Best Practices for Supporting Youth in the New World of Work

Futures and Options' Findings & Recommendations

The Covid-19 pandemic precipitated a shift in the traditional workplace setting, ushering a new era of remote and hybrid work for millions of Americans. Workers who previously performed their job tasks exclusively in an office are now performing them at home, as many employers have chosen to give up their office spaces and instead, invest in technology that connects employees to each other through web-based platforms.[1] In the post-pandemic era, we have entered a new world of work, in which 41% of all full time employees work in either fully remote or hybrid work models.[2]

> " This is an experience that has widened my perspective and equipped me with new skills. The hands-on learning and exposure to real-world challenges helped me understand more about the professional workplace. Interacting with professionals in a remote internship could be challenging, but my supervisors and the Futures and Options team made sure I was still able to build strong relationships. "

Introduction

Futures and Options prepares young people to be successful in the workplace, offering them access to meaningful work experiences and equipping them with a toolkit of professional skills. We work with a range of employers seeking to invest in the future workforce, hiring young people in robust internship roles and providing mentorship to help youth develop the confidence needed to achieve their career goals. Last year, we connected nearly 300 youth to internships with 100 employers; 32% of internships were fully remote and 36% were hybrid. In order to best support our interns and employer partners, we have revamped our student-centered trainings and business engagement strategies to include recommendations for mentoring high school interns in a remote environment.

Best Practices for Supporting Youth in the New World of Work: Futures and Options' Findings & Recommendations is a guide for employers seeking to provide productive, collaborative, and challenging experiences for high school interns in the new virtual context for work. While supervisors, managers, and mentors have previously helped interns develop fundamental employability skills – such as making strong first impressions, building relationships, working in teams, and delivering presentations – in an exclusively in-person setting, they now must rethink their coaching strategies to be delivered effectively through a computer screen. Over the past three years, Futures and Options has had conversations with interns and supervisors, facilitated hundreds of remote site visits, and conducted extensive industry research on this topic. In this guide, we share best practices for supporting employers as they strive to expose high school interns to career pathways and professional environments, to help students establish the foundation of a professional network, and to inspire our city's youth to chart their futures.

93%
of employers

plan to continue to conduct job interviews remotely, underscoring the need to teach young people best practices for presenting themselves virtually.[3]
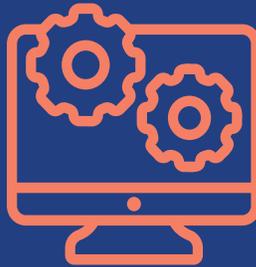
In the last three years, interest in the IT/Tech industry from Futures and Options students has grown 122%.

Currently, the IT/Tech sector leads as the top industry for remote work. Other industries that our students are interested in and that are offering more and more remote and hybrid positions include marketing, financial services, and healthcare.[4]

U.S. company hybrid work model plans[5]

47%
Offered hybrid work pre-pandemic

27%
Implemented hybrid work during the pandemic and plan to keep

16%
Implemented hybrid work during the pandemic and plan to move away from it

10%
Never offered hybrid work and don't plan on it

24-35

The age group most likely to work remotely are 24-35 year-olds.[6]

Intern Perspective

Since March 2020, 76% of Futures and Options' high school internships have been remote or hybrid. Our high touch program model ensures that we are in frequent communication with interns for the duration of their internships, and as a result, we have gained critical insight into young people's experience with remote work. This data, combined with the results of a recent survey that asked 107 interns for feedback on their remote experiences, offers the following takeaways:

TASKS

The responsibilities interns are most often assigned when working remotely, and that they find amenable to completing from home, include: conducting research; entering, updating, and tracking data; preparing documents and presentations; taking notes during Zoom meetings with colleagues and external partners; creating and posting social media content; and managing calendars, schedules, and appointments.

MEETINGS WITH SUPERVISORS

Nearly half of all remote interns meet with their supervisors at least once per day (for hybrid interns, once per day that they were working remotely). These meetings primarily focus on feedback on specific tasks, but interns and supervisors also use this time to discuss interns' goals and feedback on interns' performance. About 25% of hybrid interns never meet with their supervisors when working remotely, saving one-on-one conversations for the in-person portion of the internship. Further, while 94% of remote and hybrid interns find these remote meetings helpful, one third of remote interns feel they would get more out of the meetings if they were in person.

SOFTWARE

The most popular software used in remote and hybrid internships include Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Suite, and Slack; interns shared what they liked about each software, as follows:

• **Zoom:** Interns are familiar with Zoom from using it in school, they like using the "reactions" feature during large

meetings, and they find its clear imaging allows them to better read facial expressions during meetings.
• **Microsoft Teams:** Interns find the status feature helpful when they want to make sure their colleagues are free before sending them a message, and they like using the chat feature for quick, informal questions.
• **Google Suite:** Interns often use Google Suite for school projects, and they like that all the applications are interactive, allowing colleagues to work on documents at the same time.
• **Slack:** Interns find Slack to be user-friendly, and describe it as a "professional version of texting."

Other helpful software and applications, for both communicating with colleagues and managing their projects, include Trello, Skype, BAND, Discord, Telegram, WhatsApp, and GroupMe.

TAKING INITIATIVE

The majority of interns take initiative in remote environments by proactively providing updates on their projects and by requesting feedback on their work. Some demonstrate initiative by asking to attend virtual meetings that they were not originally invited to, and by joining virtual social engagements with colleagues.

CHALLENGES WITH REMOTE WORK

Interns shared that it is difficult to understand directions when they are delivered over remote platforms, and therefore find it challenging to complete tasks quickly and accurately. They often feel nervous reaching out to supervisors with questions because they do not have a sense of how busy their supervisors are at any given time. Interns working in hybrid positions indicated that they often hold their questions until the next time they see their supervisors in person, rather than ask questions while working remotely. Further, interns working in fully remote positions struggle with time management more than interns working in hybrid positions, citing distractions at home as making it challenging to complete their work on time.

> **Since the internship was virtual, it was hard communicating and understanding the tasks that I was assigned. I would have to keep asking follow-up questions.**

Most Challenging Parts of Remote Work, According to Interns

31% Understanding and completing tasks

10% Zoom fatigue

19% Communication with supervisor

4% Making presentations over video

17% Time management

2% Taking initiative

15% Socializing and getting to know colleagues

2% Tech issues

> "One of the highlights of my experience was the opportunity to lead the virtual Team Huddles every Friday. It is very enjoyable to run a check-in meeting with the team and build strong relationships with each other in a remote working environment."

REWARDS OF REMOTE WORK

Despite sometimes struggling to effectively communicate with their supervisors remotely, interns shared that the online networking opportunities are especially rewarding. Interns who work for firms with offices around the country are able to connect with people from other offices, something they do not necessarily have had access to in a fully in-person internship. Additionally, interns working in hybrid positions shared that they often meet colleagues for the first time in person, and then schedule additional virtual informational interviews for more nuanced conversations. Finally, all interns appreciate the opportunity to experience professional, virtual work environments, sharing that they gain tips and tricks for presenting themselves virtually by observing the behaviors and communication styles of their supervisors and colleagues.

Supervisor Perspective

The close coordination between supervisors and Futures and Options' program staff members throughout the Internship Program cycle provides many opportunities for feedback and information sharing. Over the past three years, we have collaborated with employers to get a better sense of their experiences hosting remote and hybrid interns and to develop strategies for robust supervision. More recently, we administered a survey and hosted 11 interviews with internship supervisors to collect information on facilitating successful high school internships in remote and hybrid environments. Top takeaways include:

TRAINING

Futures and Options Internship Program supervisors recommend that employers host trainings for interns on how to use virtual platforms at the start of the program. While many interns have some experience with video conferencing platforms before their internships, they will still benefit from an introduction to the specific software that the internship site uses to complete assignments and communicate with colleagues. Interns can receive specific training on how to use special features, such as screen sharing, breakout rooms, and "reaction" emojis, as well as general etiquette for video meetings, including remaining on camera, blurring the background to avoid distractions, and muting microphones when other meeting attendees are speaking. Further, supervisors advise that it is helpful to explain the primary uses for each of the platforms that the organization employs; for example, Zoom is for meetings, Teams is for chatting about projects and other work-related topics, and WhatsApp is for social communication.

TASKS

Supervisors suggest selecting simple, isolated tasks for remote and hybrid interns to work on at the start of the internship. The tasks should have clear outcomes so interns and supervisors can easily determine when they are complete. This will help build interns' confidence and comfort with the workflow and the software necessary to perform the work, so that as the internship progresses, supervisors can assign more elaborate, multistep projects that build on those initial tasks. While this

recommendation could apply to any internship model, it is all the more important in a remote/hybrid setting where interns are completing their work off-site and without regular in-person interaction with mentors and peers.

Supervisors also suggest setting clear expectations for project timelines and due dates, breaking down complex projects into specific steps with anticipated deadlines for each step. For hybrid interns, supervisors suggest indicating which pieces of the project should be performed remotely and which should be performed in the office. For instance, tasks that are collaborative or complicated, and therefore will likely require the interns to ask questions, should be done while in the office. Supervisors advise writing out tasks and deadlines in a collaborative document, such as a Google Sheet, and asking interns to write in their updates on each task periodically during the workweek.

Finally, over the course of the program, interns should work on a presentation to be shared during the final week. Supervisors recommend that the presentations focus on the "bigger picture" of the organization, allowing interns to learn more about what the company does and how it fits into the larger landscape, including the industry in which the company operates. Interns should be encouraged to virtually meet with employees in other departments to learn more about their priorities and their day-to-day responsibilities. Not only will these presentations challenge interns to practice communication, research, networking, and public speaking skills generally, but they will also offer interns the opportunity to perform these skills specifically in a virtual context.

MEETINGS WITH INTERNS

Supervisors advise checking in with interns frequently, to build rapport and to help interns stay on task while they work remotely. Many supervisors recommend a team meeting at the start of the week, so interns can share what they will be working on for the week, and another team meeting towards the end of the week, so interns can provide a status update on their own work and give feedback. These meetings can start with an interactive activity, like an icebreaker, to help

> "Our hybrid intern struggled with broad directions, she needed specific guidance about when she would be working on each of her tasks. We provided a nuanced task list, with expected deadlines, which helped her be more successful in completing her work."

Most Challenging Parts of Working with Remote Interns, According to Supervisors:

74% — Keeping interns on task and engaged in the work

63% — Difficulty integrating interns into office culture

63% — Interns' competency with software necessary for remote work

58% — Maintaining a consistent work schedule for interns

interns get to know one another. Supervisors recommend asking the interns to lead these activities, rotating the leaders each time, so they get experience directing collaborative exercises over virtual platforms. Further, most supervisors recommend hosting individual "check in" meetings with interns at the start of the workday and individual "check out" meetings at the end of the workday. This meeting cadence offers several opportunities to check on progress of work and provide feedback, and helps supervisors understand when interns start and end their workdays.

Supervisors also suggest scheduling virtual meetings specifically to connect with interns about their college and career goals, and to share more about their own personal career journeys. This gives interns space to ask questions about supervisors' roles, their departments, and the organization more generally. Supervisors can also share advice for breaking into their fields. Taking that one step further, supervisors should invite interns to sit in on their virtual meetings with colleagues at the company and/or external partners, so that interns can get a better sense of their supervisors' responsibilities and have a model for how to conduct effective virtual meetings. More effort is needed to make this happen in a remote workspace, since supervisors cannot just "pull an intern into a meeting" when walking by their office or desk. Making the extra effort to invite remote interns into other virtual spaces can go a long way to ensuring they feel welcome in the workplace.

SOFTWARE
Supervisors recommend the following software to enhance remote and hybrid internship experiences:

- **Video conferencing:** Zoom, Microsoft Teams
- **Project/task management:** Trello, Smartsheet, Workstreams.ai, Monday.com
- **Collaborative work:** Google Docs, Google Sheets, Google Slides, Zoho Connect
- **Quick communication:** WhatsApp, Slack

NETWORKING
Supervisors suggest proactively connecting interns to colleagues in other divisions of the organization so they can learn about different roles and the pathways employees took to get to those roles. This empowers interns to build their professional networks, as well as practice hosting one-on-one conversations through video conferencing platforms, something they will need to do often as they progress in their careers. Supervisors also recommend including interns in any virtual meetings, events, and social activities happening at the organization. Finally, one supervisor recommended helping interns make their own LinkedIn profiles, and encouraging them to connect with other employees at the company.

CHALLENGES WORKING WITH REMOTE INTERNS
The majority of supervisors cite limited ability to monitor their interns' progress on tasks as the most challenging part of working with remote and hybrid interns. They note that they do not always know if their interns are working on their projects, or if they are focusing on other responsibilities within their homes. This issue is further complicated by interns' lack of experience with project management tools and other software essential for remote work. Supervisors also struggle to determine a consistent schedule for their interns; often, they learn that their interns are working on projects in the early mornings or late evenings, rather than during traditional business hours.

REWARDS OF WORKING WITH REMOTE INTERNS
Supervisors shared many of the rewards they experienced from working with remote and hybrid interns, including expanding their managerial skills, teaching interns how to use software essential for working remotely, and hearing interns' perspectives on remote tasks, particularly developing social media content and other creative messaging. They appreciate the flexibility that remote and hybrid work models offer. Overall, supervisors are grateful for the enthusiasm and positivity that their interns bring to their remote/hybrid internships.

Looking Ahead

High school students make phenomenal interns; they are energetic, enthusiastic, and motivated to learn.

Employers with fully remote or hybrid work models should not be discouraged from hiring high school interns, and instead should embrace the opportunity to introduce young people to the new world of work. Together, employers and intermediary organizations like Futures and Options can find creative ways to engage high school interns virtually, empowering them to experience the thrill of work and develop a toolbox of professional skills.

> "**Our intern was exceptional. She was always ready to work, collaborated well with other team members, and had a positive attitude. She showed genuine interest in the work we do and it was a pleasure to watch her develop skills and grow her confidence throughout her internship.**"

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Best Practices for Supporting Youth in the New World of Work

Reference Guide for Employer Partners

Futures and Options is committed to supporting employers in creating robust internship experiences for New York City high school students. Our observations over the last three years, as well as our conversations with interns and supervisors, have given us critical insight into how to design worthwhile internship experiences for both parties. The resulting recommendations of best practices makes us confident that, even with remote work here to stay, the right structures can enable high school students to meaningfully contribute to your organization while developing skills and gaining exposure to the world of work.

Training your intern

- Determine which virtual platforms and software your interns will use and train them on how and when to use those platforms.
- Teach interns the "unwritten rules" for professional etiquette during video conferencing, such as finding a quiet space for the call, keeping cameras turned on, and muting when others are speaking.

Assigning job responsibilities

- Assign finite tasks at the start of then internship and then, as you get to know your interns and their skills, expand on those tasks and assign more complex projects.
- Break down projects into individual tasks in a shared document, and include expected deadlines for each task. Ask interns to update their progress on tasks regularly.
- Direct interns to work on a presentation during their downtime that focuses on broader issues facing your organization and that will be presented at the conclusion of the internship. This will give your interns a more comprehensive perspective on the company and will offer an opportunity for them to practice making virtual presentations.

Communicating frequently and effectively

- Communicate with your interns regularly. It is best to have a check-in meeting at the start of the workday and a check-out meeting at the end of each day.
- Encourage interns to lead icebreakers and other interactive activities during virtual team meetings.
- Create dedicated spaces for talking to your interns about your career journey and the current responsibilities of your role.
- Help your intern understand when to use chats, when to write emails, and/or when to video call. At each company, certain topics are more appropriate for certain communication channels.
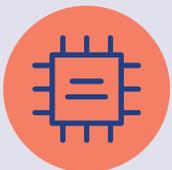
Selecting the right software

- Choose platforms that interns have already used. Many interns have previous experience with Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Suite products from school and extracurricular programs.
- Consider using project management software to organize tasks and get a clearer understanding of what your interns have completed.

Encouraging opportunities for networking

- Create opportunities for interns to virtually engage meaningfully with other employees at your organization.
- Help your interns make LinkedIn profiles and encourage them to connect with other employees at the organization.