

INTERNSHIP IN THE HR DEPARTMENT – ORGANIZATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The study on the quality of internships presented in this paper aims to highlight, on one hand, the perception of organizations from the business environment in Romania regarding the internships of students and, on the other hand, the way organizations appreciate the work of students from Bucharest University of Economic Studies, undertaken during their internships in the field of human resources. The study seeks to bring a contribution to a better insertion on the labor market of future bachelor and master graduates by proposing ways to improve the quality of internships and students' activity in the process. In this view two complementary studies were conducted which goal was to highlight several lines of action to be agreed by all actors involved in internship programs in the selected organizations, based on data collected from questionnaires filled in by the internship coordinators from the organizations and by the students who completed the internship.

KEYWORDS: *HR, internship program, quality, students, usefulness*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *I20, I24, I26, L20, L30*

1. INTRODUCTION

The study on the quality of internships presented in this paper has been developed as part of the project "Internships in the field of human resources for students – PREUS", project number POSDRU/161/ 2.1/G/137 915. It aims to highlight, on one hand, the perception of companies from the Romanian business environment regarding the internships of students and, on the other hand, the way companies appreciate the work of students from Bucharest University of Economic Studies, while performing their internships in the field of human resources, as an opportunity provided by this project to enrich their experience and practices. Being directly correlated with the main goal of the project, our study seeks ways to improve the quality of internships and students' activity, thus contributing to a better insertion on the labor market of future bachelor and master graduates.

The concern of Bucharest University of Economic Studies for the adequacy of its study programs, both bachelor and master programs to the requirements of a labor market that is increasingly dynamic and unpredictable, is permanent. The PREUS project has created right premises for the development of partnerships between the university and the business environment and for strengthening existing collaborations, project partners' meetings, their discussions and direct

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collaboration contributing to the acknowledgement of the immediate and future objectives of the partners involved in this project and to their harmonization.

From our point of view, we have benefitted from the opportunities this project created and started two complementary studies that aim to highlight several lines of action to be agreed by all actors involved in the internships in companies.

By the time of this study we based our decisions and actions mostly on our direct observations, on the analysis of points of view that were publicly expressed by some managers from the partner organizations and the opinions shared by coordinating professors and students enrolled in the project. This approach can be furthermore complemented by including the opinion of organizations, which we believe represents a substantial value contribution. In fact, universities have realized more clearly lately that the important role they bear is that of a facilitator of insertion in the labor market and that the value, prestige and reputation they enjoy are influenced directly by the degree of absorption of their graduates on the labour market. This is why, more frequently in the past years, universities regard organizations as clients of their educational services and ask for feedback from their part.

The first study was conducted among 167 students out of 250 who were part of the project's target group PREUS and had several objectives:

- to identify the strengths and weaknesses of internship programs offered to students by organizations and to identify and underline possible means to improve these programs;
- to highlight the main difficulties organizations that offer internship programs for students are facing;
- to underline the advantages and the usefulness of internship programs for organizations;
- to identify the benefits that students performing internship programs enjoy;
- to identify the place of internship programs in the organization's policy.

The second study focused on how companies evaluated students' activity through the means of the evaluation criteria agreed upon with the university: *the workload, the quality of work, the degree of initiative and creativity manifested, the personal skills and the ability to integrate in a team, the learning ability, the quality of theoretical knowledge, the commitment, the punctuality and personal efficiency*. We collected information from 167 filled-in questionnaires.

In both cases, the information collected was processed using Microsoft Excel 2007 package and SPSS Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

Putting together the comments made by companies on how internship programs organized by Bucharest University of Economic Studies are designed, conducted and evaluated and how the performance of each student is evaluated, we found more solutions to improve the current situation and to increase the benefits of all those involved in this process.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In addressing our research we considered the cyclical nature of the process, as authors Gupta & Gupta (2011) also recommended in their work, and the sequence of steps that could lead to the expected results.

Therefore, the steps taken were:

- identifying the research questions: how can we improve the quality of internship programs? (to be noted that the research question was common to both studies);
- formulating the research objectives (they were formulated for each study);

- formulating the research hypotheses (they were formulated for each study);
- analyzing the data based on the hypotheses (these were analyzed for each study);
- interpreting the data to validate hypotheses and clarify the research question (they were interpreted for each study).

From a graphical point of view, the sequence of steps may overlap the research process diagram shown below (Figure 1).

In order to find adequate solutions we have used both quantitative and qualitative methods. The purpose of combining the use of both methods was to get an overall view of the internship programs but also to analyze our research topics of interest using several approaches in order to find appropriate solutions.

In the view of gathering necessary information companies were requested to formulate answers or to evaluate several criteria in accordance with the evaluation forms designed for the analysis. The time span for which the research was conducted was 2014-2015 and the sample of organizations we surveyed was established randomly, based on their acceptance to participate in the project. The research team initially contacted 10 organizations and as the information spread in the business environment, other organizations sought to conclude partnerships with Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

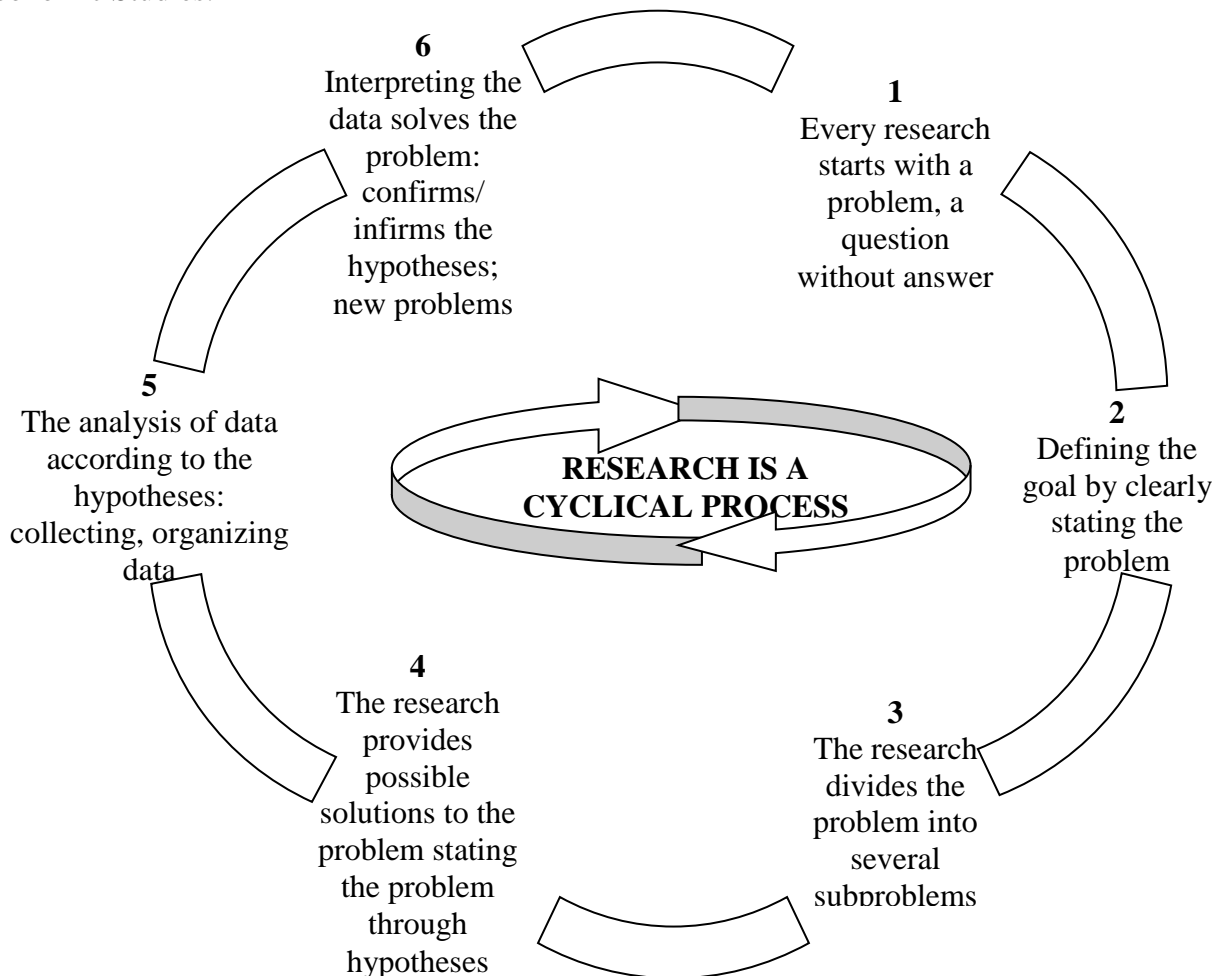


Figure 1. Steps in the research process

Source: the authors

Thus for the first study we had views from over 20 organizations.

These companies, which have hosted internship programs for over 150 students have made it possible to obtain interesting results reflecting views on: *the usefulness of internship programs for organizations* (44% of respondents considered the work carried out by students during the internship as very useful while 41% consider it to be satisfactory), *the way in which the internship meets organization's policy, the cooperation between the organization that offers internship programs and the representative of Bucharest University of Economic Studies, the way in which internship programs led to the creation and development of professional skills, the benefits such organizations derive from hosting internship programs and the benefits enjoyed by students performing internship programs.*

Regarding the second study, it was based on information collected through the "Evaluation form for students enrolled in internship programs" and the "Feedback form", forms which were filled in by the internship program coordinator from the organization.

For the interpretation of the statistical data obtained from data collection through questionnaires the SPSS Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used, which is considered as one of the most used tools for statistical analysis.

3. RESULTS

3.1 The assessment of internship programs by companies

In view of the study on the quality of internship programs proposed as an objective for the completion of the project and also as an activity planned in the schedule of the project, we have reviewed the information provided by the two questionnaires addressed on one hand to the internship program coordinators from the partner organizations – the "Evaluation form for students enrolled in the internship program" and the "Evaluation of the internship program form" and on the other hand to students – the "Feedback form", in order to obtain feedback on the progress of the internship program. The questionnaires addressed are a grasp of the activity of students at bachelor's and master's level during the internships carried out under this project. The project enrolled 250 students, of which 167 carried out and successfully completed internships, of which 59% were students at bachelor's level and 41% were students at master's level in the "Human Resource Management" program.

Partner organizations that offered the opportunity for students to apply the theoretical knowledge accumulated during university years and that followed the request to provide feedback on the internships hosted, were both from the private and public sectors.

The first results of the study emerged from questionnaires filled in by the representatives of the partner organizations, namely the coordinators. They filled in the "Evaluation of the internship program form".

The first question addressed in the questionnaire was: "Do you consider the internship that has just been completed was useful for your organization?"

Respondents could indicate a single response from the following options: "very useful", "useful", "somewhat useful", "not very useful".

Table 1. Descriptive situation on the usefulness of the internship

N	Valid answers	167
	Missing answers	12
Mean		4,2634730538922
Mode		15
Standard deviation		4,00
Minimum value		0,7982
Maximum value		2
		5

Source: compiled by the authors

After recording the responses in the database the options were coded and assigned numerical values each as follows: 5 for “very high”, 4 for “high”, 3 “medium”, 2 for “low” and 1 for “very low”. After centralizing and processing the answers, the results shown in the following table (Descriptive situation on the usefulness of the internship) were obtained.

Regarding the frequency of responses the situation is as follows:

Table 2. The usefulness of the internship - frequency

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentages	Cumulated percentages
Valid 2,00	5	2,8	3,0	3,0
3,00	22	12,2	13,1	16,1
4,00	64	35,6	38,1	54,2
4,263473053892	1	,6	,6	54,8
215	75	42,2	45,2	100,0
5,00	167	93,3	100,0	
Total	12	6,7		
Missing System	180	100,0		
Total				

Source: compiled by the authors

We note that the mean is 4, a value that corresponds to the option ”high”. Overall we can state that the usefulness of the internship is high and if the standard deviation is 0.79 this can lead us to the conclusion that, in the future, the usefulness of the internship may be highly representative by approximately 80% (standard deviation = 0.79).

Another interesting point of view is the analysis of the usefulness of the internship according to the month in which the internship was completed. The report is as follows:

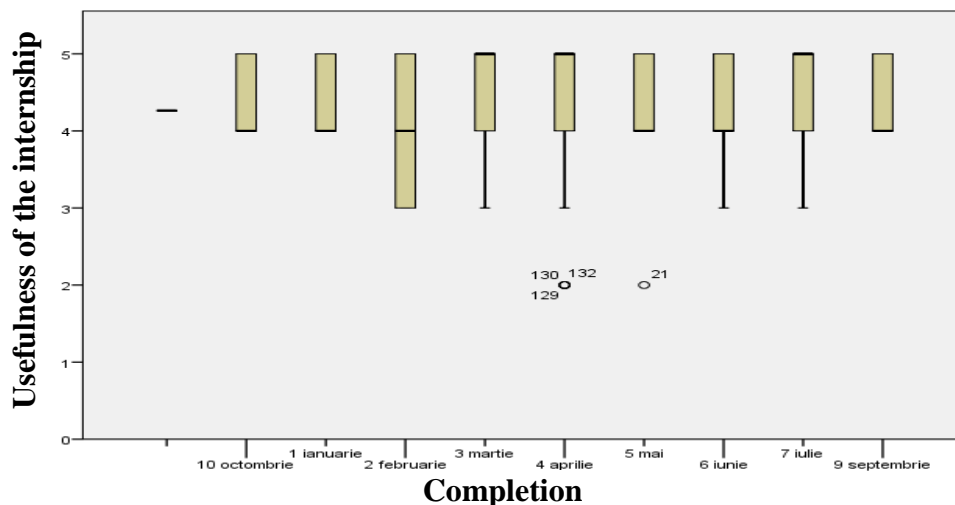


Figure 2. Usefulness by completion date

Regarding the necessity of the internship, by looking at respondents’ options, we found that the internship is considered highly necessary for the organization. As a trend, over 80% of the organizations will probably find it necessary to host internship programs. The calculated frequency depending on the options of the respondents is:

Table 3. The necessity of the internship

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
2. Necessity of the internship	167	2	5	4,13776	0,80357
Valid N	167				

Source: compiled by the authors

To what the cooperation between the partner organization and the representative of the university is concerned, the finding was that, overall, it is considered to be a very good one. No respondent indicated an improper process or a dysfunction. At the same time, the calculated standard deviation is 0.61 which may indicate that this rating can repeat in the future with a ratio of 60%.

Table 4. Cooperation

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Standard deviation	Variation
3.Cooperation	167	3	5	4,634730	0,61282	0,376
Valide N	167					

Source: compiled by the authors

Another aspect had in view for the assessment was the creation and the development of skills. Related to this aspect, researcher McNamara (2008) also underlined the importance of student

capability, that is the ability to perform in the workplace, is an integral component of work integrated learning that should be included in the learning objectives of the intern. The question was whether the internship completed through this project led to the creation/ development of professional skills. The following response options were available (one could indicate only one option): “to a very large extent”, “to a larger extent”, “to a lesser extent”, “to a very small extent”. The rating was made with rates from 1 to 4 in the decreasing order of importance. After centralizing and processing the answers, the situation is as follows:

Table 5. Skills and competences

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Variation
4. Competences	167	0,00	6	3,4759	,664	,442
Valide N	167					

Source: compiled by the authors

With an average of 3.47 we can surely state that the tendency is to xonaiswe that students have developed skills to a very large extent, a trend that can be maintained in the future in a ratio of 66%.

3.2 The assessment of students by organizations

In order to conduct an analysis on the perception of partner organizations regarding the students they hosted to perform internship programs, we have collected data from the "Evaluation form for students enrolled in the internship program", form filled in by organizations' representatives at the moment of completing the internship. The questionnaire sought to highlight the opinion of the internship coordinators from partner organizations on the *workload* that students are prepared to undertake, *the quality of the work performed*, *the overall communication skills* of students, here referring to the communication with the coordinator and the colleagues in the department/ the team, the way in which students show *initiative and creativity* at work and in the activities they carry out, whether or not students have *interpersonal skills* and how they use them, *the integration* in the team to which they were assigned, *the learning capacity*, *the quality of theoretical knowledge*, *the commitment*, *the punctuality* and *personal efficiency*, as means of immersion in the organizational environment in which they integrated. Some of these criteria are also presented as key points to internship success by Hansen. After receiving the filled-in questionnaires from students a database with information collected from 167 questionnaires was created. The data were then processed using Microsoft Excel 2007 and SPSS software.

In order to process the information gathered from the questionnaires addressed to the partner organizations, a first step was to tabulate the data obtained, followed by the description of the set of data by analyzing the mean, the mode, the maximum and minimum values and the standard deviation.

In this regard, a first step was to determine the percentage distribution of each type of response on the issues evaluated by means of questionnaire items. Thus, in the assessment of *workload*, 88 of the students evaluated (53%) were considered as carrying out additional tasks to those normally assigned on a regular basis, about 55 of them (33%) were considered to perform additional tasks only occasionally, for 23 of them (14%) the coordinators reported a strict execution of the assigned tasks without exceeding their competences. There were no reported cases of students who did not fulfill their duties partially or totally. There was only one case of a student who was not rated on any of the criteria assessed in this questionnaire, the form not being completed.

The second item evaluated was the *quality of work*, for this criterion 82 students (50%) were assessed as meeting and even exceeding the quality standards required by the organization, 47 of them (28%) occasionally exceed the quality standards and for the rest of 36 (22%) students, coordinators reported that they comply with the quality standards as they are, without any personal involvement or intervention. Only one student (0.6%) of those evaluated for their activity during the internship was rated with the score 2, which means not achieving the quality standards occasionally. There was no evidence of any student who would not achieve quality standards, one of the students not being assessed for this criterion.

A summary of the statistical indicators considered as relevant for analyzing the data obtained from submitting the questionnaire is further presented for this criterion which is regarded as significant for the success of the internship.

Table 6. Descriptive situation regarding the quality of work

Statistical indicator	Value
Mean	4.27
Median	4.000000000
Mode	5.000000000
Minimum value	2
Maximum value	5
Standard deviation	0.817747644

Source: compiled by the authors

Finally, we wanted to determine what would be the percentage of the employability of students in the organizations in which they undertook and completed the internship, for the question "In your opinion, is the student employable in your organization", 152 students have been assigned a "yes" value (more than 97 %), 4 having been assigned a "no" response, and 11 responses having not been completed. We also wanted to identify whether organizations would be available to take up other students in the view of undertaking their internships, based on the experience they had with those students who have already completed an internship and we addressed organizations the following question: "Would your organization be interested to take up additional students for an internship program", case in which they proved to be open for future cooperation, 145 of them (about 95%) choosing "yes" as an answer and only 8 of them choosing "no", 14 responses being left blank.

3.3. The assessment of internship programs by students

Particular attention was paid to the views of students after completing the internship, they being, after all, the main focus of this project, on the way in which students are or are not satisfied after such an experience depending the quality of internships and the capacity of the project to achieve its proposed objectives.

Thus, we collected data from the questionnaire "Feedback form", a form that was filled in by 167 students. The form was concerned with revealing students' opinion regarding some aspects considered essential in an internship, namely *the clarity and the degree of realization of the objectives formulated by the internship program coordinator, the extent to which the knowledge accumulated in university years were essential in carrying out the activities, the extent to which the working conditions made available (working space, environment) corresponded entirely to the expectations of students, the relationship with the coordinator and the way he/she became involved in the supervision of the student, the appropriateness of tools/ equipment used to perform the*

activities during the internship, the degree of satisfaction of students regarding the practical skills acquired during the training period, whether students recommend or not to a fellow colleague the organization in which they performed the internship, whether or not they want to continue working in the organization as an employee, the general perspective on the internship and the extent to which the internship was able to add value to the students' career development. After receiving the questionnaires from students we constituted a database with the information provided. The data were then processed using Microsoft Excel 2007 and SPSS software.

Among the most significant results obtained, we present the following:

- 129 of the students evaluated (78%) felt that coordinators managed to formulate clear and very specific objectives, 34 of them (20%) assigned the score 4 to this criterion, three of them (about 2 %) were less satisfied with the clarity of the formulated objectives. There were no students entirely dissatisfied, and one answer was not communicated.
- regarding the relevance of the knowledge accumulated in university years for the activities undertaken during the internship, 43 students (26%) assigned the maximum score 5 to this item, 55 (33%) considering that a certain level of knowledge is necessary but this does not impede the accomplishment of tasks and 44 (33%) of them stated that the knowledge is less important in an internship. The results from this item are quite discordant with what has been obtained in the assessment of the opinion of internship coordinators for the same question, which leads us to the conclusion that there is a major discrepancy between the expectations of organizations and the perception of students regarding the relevance of the theoretical knowledge or of the master programs. A recommendation in this regard for students would be to take into account the views of organizations and focus more on gaining theoretical skills, instruments and methods specific to the economic field and to the field of specialization in order to better adapt to the demands and rigors of organizations where they intend to find a job. This aspect comes to support the recommendation made in the Internship Guide for Students issued by Bucharest University of Economic Studies (2015).

Table 7. Descriptive statistics regarding the relevance of the knowledge accumulate in university years

Statistical indicator	Value
Mean	3.698795181
Median	4
Mode	4
Minimum value	1
Maximum value	5
Standard deviation	1.060060586

Source: compiled by the authors

- overall, 90% of the students surveyed consider the working conditions in the office according to their expectations.
- the study revealed a high degree of satisfaction of students regarding the relationship with the internship coordinator (140 students, i.e. a rate of 84%), only 2% of them being less satisfied with the way they were guided and advised during the internship, which suggests that organizations were interested in forming potential future employees or even without considering the possibility of employing them, their goal has remained firm in what concerns the seriousness and the responsibility in working with people. There were no students dissatisfied for this evaluation.
- students stated that they were very satisfied related to the practical skills acquired during the training period, in a ration of 70%, 20% of them stating that they are almost satisfied, only 2%

saying they are partly dissatisfied and one student stating he/she was totally dissatisfied in accordance with his/her expectations. A study conducted by Haag, Guilbeau and Goble (2006) underlined the fact that students in engineering were considered as less skilled in planning, preparing, writing reports and in presenting the material therefore an internship may students also improve other type of skills associated with their job apart from the specific tasks assigned. One must consider that in any new context or new environment, due to the ignorance of the conditions of performing activities and of the overall framework, there is always a gap between the reality and the image created beforehand on what is expected to happen.

- 123 students (74%) stated they are convinced to recommend the organization to other colleagues, only 2 students saying they are partly convinced they would not recommend the organization to anyone else for performing an internship, one student being totally convinced that he/she would not recommend that organization. Overall, the students questioned recommend the organization being strongly convinced that it is an opportunity for those who want to improve their practical skills.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Students' internships during university years are a priority of the educational process at Bucharest University of Economic Studies. For this reason, our university joined as a partner in the project whose results were presented in this study – "PREUS - Internships in the field of human resources for students" - , believing that it will improve the current practices in this field and that it will integrate, in the methodology for conducting students' internship programs, as many views of the actors involved in this process.

This study explored the views of numerous organizations operating in the business environment in Romania and allowed us to achieve a well-founded framework of proposals to improve internship programs.

We admit that one of the limitations of this study could be the fact that it refers exclusively to the students of Bucharest University of Economic Studies, particularly belonging to the faculties of Management, Public Administration and Business Administration teaching in foreign languages, an aspect which does not allow us to generalize the results. It is true that we did not have in view such an objective and that we primarily focused on the improvement of internships for the students of Bucharest University of Economic Studies. However, we assert that many of the conclusions and solutions of our research can represent a source of inspiration for the faculties in the field of Economics in Romania and that their future undertakings might have a starting point to facilitate their eventual studies and research emerging from this study.

Throughout the paper we made numerous partial conclusions, therefore, in what follows, we will summarize only a few that can be valued in our future undertakings, some of these findings being also revealed in the study of True:

- the internship is seen as a useful activity for students and organizations, a conclusion that is also revealed by Kaseorg and Pukkonen (2015) in their study, for several reasons: the relationship that may be developed with potential candidates for certain jobs, a better organization of the work in the department/ division, the reduction in the work volume for some current employees and the support in carrying out daily activities offered by interns, the streamlining of daily working tasks, the restructuring of the current database, the promotion of organization's image, a new approach to problems, the knowledge transfer, the discovery of human resources with high potential, new ideas regarding the recruitment process, a better organization of the division of work, the development of an educational process in both ways – for the organization and also for the intern, the activation of the working environment and the development of partnerships and collaborations with the academic environment.

- students enrolled in internship programs represent a temporary workforce that may be integrated in the organization and may come with spontaneous improvement suggestions for the activity. Organizations that have managed to attract and motivate students during internships were able to find their opinion about how they see the organization of the workplace in general and of the daily activities, an aspect that can represent a real gain for the organizations that have initiated this process.

Considering the highlighted aspects throughout this project, there are some recommendations that are necessary to be taken into account for future similar projects or programs:

- a good organization of internships from the side of the university: longer periods of time allocated for the internships, the conclusion of partnerships with organizations interested in long-term partnerships with the university, clearly formulated requirements for students' assessment, the appointment of coordinators to supervise ongoing internships, a high interest for the feedback provided by organizations and by students, the design and the conduct of internships by fields of activity.

- a better organization of internships from the side of the companies involved: the appointment of coordinators, the offering of jobs relevant to the competences of the intern, the engagement of students in dedicated activities, the involvement of coordinators in the objective assessment of interns, the retention of good students for longer periods of time and/ or the proposal of job offers (if they are willing to continue their work in the organization), the reward of outstanding students.

We believe that demands, requirements and expectations change very often and therefore, the most important recommendation is that of a permanent monitoring and a suitability of internships so that it can increase the contribution to the professional training and forming of students and to model the skills and abilities without which the opportunities for integration in the professional life do not exist. At the same time, the experience gained during this project has proved that:

- the University-Organization-Student triangle is vital, and only by activating the three poles are there chances of success;
- the business environment is willing and interested in establishing a tighter relationship with the academic environment and as a result, the cooperation with the organizations can be expanded in many aspects (courses, professional conferences, joint events)
- HR managers are highly competent, open to our initiatives and the development of a long-term relationship with them can be of great use in the future.

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