A Case Against Internship Certification

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We are writing in response to Byrne et al. (2014), who proposed that industrial–organizational (I–O) student internships be reviewed and certified by SIOP. We disagree with the authors' proposal on the grounds that, from an organization's perspective, certification creates unnecessary bureaucracy. In addition, certification could have negative consequences for the quality of the intern's experience as well as the organization's willingness to fill open internships with I–O students. Further we contend that the issues cited by the authors, which their proposed certification process would address, are not actually problems.

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Let us start by acknowledging the value of the internship experience. We agree with the authors that internships are tremendously important for I–O students wishing to work in an applied setting. Internships provide students the opportunity to develop vital business skills that cannot be learned, or at least are not currently taught, in the classroom. These include, among those discussed by the authors: change management, communicating effectively with leaders, and a basic understanding of how a business, and HR, operates. Internships are a comparatively safe environment to learn—interns are generally paired with a supervisor or mentor who should review his or her work and provide constructive feedback before any costly errors are made.

Internships are also highly valued by organizations. They are temporary and relatively low-cost arrangements, which provide the organization with a low-risk staffing option. Further, they are often treated as extended job interviews and realistic job previews. From both the student and organization's perspective, internships are a benefit. Byrne and colleagues support the value of internships, and surely their motivation in suggesting certification is to ensure that they are a meaningful experience for the student.

However, we believe that a certification process would be a mistake. First, it adds a level of bureaucracy that is both unnecessary and potentially inhibiting. As it stands, practitioners are faced with a great deal of administrative work as part of their jobs. Adding another layer of paperwork as a step in obtaining an intern will certainly be off putting to an organization, as will adding a third party into the intern–employer relationship. Given current workload demands in many organizations, the extra work required may lead an organization to circumvent the process—perhaps hiring an I–O student on a temporary work assignment without calling it an internship—or forgo an intern all together.

What's more, other disciplines may be competing for what have traditionally been I–O assignments. For instance, the increasing emphasis on Big Data in HR—a natural fit for an I–O's background in human behavior coupled with statistics—is also relevant in economics, statistics, and even engineering. If I–O interns are harder to get, an organization will have little problem seeking those skills elsewhere.

Second, the authors suggest that the certification process be used to ensure that competencies missing from the I–O curriculum be part of a student's internship. Under this model, the organization must ensure *a priori* that the intern has exposure to certain experiences during his or her tenure. This limits the dynamic nature of an internship, which at present may be crafted in real time to be the most productive experience for both the intern and the organization. As an example, Ford interns are often asked to help with projects that will make use of their skill sets but that were not part of their original objectives. Among other achievements, our previous interns have designed a methodology to identify where we should recruit candidates, created and delivered presentations to senior leadership, and helped craft our corporate strategy for developing and attracting talent in the STEM fields.

The potential negative consequences discussed above demonstrate why certified internships might be a risk for the I–O community. We further believe that these risks are unnecessary, as there is not currently a significant problem that needs to be addressed. First, organizations are best served when their internships are a good experience for the student. Therefore they should already be ensuring that interns are treated fairly (e.g., fair wages), have adequate organizational support (e.g., an involved supervisor), and have meaningful assignments. Organizations prefer to ensure that these elements are in place because they allow for the value of the internship to be maximized. They also ensure that the organization is seen as a desirable place to be an intern and, ultimately, an employee.

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Second, the authors note that certification will help ''level the playing field'' among employers. It has always been the case that certain employers, and therefore internships, are more highly valued than others. Certification will do little to change the prestige associated with bigger or more recognizable companies—the advantage of a recognizable employer will remain even if a smaller organization is certified. However, it is our belief that the playing field should not necessarily be leveled. An internship experience at a more competitive, prestigious, or highly visible organization is, in theory, earned by the most qualified applicant. This system allows for a healthy competition among graduate students, and obtaining an internship at a top-tier employer is a surely motivating reward.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, gaining meaningful employment does not appear to be an issue for new graduates. Data from the Bureau of Labor and Statistics supports that our field is still growing (projected to grow by 35% by 2020) (bls.gov, 2012). Although no certification is currently in place, the system does not appear to be broken. Overall, it appears that this proposal is driven primarily from an academic perspective. It is unlikely that any organizations have been asking for a certification and likely that many would oppose it. Although we agree with the importance of internships, and would like them to be a quality experience for both parties, we do not believe that a certification process is the way to achieve that goal.

Reference

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