Intern engagement may be impacted by cohort hire versus independent hire

AT A GLANCE
Hiring interns in a cohort may increase individual engagement in the internship role and could translate into higher workplace productivity and satisfaction versus hiring interns independently.

The Situation
Internships can provide unique advantages to both the interns hired and the employers. The hired interns reap many potential benefits, such as skillset-building, professional networking opportunities and career exploration. Meanwhile, internships allow employers to evaluate potential new hires, expose interns to their organization’s mission and values, and gain fresh and new perspectives. However, keeping interns engaged in their role and subsequent duties is important to increase intern satisfaction and overall productivity.

Interns are most commonly hired during spring and summers by University of Idaho Extension faculty. They can be hired individually or as a cohort. According to Merriam-Webster, cohorts are defined as “a band or group.” Currently, due to funding limitations, educators are typically funded for one intern per year. However, with grant and/or program funds, hiring multiple interns to work on the same or similar projects can be possible.

Hiring interns independently or as a member of a cohort may affect overall intern engagement. Research has repeatedly shown that high levels of intern engagement may improve internship satisfaction and ultimately increase an intern’s productivity in their role (Barros, Costello, Beaman & Westover, 2016).

Our Response
UI Extension faculty developed an online survey to explore internship engagement of interns hired independently versus interns hired in a cohort. The survey used Texas A&M’s “Engagement Scale: Electronic Questionnaire Version” to estimate interns’ self-perceived engagement during their internship. The engagement scale is a summative scale with all scores summed, and an average obtained. The higher the average (out of 100), the more engaged the intern was in their internship activities and responsibilities.
In August 2018, Extension faculty who were direct supervisors of interns distributed the voluntary survey to interns across the state.

**Program Outcomes**

There was a total of 31 completed survey responses. Of the survey responses, 20 respondents were interns that worked independently, and 11 respondents were those who worked within a hired cohort. 81 percent of respondents were female. Almost 19 percent of respondents identified as Hispanic/Latinx. 6 percent of respondents identified as Native American.

Figure 1 shows the average (mean) of intern survey responses (filtered by those who were hired as a member of a cohort versus those hired independently) when answering the survey questions “Approximately what percent of the time during your internship did you feel...”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 1. Intern Survey Responses</th>
<th>Mean (Cohort)</th>
<th>Mean (Independent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...fully engaged?</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>81.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...fully focused?</td>
<td>90.0</td>
<td>82.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...deeply interested in what was happening?</td>
<td>91.3</td>
<td>82.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...fully engrossed in what was happening?</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>77.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...fully mesmerized in what was happening?</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>71.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...strong emotions?</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>71.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...excitement?</td>
<td>91.3</td>
<td>82.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...strong feelings?</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>69.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For every “Engagement Scale” survey question, interns who were hired within a cohort, on average, responded higher, indicating greater self-perceived internship engagement than those who were hired to work independently.

When asked “Please rate your overall satisfaction with your internship from when you started the internship to when you finished the internship,” on a scale ranging from one (Disgusted) to nine (Delighted), the mean for cohort respondents was 8.6 versus a 7.9 mean for independent respondents, indicating those hired in a cohort were more likely to report greater satisfaction with their internship.

These results indicate that Extension staff working in a cohort have higher job satisfaction. Research indicates that staff with more job satisfaction have higher levels of workplace productivity. Interns who are members of internship cohorts may also have improved internship satisfaction when hired as a member of a cohort (Barros et al., 2016).

**The Future**

Based on this analysis, strategic hiring will positively increase intern engagement. Hiring interns to work collaboratively can translate to increased productivity and satisfaction in an internship role. With increased productivity, Extension will have a greater outreach in communities throughout the state of Idaho.


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**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Surine Greenway, Extension Educator • University of Idaho Extension, Owyhee County • 208-896-4104 • surineg@uidaho.edu

Jackie Amende, Extension Educator • University of Idaho Extension, Canyon County • 208-459-6003 • jamende@uidaho.edu

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