (1999) scale. The items were adapted to reflect internships by substituting 'subordinate' with 'intern'. Sample items are, "this internee makes an important contribution to the overall performance of their work unit", and "the performance of this intern always meets my expectations". Responses were indicated on a seven-point scale, from '1' (strongly disagree) to '7' (strongly agree) ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

Internship payment was measured on a single item; "select the payment you received for your internship per month", and responses were indicated on a six-point scale: '1' = (no payment), '2' = (0-500 RMB), '3' = (500-1000RMB), '4' = (1000-1500RMB), '5' = (1500-2000RMB), and '6' = (over 2000 RMB).

## RESULTS

The data was analyzed with structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS 20. To examine the fit to the data comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and cut offs established by (Hu & Bentler, 1999), were used. In addition, Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations intercorrelations, and Cronbach alphas of the study's variables. The low correlations indicate that control variables and multi-collinearity are unlikely to bias the results. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was also undertaken on alternative measurement models, the hypothesized measurement model provided best fit to the data. There was a significant deterioration in chi-square and degrees of freedom when contrasted with alternative factor

structures including a single factor model, further evidencing adequate discriminate validity between the measures in our study.

TABLE 2: Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Gender	.64	.480				
2. Payment	2.50	1.66	.175			
3. Internship Satisfaction	4.94	1.17	.373	.287**		
4. Intern Performance	4.78	1.07	.681	.158**	.529**	

Notes: N=618 (309 intern-supervisor dyads) \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , reliability alphas are reported on the diagonal

The results of the SEM analysis are presented in Figure 1, indicating the model's good fit to the data ( $X^2 = 23.850$ ; d.f. = 12; TLI=.980, CFI = 0.988; RMSEA = 0.057, SRMR=.0325). In addition two of the three hypothesized effects gained strong support in the study, Payment was found to strongly impact on, internship satisfaction ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Internship Satisfaction was found to strongly impact in intern performance ( $\beta = .63$ ,  $p < .001$ ), however, payment was found to have an insignificant influence on Intern's performance ( $\beta = -.02$ ,  $p < .767$ ).

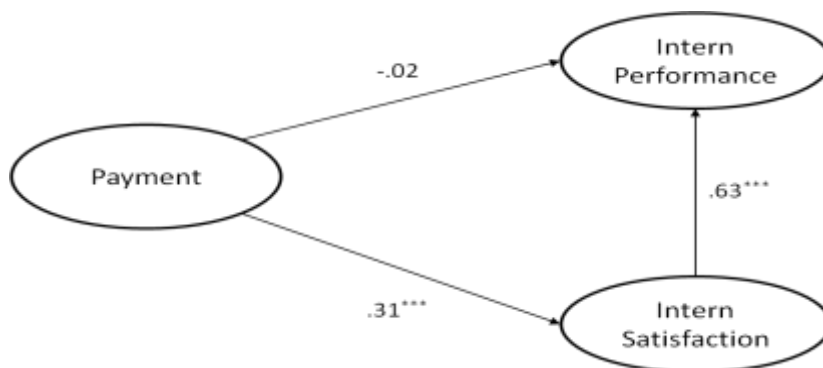


FIGURE 1: Structural equation model

## DISCUSSION

A key question both of theoretical and practical relevance, is the extent to which an intern's experiences during internships, parallel those of regular employees during employment, and by extension the transferability of established predictive relationships in regular employment to internships. This study contributes towards answering this question, by investigating the interactions between the core employment variables or pay, job performance and job satisfaction within the context of internships. Thus, advancing an important emerging stream of internship research which investigates the transferability of extant organizational

theory to the context of internships (Beenen, 2014; Rose et al., 2014; Zhao & Liden, 2011). The study's findings establish both important points of convergence and divergence between internships and regular employment, with implications for both internship specific work and broader organizational theories.

In regards to the parallels with regular employment established by the study, firstly the study evidenced that an intern's job satisfaction is positively related to their in-role performance, thereby, extending one of the most widely-studied causal linkages in employment to internships (Bowling, 2007; Herzberg et al., 1957; Judge et al., 2001). This, finding contributes a particularly valuable perspective, as it suggests that intern's conceptualized their internships similarly to regular employees, potentially as a typical performance context (Barnes & Morgeson, 2007; Jenkins, Mitra, Gupta, & Shaw, 1998). This is of interest from human resource management employee selection perspective as the finding contributes to addressing a criticism of traditional selection methods, which is that they evaluate candidates in maximum rather the typical performance situations, and this factor limits their ability to predict behavior in actual employment (Klehe & Anderson, 2005; Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002; Whetzel & McDaniel, 2009). To date the selection literature has largely been unable to address such criticisms, primarily because it is difficult to replicate a typical performance setting outside of regular employment due to the number of variables involved. This initial indication that internships may be reflective of typical performance settings, means that evaluation of intern in-role performance during internships is possibly reflective of post-employment performance, rather than performance evaluated in maximum performance settings such as employment interviews.

Furthermore, the study establishes another important point of convergence with regular employment contexts, by evidencing a predictive link from internship payment and internship satisfaction, pay is generally regarded as one of the core components of overall job satisfaction for regular employees (Heneman & Judge, 2000), with numerous studies supporting this relationship (Beutell & Witting-Berman, 1999; Sanchez-Runde & Brock, 1996). In regards to the internship literature, this finding, corroborates Beebe, Baylock, and Sweetser's (2009) finding, whilst diverging from the findings of D'Abate et al. (2009), who found no significant relationship in their study of internships. These divergent results between internship studies may be due to the fact that there are a large number of additional variables which may impact on the relationship between the pay and employee satisfaction relationship (Judge, Piccolo, Podsakoff, Shaw, & Rich, 2010).

Of relevance to the broader organizational literature the two supported hypothesis indicate that intern's may share theoretical similarities with other groups of employees, such as organizational newcomers (Blake E. Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Morrison, 1993) or other groups of short tenure employees (Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2009; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Glomb, & Ahlburg, 2005). In addition establishing the transferability of these established linkages to internships indicate, that these predictive relationships manifest themselves at an earlier stage of the employment relationship than previously tested, signifying that these relationships are not influenced by relatively unique variables within internships, such as the predefined short duration of the internship experience and the intern's unique organizational status.

In regards to the rejected hypothesis, which asserted a positive relationship between an intern's pay level and an intern's performance, this finding suggests that despite the aforementioned findings suggesting convergence between internships and regular

employment, that internships also possess unique dynamics relative to regular employment settings, impacting on the key outcome of performance (Bowling, 2007; Herzberg et al., 1957; Judge et al., 2001). For instance, indicating the appropriateness of self-determination theory for conceptualizing internships, in that extrinsic rewards undermine intrinsic motivations (Ryan & Deci, 2000) which corresponds with D'Abate et al.'s (2009) work which found the intrinsically motivating characteristics of the work itself during internships to be more influential than tangible contextual factors present during internships, including pay. Furthermore, this finding echoes those results produced from investigating other early-career employees, which suggest that early career employees strongly focused on developing their career (Doering, Rhodes, & Schuster, 1983; Gould, 1979). Consequently, early career employees tend to focus on those intrinsically motivating characteristics of their work associated with greater learning opportunities (Rabinowitz & Hall, 1981; Wright & Bonett, 2002). In addition at this early stage of their career they also tend to be more optimistic regarding the positive link between their learning and career advancement (B. E Ashforth & Saks, 2000; Bauer & Green, 1998; Cropanzano, James, & Konovsky, 1993). For these reasons, it can also be presumed that interns on the verge of making future career decisions may be motivated to perform by other characteristics of the internship beyond pay level.

Beyond the theoretical implications of this study, the findings of this study also have a number of timely practical implications, from a host organization's perspective. Specifically as this is one of the few studies able to provide host organizations managers with guidance regarding how internships can be designed to enhance the key outcomes of intern satisfaction and intern job performance. Thereby, enabling host organizations to extract the maximum value from their substantial investment in internship programs. One such way to extract more value from internships is from a host organization's employee selection perspective, as it can be argued that the primary advantage of internships as a selection method is their potential to provide a context in which to evaluate candidates in typical performance situations (Zhao & Liden, 2011). In addition, considering the factors which determine internship satisfaction is important as dissatisfied interns may provide negative publicity for the organization, and word of mouth amongst peers is an influential recruitment tool (Kilduff, 1990; Van Hove & Lievens, 2005). Therefore, this study highlights to managers of host organizations, when designing their internship programs, they should consider which characteristics of internships may differ from, or parallel those, which predict regular employee satisfaction and performance.

In common with all empirical research, this study also has several limitations which should be noted, and which point to avenues for future research. Firstly, a longitudinal research design, which utilizes additional intervals of data collection and levels of analysis, would enhance the rigor of the findings. However, Kulik (2011) argues that achieving this ideal with methodological rigor is not always practically feasible, as it requires access to sizable samples at multiple organizational levels in multiple organizations, at multiple intervals. As a result, this study within practical limitations, allows for a reasonable degree of confidence in its findings, primarily by taking steps to mitigate threats from Common Method Variance (CMV), by drawing the data from two sources at multiple time intervals, and performing post ad hoc analysis.

A further limitation of this study is that the direction of causality in some of the hypothesized relationships cannot definitively be established. For instance, it is theoretically plausible that, a reversed causation between intern satisfaction and in-role performance is also possible



(Naylor et al., 1980; Vroom, 1964). However, given the short duration of the internship, and that the intern-supervisor dyads were newly established, coupled with the sequence of data collection in this study, causation in the hypothesized direction is probable. Nevertheless, alternative causal orders and mechanisms in the model cannot be conclusively ruled out. Therefore, if future studies could study internships of longer duration, with a longitudinal reproach design, which adds additional intervals with longer spacing between them, the direction of the causal relationships in the model could be more conclusively established.

In addition, future work, building on the model tested in this study, could explore additional unmeasured variables, and may help to explain the pattern of results detected. For instance the exact strength of the relationship between pay level and job satisfaction remains debatable, predominately due to the large number of additional variables which may impact on the strength of this relationship (Judge et al., 2010). Furthermore with regards to advocating internships as a selection setting, this study did not directly measure the extent to which the internships in the study were reflective of a typical performance setting. Therefore, it is unknown whether interns perceived their internship as a selection setting designed to evaluate their maximum performance, which may have impacted on their behavior during internships. Thus, it would be informative for future research to measure the extent to which the interns perceived their internship experience as a maximum performance selection context.

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The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education publishes peer-reviewed original research, topical issues, and best practice articles from throughout the world dealing with Cooperative Education (Co-op) and Work-Integrated Learning/Education (WIL).

In this Journal, Co-op/WIL is defined as an educational approach that uses relevant work-based projects that form an integrated and assessed part of an academic program of study (e.g., work placements, internships, practicum). These programs should have clear linkages with, or add to, the knowledge and skill base of the academic program. These programs can be described by a variety of names, such as cooperative and work-integrated education, work-based learning, workplace learning, professional training, industry-based learning, engaged industry learning, career and technical education, internships, experiential education, experiential learning, vocational education and training, fieldwork education, and service learning.

The Journal's main aim is to allow specialists working in these areas to disseminate their findings and share their knowledge for the benefit of institutions, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that will lead to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of co-op/WIL, and promote further research.

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