

Best Practices For Running A Financial Planning Internship Program (And Creating A More Productive Outlook)

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Executive Summary

Traditionally, financial planning internship programs have offered students who are aspiring financial planners a way to prepare for entering the workforce by gaining real-world experience in advisory firm settings (as well as a way to get their foot in the door with prospective employers). But when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in 2020, many firms shut their offices and went fully remote, which forced them to either rapidly reconfigure their internship programs or – as was more commonly the case – to suspend their internships or end them entirely.

Recognizing the potential impact that a lack of internships for a generation of planners could have on the industry, in 2020 the Financial Planning Association (FPA) launched "The Externship", a virtual program that provided participants with access to mentorships with financial planning practitioners, technology commonly used in financial planning, and the opportunity to apply hours from the program towards the experience requirement for CFP certification. And while the original vision for The Externship was to provide a 1-year stopgap solution for a few hundred attendees, ultimately over a thousand students signed up in 2020 – because as it turned out, the virtual structure of The Externship opened up opportunities to participate not only for students whose internship opportunities had been disrupted by the pandemic, but also for those who (due to working, caretaking, and other commitments) would have never had the ability to participate in a traditional internship in the first place!

In this Guest Post, Hannah Moore, the creator of The Externship, offers her perspective on how lessons learned from The Externship (which is now entering its 4th year) can inform advisory firm leaders on how they structure and implement their own internship programs to create potentially better outcomes for interns, employees, the firms themselves, and the industry as a whole.

In the wake of the pandemic, many advisory firms have adopted a ‘new normal’ of either hybrid or fully-remote work, providing an opportunity for them to rethink how they conduct their internship programs. While adopting a ‘business-as-usual’ mindset towards internships makes little sense when business as usual has changed so dramatically since 2020, the success and growing popularity of The Externship has suggested that even before the pandemic, the traditional internship model wasn’t working as well as it could have, either for interns or the firms they worked for.

For interns, a good internship can increase the chances of getting a job offer, from either the firm that they interned with or other firms who value the experience that the intern received from the program. But firms benefit as well, with the opportunity to thoroughly vet and observe potential employees and to showcase themselves to prospective talent. And there are even advantages for the firm’s existing employees who mentor the interns: the opportunity to train, teach, and manage interns can provide valuable leadership experience to benefit their own career development.

Ultimately, the key point is that today’s interns – whether they participate in industrywide programs like The Externship or in internships at the individual firm level – represent future generations of leaders in the

financial planning industry. The ways that firms implement their financial planning internship programs not only influence the financial planning philosophies and practices that interns develop throughout their careers, but can also impact how diverse and equitable the profession will be in the future. Which means that internships play an instrumental role in moving the profession forward, and by creating internships that are better, more intentional, and more accessible, firms can make for a more productive outlook not just for the benefit of their own businesses and employees, but also for students and the industry at large!



Author: Hannah Moore, CFP®

Guest Contributor



Hannah Moore is on a mission to change the way people think and talk about money. Hannah's path to becoming a financial planner started when she was a young, number-loving creative. Hannah grew up listening to personal finance radio shows and feeling like the advice was off. It was as if the people giving that advice forgot they were speaking to real people.

As a Certified Financial Planner™, Hannah has seen the impact that financial planning done well has on clients' lives — and how it can truly transform and open a new world of possibilities. Hannah holds a degree in financial services and planning from Baylor University. She brings more than a decade of experience, the perspective of a first-generation college graduate, and a heart to see the financial planning profession thrive.

She and her husband Charlie live in the Dallas area with their three children, all under the age of 5. When she's not dreaming big dreams for the financial planning profession, you're likely to find her in their family garden.

Earlier this month, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the COVID-19 global public health emergency at an end. It's been a long 4 years that fundamentally changed individuals and companies alike.

With summer 2023 quickly approaching, many financial planning firms are preparing to welcome summer interns. Like runners on a track, these firms come from vastly different starting places. Some rescinded internship offers at the start of the pandemic and haven't had a cohort since. Others have hosted curtailed versions of internships in virtual environments.

This summer, many firms are ready to get back to 'normal'. But what it means to be 'normal' today isn't the same as what it meant before the pandemic. Between 4 years of personnel changes and hybrid working environments that altered workflows, many firms find themselves without the institutional knowledge or processes to even run an internship program successfully. The interns themselves have changed, too. College interns today are COVID kids; they have gaps in both hard *and* soft skills.

I'm here with an important message to anyone considering the approaching summer with some measure of dread: All is not lost! In fact, this is a unique opportunity to start anew with best practices at the forefront of your internship program.

How I Accidentally Became An Expert On Training Financial Planners

In 2020, I had been in practice as a financial planner for several years and had a steady client list. I was doing a podcast with the [Financial Planning Association \(FPA\)](#) and already had a strong relationship with the organization. Through the FPA, I began hearing about all the students losing their internships. I knew I had to do something and that, in fact, I *could* do something.

My husband holds a degree in film and video production and spent 5 years as a teacher. Together, we had the financial planning know-how, an in-house (literally...because it was 2020) production department, instructional design knowledge, and a strong relationship with the FPA. With those components in place, it was in record time that we envisioned, built, and launched "[The Externship](#)".

Thanks to quick and enthusiastic support from the financial planning community, that first year in 2020 was a success. The CFP Board granted experience hours, eMoney provided technology, and other sponsors joined. Planners from across the country participated as experts, allowing us to go deep into subjects while also providing Externs with perspectives from many different specialties and philosophies within financial planning.

We thought we'd created a 1-year solution for a few hundred attendees. We were wrong.

More than 1,400 people signed up, and they weren't just college students. They were also career changers, parents returning to the workforce, college students considering changing majors, and paraplanners ready to advance their careers. They were financial planning students who, even in a normal year, would never have had the opportunity for an internship because they were working construction jobs to put themselves through school or were nontraditional students with kids at home for the summer. They were soon-to-be military veterans preparing for civilian careers and corporate executives quietly laying the groundwork for a gigantic career change.

In short, they were (and 4 years later, still are) the future of the financial planning profession.

According to [Harvard Business Review](#), we should not have been surprised. According to author Julia Freeman Fisher:

Summer internships are a proven gateway to jobs. But that gateway is not equally open to students from different backgrounds. Low-income, 1st-generation, and underrepresented students' internship participation rates lag behind those of their wealthier, white peers. Moreover, access to *paid* internships, which are associated with long-term wage premiums, remains uneven along lines of race and class.

What we initially believed would be a 1-year patch was helping to break down barriers to entry into the profession and creating new solutions for training. Today, registration is underway for the 4th iteration of The Externship, our alumni roster exceeds 2,500, and I've learned a lot about internships, externships, and training new and future financial planners.

And if you're launching (or relaunching) an internship program this summer, I'm here to help.

Everything Has Changed... But Is That A Bad Thing?

I have a friend whose child has a prosthetic leg. He once told me something interesting: A flurry of innovation and research dollars dedicated to prosthetic devices generally occurs during times of war.

Trying times and the effects of those difficulties produce new needs, new technologies, and a chance to think about things differently.

In the last 4 years, the processes and workflows of advisory firms have changed to accommodate a virtual work environment. Technology has drastically changed. And team dynamics will never be the same after that time the boss had to jump off a Zoom call to help their 8-year-old log on to virtual second grade. Even team members themselves are not the same. Trying to relaunch an internship program with a ‘business-as-usual’ mentality will be like fitting the proverbial square peg into a round hole. It won’t work and will lead to frustration all around.

COVID opened up opportunities for firms to expand not only how they think about work in general but also how they specifically conduct internship programs. Advisors who want a successful internship program this summer can start with the mindset that this is their chance to build a new, better, in-person internship that reflects their firm as it is now.

From 2020 until now, we have learned the lessons that can make internships better, more intentional, and more productive experiences for both firms and students. And I’m here to tell you more about them.

The Definition Of An Intern

Before venturing further, it’s important that everyone is on the same page about the definition of an intern. While there are varying ideas about what an internship actually involves, the [National Association of Colleges and Employers](#) suggests this definition:

An internship is a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting.

To make these principles practical, I propose the following:

- Interns **are** at your company to learn. While they will certainly help with your workload, their primary function is learning.
- Interns **are** future professionals.
- Unless you are operating a zoo or other non-profit (and if you’re reading this post, I assume you are not), interns **are not** volunteers. Interns **are** paid.
- Interns **are not** temp workers hired for administrative tasks.

What does all this mean? *A well-run internship takes a lot of work.*

The good news is that internships are not only good for the profession and the interns themselves, but they’re also good for an advisor’s firm and its current employees.

[Internships are important for firms, students, and employees. And that means they’re good for the health of our profession.](#)

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Internships Are Good For The Firm

We talk a lot about internships as the recruiting pipeline, the place from which new employees will be found; however, I propose looking at it from a different angle. A strong internship program can be an advisor’s best and most thorough vetting tool. It is an interview that lasts 2 or 3 months and provides a chance to see who will flourish in a full-time position. I’ll discuss this further in a later section.

Advisors who follow industry news know that a talent shortage is just on the horizon. According to studies aggregated by WealthManagement.com, [the average age of financial advisors is rising](#). Chris Kerckhoff,

President and CEO of wealth management company Plancorp LLC, writes:

A report by J.D. Power sets the average [age of financial advisors] at [57 years old](#), up from 54 in 2020. In fact, [43% of advisors](#) are 55 years of age or older. And of those between the ages of 51 to 55, [38% have plans to retire](#) in the next 10 years.

Hiring interns and running an excellent internship program takes time and money, but just as we speak to our clients about dividends and interest rates, I challenge advisors to think about internships as an investment. This summer's interns are next year's colleagues. In a decade, they'll be the movers and shakers. A decade after that, they will be our profession's leaders. A decade or 2 later, its wise elders.

By investing in interns and giving time and intentional forethought to internship programs, advisors are not only preparing interns for their careers but also contributing to the long-term health of the financial planning profession.

Internships Are Good For Students

I hear from firms that they're worried about hiring interns if they have no full-time positions to fill at the end of the summer. But the data is clear. Students need internships in order to get a job, and what they want out of their internship is experience, skill development, and knowledge growth.

According to a study of college students and 2022 college graduates conducted by *Inside Higher Ed* and *College Pulse* on internships and experiential learning, [85% of respondents said an internship was necessary in order for them to successfully launch into their careers](#).

When respondents were asked about their desired outcome of an internship, the top answer was "to develop specific skills needed for a career". The second most popular answer was "growing knowledge in an area of passion".

Zippia, an online recruitment company, examined [the benefits and trends of U.S. internships](#) in an article published in February 2023. Their data suggest that, compared to those with no internship experience, former interns are:

- 35% more likely to get at least 1 job offer after graduation;
- 15% less likely to be unemployed; and that
- 70% of interns are given job offers from the same company they interned for.

While many firms vet their future employees through an internship program, not all do. According to Zippia's findings, 30% of interns do not receive a job offer from their internship provider.

Even when a firm *doesn't* have the capacity (or desire) to make a job offer to its interns, internships can still be good for students. I conducted a focus group of the 2020 Externship participants and found that they wanted 2 things: 1) exposure to the profession and 2) a way to determine if a career in financial planning was right for them.

Besides giving interns a chance to see financial planning in real life, internships also help students develop soft skills. Never has this been more important than it is for [Gen-Z in the post-COVID years](#). From showing up to meetings on time to email etiquette to appropriate communication with clients, internships provide an [important opportunity for students to learn and practice soft skills](#).

Internships Are Good For The Firm's Current Employees

In discussions about the benefits of internship programs, current employees are often left out of the equation. Or firm owners may be tempted to view an internship as a negative to their employees – leaching both their time and productivity. However, a well-run internship can actually have benefits for employees.

By giving employees the opportunity to train and manage interns, they can gain valuable management experience. This is especially beneficial for employees who do not normally have a chance for that professional growth.

The “learn-do-teach” methodology, based on the “see one, do one, teach one” model created in the late 1800s by John Hopkins Hospital’s first Chief of Surgery, William Stewart Halsted, was used to establish the first surgical residency program, training new surgeons by incrementally assigning them with more complex responsibilities. Today, “learn, do, teach” is a mantra repeated in various fields ranging from the military to scouting programs to medical and nursing schools.

The learn-do-teach framework can also be used to help firm employees benefit from taking an active role in the financial planning internship process. After studying their team’s dynamics, a firm owner may find that many of their employees, especially newer or lower-level ones, tend to be in a learn-do cycle, never having the opportunity to practice the final step in the methodology of teaching the skills, processes, or competencies that they have learned and done themselves. However, this final ‘teach’ step is crucial to skill mastery.

In a discussion of Halsted’s “see one, do one, teach one” method, London-based executive consulting and training firm [positive.com](#) note that [one of the key reasons that the method is successful is that it helps individuals take ownership of what they have learned](#). Additionally, they note the following about why the method works so well:

As well as engendering a sense of ownership, teaching and therefore repeating the learned knowledge or behaviour means that it will become more automatic over time. This is due to neuroplasticity—the process whereby the brain forms new neural connections and rewires itself based on an individual’s behaviours. The fact that the repetition of the new behaviour can precipitate a process of neural rewiring—literally altering the structure of our brain—ratifies the idea that the see one, do one, teach one method creates lasting change.

There’s another benefit to employees and, by extension, to the firms they work for. Mentorship programs often involve employees who mentor interns. And while we often read about the value of mentoring for the *mentees*, there is also value for the *mentors* as well. According to a 2023 employee engagement study by mentoring software provider MentorcliQ, [“employees who are involved in mentoring programs have a 50% higher retention rate than those not involved in mentoring”](#). Furthermore, [employees often value mentorship “because it fosters employee excitement about the skills and insights they can learn from others outside of their daily tasks”](#), explains Myron Moser, Strategic Advisory Board Member business consultancy firm [alliantgroup](#).

Because interns provide firm employees with a chance to solidify their skills and gain a sense of ownership in the firm and its culture, they can ultimately help bolster employee retention. And in my book, that’s a win-win!

The Reasons To Set Up An Internship Program

Here’s where theory meets application. When it comes time to figure out the nuts and bolts of creating an internship program, the first question advisors can ask themselves is this: Why do I want (or need) interns?

The answers usually fall into one of the following categories:

- Recruitment of future full-time employees;
- Service to the profession and future planners;
- Desire to increase diversity in the firm;
- Assistance with workloads; and/or
- Development or maintenance of a relationship with a university.

Let's dive into each of these categories.

Recruitment Of Future Full-Time Employees: Testing Future Hires

Interns don't need to walk in on their first day knowing how to use the firm's technology, read investment statements, or make a financial plan. What they *do* need is the potential to learn the competencies and core skill sets they need to *grow into* effective advisors.

Advisors who want to implement an internship program as a way to assess potential future hires can approach the process like a long job interview where the intern can be tested in a way normal job applicants can never be tested.

This approach requires that advisors have a sharp eye on the intern's work and that they can commit to providing detailed and constructive feedback to the intern throughout the internship. As how they receive and incorporate suggestions will be as insightful as anything.

Service To The Profession And Future Planners: Seeing Students Succeed!

For advisors who want to offer opportunities for future planners to learn about the profession, their primary job is to believe in their interns, to support career dreams and their big ideas, and to help guide them to the paths that will make those dreams a reality.

Here are a few ideas to help open doors for student interns:

- **Networking opportunities.** Create a lunch-and-learn event or host a happy hour for fellow planners and their interns in the local area.
- **Resume-building opportunities.** Give interns assignments that will help them develop tangible skills, such as tasks that require them to learn and use specific software programs, develop proficiencies on certain forms, or beginning-to-end projects.
- **Communicate 'Why'.** In his incredible business leadership book [*Start with Why*](#), Simon Sinek writes, "People don't buy what you do; they buy why you do it. And what you do simply proves what you believe." Advisors can convey their own personal 'Why' to interns by telling them about the elderly woman they advised for years who was able to maintain her dignity and independence in her final years because of the guidance they provided to her. Or by introducing them to clients whose children are about to be the first in their families to graduate from college. Take them to the wing of the museum or hospital or school that a client helped fund. What gets the advisor out of bed every morning? Advisors can explain their reasons to make sure interns understand their why.
- **Provide insights.** Advisors can help their interns understand the many career paths open to them. Explain the difference between designations. Tell them about the lessons learned in the trenches. They'll be thankful for such insights.

A Desire To Increase Diversity In The Firm: Adjusting The Talent Pipeline

Sometimes diversity can be a tricky subject. For me, diversity is not about meeting quotas but about ensuring that the community of financial planners is as varied as our clients.

In a 2016 Harvard Business Review article, authors David Rock and Heidi Grant write about [the benefits of diverse teams](#), noting that “research has revealed another, more nuanced benefit of workplace diversity: nonhomogenous teams are simply smarter. Working with people who are different from you may challenge your brain to overcome its stale ways of thinking and sharpen its performance.” They go on to explain research studies that continually point to diverse teams being more fact-focused, more diligent, and more innovative.

Rock and Grant also cited a [2015 McKinsey report](#) examining data from 366 public companies in various industries in Canada, Latin America, the United Kingdom, and the U.S., which “found that those in the top quartile for ethnic and racial diversity in management were 35% more likely to have financial returns above their industry mean, and those in the top quartile for gender diversity were 15% more likely to have returns above the industry mean.”

For advisors who want to increase diversity, a good place to start is to determine why their talent pool is homogeneous. This could be as simple as jotting down when, where, and how they met their past hires or as complex as an internal HR study. Identify processes and the firm’s talent pool. And if needed, adjust those processes and venture to some new talent pools.

Advisors may also need to do the hard work of evaluating their firm’s culture to make sure that the firm itself isn’t the problem.

For those who want to dive deeper into this or to get more practical solutions, talk to my friends at [BLX](#).

Assistance With The Workload: Providing Support To A Firm’s Full-Time Employees

Going back to the definition of an intern, remember that interns are *not* temp workers. For advisors who need assistance with menial and administrative tasks, first consider the following:

1. Do you actually need interns? Perhaps what you really need are more employees, whether they be planners or support staff, full-time or part-time. I suggest first examining your workload. Where are your bottlenecks? If they’re administrative, you probably need support staff. However, if they are centered around planning, an internship allows you to test the waters. By their very definition, internships are temporary. Hiring a summer intern can help you determine the type of full-time employee you need before you make a job offer.
2. If everyone is as busy as you think they are, is there someone in your firm who would actually have the bandwidth to train the interns?
3. Will an influx of summer help cause the excessive workload to be felt even more at the end of the summer? If so, be prepared to hire more employees in the fall.

For advisors who determine that interns *are* the right choice for the help they seek, the following guidelines are important to keep in mind to ensure that both the firm *and* the intern will benefit from the experience:

1. **Set realistic expectations.** Advisors may need to be blunt during the interviews to ensure interns understand what will be involved in the internship. For example, advisors may simply need to tell interns that there will be a *lot* of filing.
2. **Use menial work as a teaching opportunity.** I had an internship where I spent most of my time sitting in a copy room. But because I made an effort to understand the forms I was scanning and filing, I got value from that time sitting in the copy room. With just a little education, even filing can

be a learning experience... but advisors will have to take the time to provide interns with that education.

3. **Recognize the value of explaining ‘Why’.** As is the case for advisors who want to provide service to the profession, advisors who are seeking interns to help them with their workload can also help interns by explaining their ‘Why’. Doing so is most crucial, especially when explaining the purpose and the bigger picture involved in tasks they are assigned – whether they involve the form they’re copying, the file they’re stuffing, or the archives they’re...archiving. To quote Sinek again, “Working hard for something we do not care about is called stress, working hard for something we love is called passion.”
4. **Supplement busywork with career-development opportunities.** Advisors naturally want interns to benefit from their internship and be excited about the profession. If advisors overload their interns with menial assignments, make sure that some serious perks are added in... like lunch-and-learns, networking events, and other educational experiences.

Develop And Maintain A Relationship With A University: Showing Off Your Firm!

Some advisors may want to develop relationships with a local university by contracting certain professors for special assignments, or perhaps they have a vested interest in their alma mater. Here’s the most important thing to remember: interns are going to return to school at the end of the summer. And they’re going to talk. Good, bad, or ugly, professors and fellow students will hear about interns’ experiences. Remember that this internship program is a strategic component of the partnership being established, which means that creating a positive and productive experience for student interns is critically important!

Best Practices To Create A Successful Internship Program

Once advisors have identified why they need or want interns, they need to identify some best practices to ensure their internship program is successful. Here is a simplified checklist.

- Appoint a single point of contact to run the program so there’s no confusion about who is responsible for the interns and to whom interns report.
- Identify your goals for the summer for your firm and for the interns to ensure a positive experience for everyone.
- Define your metrics for success to check if you’re on track throughout the program and to provide a way for your interns to assess their goals.
- Communicate proactively about expectations such as dress code, start time, email etiquette, and other soft skills. Remember that many interns will have holes in their soft skills, and this is likely their first experience working in an office setting.
- Develop weekly cadences and monthly milestones, which are important best practices for all employees, but especially crucial for the abbreviated time span of an internship.
- Assign mentors. Remember that mentorships can have significant positive impacts on both your interns and employees.
- Build a community with your interns. You, your firm, and your employees are your intern’s welcome mat to the profession. Equip the interns to be engaged members of the profession.
- Provide professional development opportunities like networking, lunch-and-learns with experts from your firm, and interactions with members of the community. This is so important that I recommend you schedule these opportunities into your summer program.

Pro Tip: Make a living document out of the internal best practices used in the internship program. It will help advisors develop a sustainable program that can be replicated, updated, and added to year by year.

Amplified Planning’s Internship/Externship Program

After reading this, you may be convinced that internships are important and holistically beneficial. You have hopefully identified meaningful reasons for implementing an internship program and the ways it could benefit your firm.

But you could also be looking at your team, your personnel, and your workload, recognizing that you need help to implement such a program. Don't worry; you're not alone! Since I launched The Externship 4 years ago, I've heard from large and small firms that they want to do an internship program, but they don't have the time or the resources to do it well.

In response to this need, Amplified Planning has created a new program that we're rolling out for firms for the first time. [The Internship/Externship Program and Financial Advisory Firm Tool Kit](#) is a framework for your firm's existing summer internship program. It takes the curriculum, expertise, and structure of The Externship to create a framework for your own internship program.

Along with the 20-hours-per-week Externship curriculum your interns will participate in, firms will get additional tools like detailed best-practice checklists; recommended cadences for daily, weekly, and monthly milestones; a weekly guide of what your interns are learning in The Externship; and other resources.

Like all Externs, your interns will have access to eMoney and the opportunity to get eMoney certified at no additional cost and 180 experience hours they can use towards the CFP designation.

After 4 years spent training future financial planners and seeing their impact on the profession, I believe in internship programs and the power of experiential learning. Internship programs should not be a thing of the past. Interns are the talent pool for your future employees and the future of our entire profession. They can bring new perspectives and fresh eyes to your firm, and you can prepare them to serve in this profession we all care so deeply about.