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Creating Virtual Internships in the Music Business

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Introduction

Music is made accessible to the populace through the work and dedication of the people in the music industry. The music industry seeks talent and then brings that artist to the masses through recording contracts and concert tours. Mozart was one of the first to leave the patronage system to play music for the masses. Beethoven was able to make a living as a musician by playing for audiences and not solely relying on the aristocracy for total financial support. The challenges that confronted Mozart and Beethoven remain challenges for those in the music industry today.

Today, artists rely upon the general public to not only provide income, but also to provide a venue to touch the lives of others through their music. Just as Mozart and Beethoven had to move to the music centers of Europe to be part of the musical world, students are often asked to move to today's national music hubs when they are ready to join the business. While learning about the music industry it is crucial to have an internship that brings to life theory and practice. Since many students are not able to move to a hub due to financial or family reasons, is a virtual internship a plausible solution? Can a virtual internship provide a similar educational experience in comparison to a traditional internship on location? Do students in remote areas of the country have to accept that not being close to a music center precludes them from internships?

Music Business Internships

Students in programs in or near the music centers of the nation, such as New York, Los Angeles, or Nashville, have often been privileged to obtain internships with major recording labels and other leading music industry firms simply because of the ease of location and access. These prestigious opportunities give them the practical experiences they need to be successful upon graduation from an accredited educational program. In-

ternship programs can provide a range of experiences tailored to students with differing levels of preparation. They also provide valuable networking opportunities. Some internship positions are observational where the purpose is for the student to spend time observing professionals at work to obtain a better understanding of the roles they play within an organization. These types of internships are often limited in the number of hours interns spend on the job. Other internship positions provide broader working experiences that help students learn through hands-on opportunities; they can be paid or unpaid. Regardless of the nature of the experience, the time spent provides an opportunity that is hard to replicate in a classroom or laboratory setting. In H. Frederick Sweitzer and Mary King's 2004 book, *The Successful Internship*, the authors observe, "The internship...affords you the opportunity to understand the world of work in a more complete way than you do now...[It] is a catalyst for personal growth (p. 4)." An internship complements the theory they have learned in the classroom as well as life experiences. Working with professionals provides interns with models to fashion their work and gain a better understanding of how their experiences can help them be successful.

The music business' primary mode of contact is through networking, and it is vital that interns find positions that allow them to be in contact with those who have the connections through their respective networks for potential employment. "Most jobs in the music business are never advertised or made known to outsiders. In this field, there is often no need to place ads in the trades for help. Applicants line up immediately when word hits the street that some job may be coming up" (Baskerville 2009).

Of course, students can be successful without an internship. However, as stated before, students who are able to network with industry leaders have a much better chance of getting recognized by employers or securing an introduction to those who can play a significant role in their success. But interns must understand the importance of their role in order to maximize the chances of success.

What Does a Good Internship Include?

A good internship should adhere to a set of standards. These standards should be consistent for all internships. In Sweitzer and King's book eight principles of good practice are listed for all experiential learning activities as outlined by the National Society for Experiential Learning (Sweitzer and King 2004, 255-256).

1. Intention – Both the student and the internship provider must be clear on expected outcomes as well as set goals and objectives for projects.
2. Preparedness and Planning – There must be clear plans for the internship. Both the intern and the provider must understand the expectations, start, and end dates.
3. Authenticity – The internship must provide real world experience. Applicable skills learned for the intern’s individual growth in the field.
4. Reflection – An opportunity must exist for both the intern to reflect on what they are and have learned as well as the provider to reflect on the work attempted throughout the process.
5. Orientation and Training – The intern must be given a background of the company, expectations as well as how projects are to be completed. This may include various training activities that will help the intern learn the culture of the provider as well as the basics used in the industry.
6. Monitoring and Continuous Improvement – The intern is entitled to have consistent feedback on their progress. It is important in the learning process to have feedback to work toward improvement.
7. Assessment and Evaluation – At the end of a task, and the internship as a whole, the provider bears the responsibility of providing clear assessment of skills learned and an evaluation of the interns work.
8. Acknowledgement – It is vital for all parties to acknowledge the accomplishments that were achieved through the time period of the learning experience.

According to social learning theorists, successful learning takes place in an environment where individuals can construct ideas, culture, histories, and meaning as the result of ongoing social interactions and collaborative functioning (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989). Internships provide students the opportunity to satisfy curiosity as well as obtain experiences that will shape their future. It is important for providers to present an educational and social learning internship to help students attain the appropriate tools necessary for networking and career development.

What is a Virtual Internship?

A *Wall Street Journal* article published in September 2009 claimed that, “Virtual internships, while relatively rare, are becoming more common, career experts say, fueled by improving technology and the growth of social media.” A virtual internship provides students with an opportunity to work on projects and obtain a learning experience through the use of today’s technology. A company will ask the intern to complete assigned tasks through a virtual environment just as it would if the student were physically in the office. The April 2005 *THE Journal* defines a virtual internship program as:

[A virtual internship] program allows students to complete their [experience] by finishing assignments and participating in hands-on activities that can be implemented from anywhere with Internet access. Students participate in these courses while staying in touch with facilitators, who assist and monitor their progress and performance, and subject mentors, who are experts in the specific field of study. And even though all of the students’ learning is self-directed, they still have access to online resources such as audio, video and PDF files, while remaining in close contact with their subject and teacher mentors (p. 8).

It is important to note different types of internships exist that could provide a learning experience. Project-based internships require students to maintain a blog of their progress throughout the project term. Other internships require students to go beyond basic blogging to include typical business communications with the provider. Students may be requested to teleconference as well as to provide written reports about the internship experience.

A student of an accredited music business program gains extensive knowledge about the industry through theory and case study. The application of the acquired knowledge is the true test of understanding; and the internship is primarily where this happens. For many, a virtual internship may be one of the keys to business success and career networking. Today’s students have been immersed in a world of technology. They have grown up with the computer and the internet and “view technology as just another part of their environment, as they soaked it up along the way with every-

thing else. For many [students] using the new technology is as natural as breathing” (Tapscott 2009, 18).

Those who have been in the music industry for a number of years sometimes are skeptical of technology and how it could benefit the business. Too often the concern in the minds of many older music industry professionals is the Napster case and how, in their view, file sharing has become the ruination of the business. But the truth is, the industry is changing and the next generation of music business leaders will use modern technology to benefit the business and the performers with whom they work.

It is relatively easy for students to find an internship when a music business program is in one of the nation’s industry centers, but what happens when a program is not in, or near, a major city? How will these students obtain experiences that contribute to their success? Traditionally, students scour industry web sites, visit their university career center for placement opportunities, or use personal or faculty networks to obtain an internship. Often the internship requires the student to temporarily move to a music center to have the experience. This could be cost prohibitive because internship programs historically do not pay well, if at all.

Many of these internships are in facets of the business that may not benefit from on-site office time. The field of artist and repertoire (A & R) is one example. The goal of an A&R professional is to search for talent from a pool of potential candidates. Given the remote locations of some institutional programs, a student can engage in an internship from virtually any location in the nation. By expanding the number of trained interns screening for potential new talent, the A&R industry can dramatically increase the number of acts or individuals being screened. Perhaps through the use of this new procurement method, a greater number of new and emerging artists can move toward securing a recording contract. Sometimes, being signed by a major label requires being in the right place at the right time and knowing the right people. Many talented individuals and performing groups have not been discovered because their timing has not aligned with the schedules of A&R professionals. This does not make the performers less talented, it is merely the fact that they have not yet been in that right place, or have not networked appropriately. Using virtual interns, record labels and management firms will have an increased number of trained A&R professionals out in the field searching for new talent.

Past Meets Present in A&R

A virtual internship uses technology to speed up the process of talent discovery. In the past, performers were expected to “pay their dues” to get to the point where an A&R professional would consider listening to an untested, unrecorded performer. The system expected artists to go through the trials of night clubs, becoming warm-up acts for regional bands, and finally becoming regional acts themselves. Eventually, artists might be heard by an A&R professional who might sign them to a recording contract or give advice on how to improve the act. This system eradicated less popular performers, and only those with audience appeal or fortitude prevailed and were rewarded with a contract. The digital age has changed the world of expectations for the music industry and for the performer. No longer does a performer have to wait to be signed by a major label to be able to present his or her music to the masses. With the advent of digital recording, MP3 technology, and social networking, music sharing is only a click away. Many performers are now opting to build a fan base through social networking sites by allowing streaming audio of their latest releases, podcasts of interviews, blogs, and other interactive technologies to build fan support with the hopes it will translate into online sales of recordings.

Case Study

A virtual internship can create many opportunities for students and for companies. One such opportunity was created through a partnership with the Radford University music business program and RM64. Radford University has an enrollment of approximately 9,000 students and is located in the New River Valley in southwestern Virginia. In an effort to open the doors for the music business program to a broader audience outside of the local area, a partnership was developed with RM64 to provide real-world experience for students through a virtual environment. RM64 is a Los Angeles-based consulting firm with a network of professionals across the United States searching for emerging artists (RM64 2009). Using these talent scouts, the company is able to increase its base of talent for major and independent recording companies to review.

Student Experience and Blog Entries

A Radford University student started a virtual internship in the fall of 2009 and was asked to blog about his experience. The blog was used for the purpose of chronicling the experience. The internship required him

to spend time attending local performances and review artists for potential inclusion into the RM64 catalog of talent, to attend a weekly conference call, and have access to a password-protected web site that is based on a social networking platform. The student reviewed talent and, for those with proven ability for inclusion in the catalog, created online marketing materials including one sheets, photos, biographies, and song samples.

The student started his internship with some trepidation and concern about RM64's expectations. He wrote:

So basically, as I now understand it, I'm scouting talent. I look for new good music and submit it via an online system. There are also weekly conference calls to be a part of. I love new music and I feel like this is a great opportunity. Scott also told me they're well connected and this is a great springboard into new opportunities. Perhaps even more alluring, a stipend is available if I'm good at my job. Groovy (In the Pocket 2009).

Online Virtual Community

An intriguing aspect of this virtual internship is the password-protected platform from which the student, the provider, and third parties interact. Based on a social networking model, the intern submits talent with potential and then labels look at the reviews for possible signing opportunities. Basically, RM64 is providing an online community as a conduit through which talent is funneled from intern and paid talent scouts to the recording industry. This is a unique feature for this virtual internship and a platform the students are adept at using given the popularity of other social networking sites. The student said:

So I got my login information the other day after filling out a Non-Disclosure Agreement, which was interesting. Basically it just keeps me from talking about people or bands that are in the database and sharing that and other types of information with people outside the company, ESPECIALLY to my own commercial benefit. No problem.

But, back to the point, I was able to log-in and view the system. It's very streamlined and easy to navigate. There is a home page that contains information about top tracks, news, and recently added artists, among other things. There's also a place to search and browse through artists and members. They have even divided people into territories based on location. I like this feature so I can see other scouts that are in my area, it's also a great way to find new music for myself personally. It's always great to find out there's a really great band within a few hours' drive to check out on a Friday night.

Each member (such as myself), creates a profile for themselves and then in turn makes other profiles for artists that they feel are talented and marketable. Then clients of RM64 pay a fee to have access to this catalog which they use to find new and emerging talent. It's basically outsourced A&R (In the Pocket 2009).

From the student blog it is obvious that the potential for networking with other industry professionals has already begun. The ability to travel and interact with others in the music business, to spend time weekly on conference calls, and to feel responsible for a territory provides a valuable learning experience to a student in a remote location, away from the music business centers. The social networking platform provides a key to success for the intern as well as the industry. This new paradigm of connection is the future. Tapscott quotes Mark Zuckerberg, Founder and CEO of Facebook, "In order for us to be successful in this century, we're going to need to be more connected and we're going to need to have a better sense of understanding of where other people are coming from and just great sense of like, we're all connected" (p. 55). The music business is about connections, networking if you will, and the application of an A&R community provides credence to the new opportunities available in the digital age.

Conclusions

The ability to influence the future of music is the reason many enter the music business world. The virtual internship provided for this student was an opportunity to begin a career path that may not have been acces-

sible to him without digital interaction. The ability to contribute to the greater good of the business with this type of online community and a virtual internship had a tremendous effect. We are seeing a shift in the way the industry views the usefulness of the virtual environment. The potential for moving the music industry in new directions, within this virtual environment, is enormous. But it is all about individuals and how they interact with each other.

I...find myself nearly ecstatic about an upcoming conference call, where I will no doubt be grilled on the band. I look forward to sharing my thoughts and experiences with the great guys from this group. As hard as the music industry can be, all-in-all it is quite rewarding. At least for me (In the Pocket 2009).

Success leads to success. This student understands that the skills he learned through this experience are real-world opportunities. No longer is it a theoretical base, but action that involves the lives of others. The potential for a band he has heard and marketed to be signed by a record label is a real possibility—a dream come true for the band and a dream come true for an A&R intern. This student will no doubt find success from the spark that ignited the flame of his virtual internship. A truly educational experience!

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