Boost the Cross-Cultural Value of Your Virtual Internship
A Timeline for Learning, Immersion and Inspiration!

When it comes to virtual international internships, building cross-cultural awareness is as important as building professional experience. Though you won’t actually be abroad, there are many ways to overcome this challenge and immerse yourself in your employer’s culture. All it takes is a little creativity!

Use the methods below (and innovative ideas of your own) to connect with locals in your employer’s country and learn everything you can. Some of the suggestions will require you to step outside your comfort zone – which is a key part of any international experience. So, dive in!

BEFORE Your Internship: Explore Your Destination!

Use the ideas below as a starting off point and think of other ways to explore your host culture in advance of your program start date.

Get Organized with a Cross-cultural Internship Journal

Globetrotters keep travel diaries! Writing about what you observe and learn will help you recall your journey and reflect on your experiences. Your journal can be a Word document, private blog or handwritten journal. Write daily (at least a paragraph a day) and focus on cross-cultural observations rather than emotional experiences. Your ultimate goal is to professionally describe the foreign workplace. (Our Cross-cultural Internship Journal will help you get started).

Find a Cross-cultural Buddy

It’s challenging to pry open a foreign country’s culture from a distance. To make up for the immersion of an in-person visit, find a cross-cultural buddy from your employer’s country. This could be a current or former international student on your home campus, a local citizen abroad or another student with a solid understanding of your employer’s culture. Contact your study abroad office, alumni office, international student office, placement agency or even your employer. Ask if there’s someone of your own age who could become your buddy. Once you’ve found one, you’ll plan 45-minute weekly video chats for cultural exchange. Arrange creative, collaborative culture share activities, like language exchanges, book clubs or joint research projects.

Get Ready to Chat!

Small talk will be important when speaking with colleagues during your virtual internship. Prepare yourself by researching your host country in advance.

Dive into subjects that match your personal interests at home. Having general knowledge will help you network with future employers. It’s all part of becoming a global citizen!

- Local ethnicities & religions
- Landmarks & tourist destinations
- Local weather & geography
- Music, literature & film
- Popular sports & tournaments
- National holidays (religious, school, festivals, etc.)
- Local cuisine
- Current affairs

Above all else, make an effort to research your host country. Read country and culture guides. Brush up on language skills. Do research as if you’re actually about to get on a plane and head abroad. These efforts will help you ease into social chats with colleagues and enrich your personal cultural journey.

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Prepare to Understand Workplace Behavior

The biggest hurdle that virtual international interns will encounter is understanding a foreign employer’s workplace culture. Prepare to observe and analyze their culture by following the advice below:

**Culture hides itself – even from its practitioners**

We’re constantly immersed in our own culture, to the point where we can hardly recognize it. When we go abroad, we see a culture’s manifestations, but often struggle to describe them. Like the iceberg model of culture, we only see the top 10% of the cultural iceberg, and the bottom 90% is hidden. It takes work and time to uncover that hidden 90%.

**Learn about North American business culture**

Savvy global citizens understand their own culture and use that understanding as a benchmark to help them appreciate other cultures. You must build a formal understanding of North American business culture before trying to recognize and accept other approaches. How do we make decisions, motivate staff, give and receive directions, conduct meetings, communicate within teams and chat with colleagues?

**Know the two types of workplace culture**

Two elements govern your employer’s workplace culture: the universal work culture of their country as a whole, and the unique corporate culture (specific to their company). To recognize the distinction, you’ll need to be observant and analytical. Universal work culture impacts broad management styles, communication and decision-making models. Corporate culture is more unique and may impact work processes. For example, some companies are rule-based, some focus on continuous training, and others promote constant creativity.

**Research business culture in your employer’s country**

Research and study the traits of your employer’s work culture. Focus on workplace structures and standards of communication. This information is easy to find online or in print.

**Reflections BEFORE the Internship:** Look forward to your online journey

Written reflection is a core component of cross-cultural learning. Answer (or modify) the following questions in your cross-cultural internship journal before your internship starts:

1. How have you maximized your cross-cultural immersion so far? What have you learned?
2. Describe your own business culture. Which beliefs might impact your upcoming internship?
3. How else do you think your employer’s culture will manifest in work life? How will it differ from your own?
4. Describe how you expect to be professionally and culturally challenged.
5. What are your short-term professional goals for the upcoming internship?
6. What are your personal goals or outcomes?
DURING Your Internship: Get Smart About the Cross-cultural Workplace!

Once your internship has started, reach out and take your cross-cultural learning to the next level:

**Ask your employer about their culture**
You’ve done your research, now it’s time to hear straight from the source! Ask your supervisor about their culture, favorite foods, films and sport teams. You can also ask about workplace culture, such as management and communication styles.

**Ask your advisors for cultural guidance**
Ask if your school or placement agency has any further suggestions about how you can enrich the cross-cultural element of your internship.

**Be social**
Use the chat topics listed above to try and open up a social dialogue with colleagues.

**Do a mid-term assessment**
At the halfway point of your internship, stop to reflect: Are you reaching your intended goals? Get ready for a formal assessment from your employer.

Reflections DURING the Internship: Think Closely About Your Experience

1. Describe your first impressions of your host culture.
2. How has your pre-internship preparation affected your internship experience?
3. Have you recognized differences in your host culture’s approach to work and communication?
4. How are you maximizing the cross-cultural learning element of work relationships?
5. Describe any cross-cultural communication challenges you have experienced.
6. What skills do you believe you are developing?
7. What have you learned about managing cross-cultural relationships online?
8. Have you found a buddy at home or abroad to discuss your experience with? If so, how have you connected? If not, how could you find one?
9. Write a career story that highlights the international skills you’re developing.

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**AFTER Your Internship: Extend Your Cross-cultural Journey!**

The end of your internship doesn’t signify the end of your cross-cultural learning journey. Use the methods below – and come up with five of your own!

**Stay curious:** Continue learning about your host culture after your internship is over. There are endless books, films, musicians and recipes to check out.

**Be a mentor or cross-cultural buddy:** Teaching others is one of the best ways to learn. Act as a mentor or a cross-cultural buddy to a younger student who is interested in your host culture. Consider starting a vlog or writing a guidebook for future interns working in your host country.

**Ask for a post-internship culture chat:** Request a quick social chat with your employer to discuss the cultural elements of your internship.

**Meet with fellow virtual interns:** Reach out and connect with others who have been through the same experience. Share your reflections.

**Join online communities:** Does your university have an online portal for students or alumni? If so, use it to connect with globally minded peers.

**Consider your next steps:** It’s time to look to the future. Start planning how to internationalize your degree and think about arranging go-abroad experiences beyond the travel bans.

If you don’t have a passport, get one! Travel will soon become possible. Make sure you’re prepared to head abroad. You’ll thank yourself for starting this process early.

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**Reflections AFTER the Internship: Integrate Your Cross-cultural Learning**

1. What aspects of your employer’s culture do you understand better? Did you build an understanding of the country’s values, politics, society and/or environment?

2. Describe situation(s) where you were required to demonstrate adaptability and flexibility.

3. Describe situation(s) where you believe your values were questioned. How did you handle the situation?

4. Explain scenarios in which you were required to demonstrate resourcefulness and problem-solving skills.

5. How did your employer’s workplace culture differ from North American culture?

6. Discuss your employer’s communication style. Did you have to learn any new cultural cues?

7. What professional skills did you develop?

8. Write three career stories about your internship to highlight your international skills.

It can be challenging to build cross-cultural experience during a virtual international internship, but with determination and imagination, it’s possible. Be creative – the world is waiting to connect with you!