

The Keys to a Successful Work-From-Home Internship - WSJ



ILLUSTRATION: JAMES STEINBERG

By

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It's a Friday night in Seattle, and Ethel Xu is getting ready for trivia night—a work event at Dell Technologies. The 23-year-old summer intern heads downstairs from her apartment to buy a bottle of plum wine.

Then she heads right back up to her living room.

It's a virtual trivia night, for a virtual intern, in what's turning out to be a virtual summer.

Ms. Xu, a design and engineering graduate student at the University of Washington, doubts she would have attended the happy hours every week if they took place at a bar. She finds veteran staffers very approachable online, talking from their homes, with kids and pets in the background.

“It’s more exposure than I would have had in person,” she says.



Ethel Xu, a virtual intern at Dell Technologies, chose an underwater scene as her background to make Zoom calls more fun.

PHOTO: DELL TECHNOLOGIES

As organizations adjust their summer internships to the new coronavirus reality, managers are tackling the challenge of how to incorporate students [into their culture](#) without seeing them face to face. The goal is to simulate those moments of osmosis that come from being in the office. In the process, they’re improvising ways to give these young workers a semblance of the typical intern experience.

“It’s going to take some creativity,” says Jen Bokoff, the director of stakeholder engagement at New York City-based Candid, which tracks global philanthropy. This summer, Candid’s interns will be invited to events like SpotiFriday, where a staff member DJs using a Spotify list and everyone dances from home.





Candid, an organization that analyzes nonprofits, hosts SpotiFriday, featuring a staff member as DJ. About 40 staff members showed up during a recent event.

PHOTO: CANDID

They'll also get to know staffers through work-from-home customs, developed since the lockdown, that are designed to be icebreakers, such as meetings that start with everyone introducing either a plant, a person or pet or a common theme for Zoom backgrounds.

Every intern this summer at Google will be assigned a personal mentor—something that was optional in past summers, says Kyle Ewing, the director of Google's talent and outreach programs.

Even though they won't have a chance to play on the company Quidditch team, interns will still participate in onboarding team activities and get a bag of swag that includes a backpack and T-shirt. Leadership seminars, with senior managers giving advice and answering questions, will move online.

The more than 900 summer interns at Dell received monitors and keyboards, along with the standard-issue laptop, to make their homes feel more like an office. Also new this summer: the creation of what the company calls cohorts, a group of five to eight interns, to help them bond. Each cohort gets a scrum master—a staffer in charge of daily check-ins—so the interns have an immediate staff connection.

Helping the interns feel connected to each other is especially urgent, since what's usually a 12-week program is getting compressed into nine weeks, says Jennifer Newbill, Dell's director of university

recruitment.



Sydney Goggans of Spelman College has said she has found aspects of doing her internship from home rewarding.

PHOTO: ASHLEY HORTON

It's impossible to fully replicate the experience of being in an office. Nonverbal cues that come from speaking to someone in person can't be simulated. But there are ways organizations can keep interns engaged and make them feel valued.

"You can't just let it slip," says Jill Klein, interim dean for the School of Professional and Extended Studies at American University, which runs a Washington Semester Summer Internship Program. She suggests scheduling regular virtual coffees for the interns with veteran staffers and including interns in meetings they might not have been invited to in person. Ms. Klein counsels students to reach out to staffers by offering to help with technology, like finding good Zoom backgrounds or showing them new apps.

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This year's crop of summer interns isn't going into virtual work green: Many have had a few months' experience working from home after colleges went online this spring. They had to learn how to meet with professors during online office hours and collaborate on group projects from separate locations.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How are you, or someone in your life, approaching virtual internships? Join the conversation below.

Many say they're grateful to have an internship at all in a pandemic, when hundreds of companies have [canceled programs and rescinded offers](#). A College Reaction/Axios Poll of students planning on starting jobs this summer taken in early May found 37% saying their summer jobs had been canceled and 43% that they've been postponed or made remote.

Sydney Goggans was supposed to study in London this summer. When that program was canceled, she got an internship through American University at the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit media

organization American Forum. Even though it might have been easier to get to know her fellow interns in person, she says working remotely has helped her overcome the discomfort she has felt in the past at reaching out to adults. “It’s less intimidating online,” she says. That’s a skill Ms. Goggans, who will be a junior at Spelman College, thinks will help her with work communications in the long run.

“I’d never have had all the senior managers’ cellphone numbers,” says Nohemy Zabala, whose internship at LobbyIt, a Washington lobbying firm, went virtual in March when the shutdown orders went into effect.



Drew University student Nohemy Zabala is an intern at LobbyIt, a lobbying firm in Washington, D.C.

PHOTO: NOHEMY ZABALA

Ms. Zabala, who will be a senior at Drew University, says staffers immediately became more accessible, encouraging her to ask questions. They also gave her more flexibility, allowing her to take off two weeks when her mom got sick.

Andrew Lanham, who will be a senior at the University of Michigan, started his software engineering internship at Westminster, Colo.-based space technology company Maxar in April near his home in Longmont. He says it’s easier to reach out for help and connect with senior managers online than he thought. He also likes that, instead of having to talk on the fly the way he would have if he ran into one of them in the hall, he has time to plan out what he wants to say ahead of time, allowing for a more controlled encounter.

However, Mr. Lanham still wishes his internship were in person so he could get to know interns in other areas, like marketing and rocket hardware. He hasn’t participated much in the virtual social events. He found a get-to-know-you Zoom with about a hundred other interns awkward, and he’s skipped Friday Zoom happy hours because that’s his day off. “I am usually hanging out with my in-person friends,” he says.

Remote Assistance

Advice from students and managers on how to keep interns engaged and included from afar:

* Set up 30-minute **video calls with different staffers** every day, suggests Carl Dutton, who will be a junior at Emory University and is doing a virtual internship with research and consulting firm Washington CORE this summer from his home in Seattle.

* Make an effort to hold video sessions focused on teaching interns **how to do tasks remotely**, such as how to craft memos, and hold Zoom professional-development sessions, suggests Justin Lewis, government relations manager at LobbyIt, a lobbying firm in Washington, D.C.

* Drop the facade and **embrace the intimacy** that comes from seeing manager's kids running around in the background during meetings, suggests Cadey Moore, a rising senior at the University of Texas, Austin, who was supposed to work in Dell's Boston office this summer.

* **Weekly bulletins or newsletters** help everyone feel connected, says Alex Lehman, who will be a freshman at Brown University and whose internship at the United Nations Foundation went virtual in March.

* Start team-building meetings **a couple of weeks before the internship** starts and then create a detailed, individual work plan for each intern, says Denice Zeck, the executive director at American Forum.

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