Title: Organizational socialization strategies of interns transitioning to telecommuting work in uncertain times
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Abstract

Purpose

The study aims to examine how organizational socialization occurs for interns transitioning from onsite to telecommuting work, particularly in a context where traditional supports have been reduced due to the pandemic.

Design/methodology

Drawing from interviews (n=30) of undergraduates interning at advertorial and marketing firms, the study conducted a thematic analysis of workplace learning experiences of undergraduate interns—newcomers at the workplace when disruption of traditional ways of performing work activities occurred. In particular, the enforced telecommuting work-from-home arrangements due to the pandemic provided a unique setting for this study of internship learning in changing contexts. The analyses reveal differences in undergraduate interns’ experiences of organizational socialization when they were at the physical workplace as compared to when they had to work remotely.

Findings

Interns reported benefitting from structured onboarding, supportive peer systems, and regular face-to-face meetings with supervisors, which facilitated their socialization and understanding of workplace culture before the pandemic. However, as telecommuting became the norm during the pandemic, these experiences shifted. Interns adapted by engaging in digital interactions to mirror office dynamics, extending work hours due to blurred work-life boundaries, and independently seeking information in the absence of direct guidance. When adapting to digital communication and independent learning, interns faced challenges like longer working hours and reduced spontaneous interactions, indicating a preference for the traditional, in-person socialization methods of the pre-pandemic workplace.

Originality

This study provides insight into interns’ experiences during the global shift to hybrid work as a result of the pandemic, contributing fresh insights into organizational socialization processes amidst workplace disruptions. The conclusions offer valuable implications for future adaptive onboarding practices in educational and professional settings.

Keywords

Organizational socialization, internship learning, transitions, workplace learning

Introduction

Organizational socialization is a critical human resource function that has implications for individuals, groups and organizations (Saks et al., 2007). The process is represented in the learning experiences of newcomers at the workplace and getting them to settle into new roles (Cranmer et al., 2019). Ensuring both organizational and individual learning needs are met is
therefore often a challenging task. The concept of organizational socialization historically encapsulates a mechanism whereby an individual progresses from a peripheral participant to an integrated member of the organization. This transition requires newcomers not only to master role-specific tasks; it also requires newcomers to internalize organizational norms and values (Feldman, 1976; Fisher, 1986). Such socialization processes have been further characterized as multidimensional learning avenues, equipping newcomers with diverse sets of knowledge, and enabling them to contribute effectively within organizational confines (Klein & Weaver, 2000).

Critically, research focusing on organizational socialization must encompass interns, given their unique positions as transitional employees who embody the essence of the newcomer experience. Interns are situated at the liminal space of academic preparation and full professional engagement, hence offering a rich context to study the initial acquisition of role-specific skills, the internalization of organizational culture, and the formation of professional identity. As they navigate their entrance into the workforce, interns must assimilate complex social and professional expectations within a relatively short timeframe, often without the benefits of long-term job security or in-depth orientation programmes. Their experiences can provide valuable insights into the socialization process, highlighting areas where existing mechanisms may be insufficient and identifying opportunities to enhance support structures. In addition, the transient nature of internships, coupled with their learning objectives (Zehr & Korte, 2020), presents a dynamic environment to observe the socialization process in real time. Given the evolving landscape of work practices and the increasing prevalence of non-traditional employment arrangements, such as gig and remote work, the study of interns’ organizational socialization is timely and essential for developing robust, adaptable workplace learning models of employee integration.

In the specific context of internships, socialization plays a pivotal role in integrating newcomers into the established workplace learning environment, thereby bolstering newcomers’ overall professional development (Ashforth et al., 2007). However, the coronavirus pandemic presented an unprecedented disruption to this established workplace learning environment. In Singapore, this disruption was marked by the rapid deployment of business continuity management plans and the initiation of the "circuit breaker" approach epitomizing the global pivot towards remote work. This change unfolded in diverse ways for newcomers at the workplace, from rescinded job offers to a shift to online work modalities (Seow & Tan, 2020; Tham et al., 2020).

While current research focuses on the broader impacts of this pandemic-induced work shift (Prouska et al., 2023), a conspicuous gap persists: the intricate experiences of interns during this transitional phase remain under-explored. The altered landscape raises a salient question: How do these interns, as organizational newcomers, perceive and navigate their socialization processes in this dispersed working environment? This study, therefore, seeks to shed light on the organizational socialization experiences of interns amidst the pre-pandemic and pandemic era, emphasizing the challenges engendered by remote working environments.

The following section reviews key research on organization socialization to underscore our efforts in adding theoretical knowledge about newcomers’ socialization process during periods of disruptions. We next highlight from our interview data how learners had experienced organizational socialization before the period of nationwide lockdown, and how they adapted
to the challenges of remote working as reported by the interns. Subsequently, we will discuss how these findings can offer indicative action plans for preparing adult learners for the post-pandemic world of work.

**Literature review**

*Landscape of organizational socialization of newcomers at the workplace*

The integration of a newcomer into and becoming a member of the organization is an intricate journey, encapsulated by the term 'organizational socialization' (Chao, 1997). Much organizational research has delineated organizational tactics into content, context and social domains for proposing proactive behaviours that facilitate this integration (Bauer et al., 2007). Emphasizing the outcomes and benefits of these tactics for socializing individuals to organizations’ values, job demands the people they will work with (Filstad, 2011; Oh, 2018), the lived, daily work experiences of these newcomers have been neglected. Particularly, how newcomers-interns navigate, interpret, and negotiate their socialization pathways merits a more detailed examination for informing the learning of professionals at the workplace organisation.

Organizational structures, in their bid to streamline newcomer integration, often oscillate between formal and informal mechanisms (Cooper-Thoman & Burke, 2012; Collins et al., 2016). Learning practices, such as participation in formal orientation programmes, training or mentorship activities, offer the scaffold for knowledge and skills acquisition. This is in contrast with informal channels, such as ad-hoc interactions, casual engagements, and non-formal gatherings, often becoming the crucial conduits for transmitting the subtler aspects of work culture and knowledge sharing (Lawon, 2009; Van Kleef et al., 2019). However, the balance and adaptive dynamics of these socialization mechanisms, especially amidst global challenges, are areas that still require scholarly attention.

Importantly, organizational socialization, despite being a well-researched domain, issues that concern learning occurring during transition periods are yet to be fully explored (Milligan, et al., 2013). The literature above provides an overarching framework of tactics, strategies, and results, but frequently lacks an in-depth examination of the intricate layers of workplace learning and development beneath (Antonacopoulou & Güttel, 2010). There is a pressing need to unpack the nuanced interplay of organizational values, peer groups, supervisors, and newcomers as they shape learning as embedded in daily workplace practices, hence, presenting opportunities for further investigation.

*Internship learning during uncertain times*

Internships, serving as intermediaries between academic rigour and real-world applications, have been touted as pivotal platforms for honing professional skills (Billett, 2001). The weaving of theoretical knowledge with practical applications makes internships an invaluable work-learn opportunity. However, the existing corpus of workplace learning literature primarily focuses on the broader impacts of participatory practices (Billett, 2014). Yet, deeper insights into the specific nature, challenges, nuances of internship, and workplace practices, especially in light of external global disruptions, remain elusive.
Interns are positioned in the liminal space of educational theories and practical needs of the working world (Fuller & Unwin, 2016). As a subset of newcomers at the workplace organization, they are transient members of the workplace, tasked with understanding and navigating the complexities of an organizational culture in a relatively short period. While the work experience can provide the basis for understanding about self and engaging in active reflection of their work engagements (Starr-Glass, 2006), this demands rapid acclimatization to both the explicit and tacit norms and expectations of their new environment. Moreover, this learning process is often shaped by the socio-material resources available for the sensemaking of the learning experiences (Authors et al., 2022).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced a significant proportion of workers, interns included, to transition to remote work terms (Bolisani et al., 2020; AlGhamdi, 2022). While sentiment analysis of workers revealed remote work was perceived positively by employees (Dubey & Tripathi, 2020), the pandemic-induced work-from-home mandates and challenged boundary-related vocational behaviours of individuals as work-home boundaries were blurred (Cho, 2020). This blurring, coupled with the broader mental health impacts of the pandemic, underscored the need to understand how interns, a crucial component of work-integrated learning students, perceived and navigated their remote work experiences. In addition, many organizations were unprepared to support their newly transitioned remote workers due to the sudden lockdowns and often failed to equip their workers with dedicated work computers, and this situation was not helped by the quick deployment of unfamiliar telecommunication tools such as Zoom and MS Teams for work continuity (Panteli et al., 2023).

For interns, telecommuting can introduce unique challenges. Without physical immersion in the workplace, gaining insights into organizational culture, forming relationships with colleagues and mentors, and accessing informal learning opportunities become complex. Intrinsic challenges of internships hence can be amplified by remote work. Traditional organizational socialization processes often rely on a combination of formalized instruction and insights acquired through informal interactions. In a remote setting, the latter becomes challenging, potentially hindering an intern's comprehensive understanding of the workplace. Informal interactions, such as coffee breaks or casual hallway conversations, often lead to invaluable insights, mentorship opportunities, and a sense of belonging (Carliner, 2013; Koch & Denner, 2022). In a remote environment, replicating these experiences requires concerted effort and innovation. Critically, the interplay between organizational socialization and internship learning took on new dimensions during the pandemic, shaped by the challenges and opportunities of remote work. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for both educational institutions and organizations to optimize the internship experience in a post-pandemic world.

**Context of internship and professional learning**

The experience of interns in the industry domain of business marketing offers the context for our current study. This work draws from a larger research project focusing on issues related to the developmental value of internship for career growth of undergraduates enrolled in autonomous universities in Singapore. The professional internship programme defining the context for this analysis includes penultimate-year undergraduate students, aged between 21 and 23 pursuing a degree in marketing. Within the graduation requirements of the marketing degree programme, undergraduates are required to participate in business marketing-related
roles in a 24-week, full-time internship with business organizations. These organizations ranged from multinational firms to small and middle-sized enterprises in the professional services industry and had business development, digital marketing and marketing departments offering internship placements. Undergraduates are encouraged to contact the companies directly to arrange the work placement. During the internship period, they are supervised and evaluated by a faculty mentor and their workplace supervisor.

Method

Research participants & interview schedule

Research participants comprised 22 third-year undergraduates (15 females and 7 males) engaged in business marketing internships over a six-month duration at companies based in Singapore. Participants were interviewed twice over the duration of their internship. The first interview was conducted within first two months of the internship to understand their internship experience. Questions included: (i) describe your internship role and the type of daily work activities you engaged in (ii) describe your colleagues and your interactions with them with examples (iii) how is your work different from your colleagues? (iv) elaborate on the types of software or digital tools that you use for work. (v) describe challenges encountered at the workplace. To capture a comprehensive view of the interns’ learning experiences, a second interview was conducted during the last month of the internship followed up with interns on their learning experience.

While it was originally planned that interviews with all respondents (‘interns’) would take place in person at the workplace during the second and final month of the internship, the latter interviews were conducted via the video-conferencing tool Zoom as the interns were by then working from home as instructed by their companies. The second interview covered dimensions of the daily work processes of interns, their interactions with coworkers, types of materials and technologies required for doing their work, workplace challenges encountered while working from home, and resources supporting the learning at work. These broad themes allowed interviewers to seek clarification and to follow the interns’ responses during the interview process. The duration of each interview was about 45 minutes. Informed written consent was obtained from the interns to participate in this study.

Data analysis

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The first stage of analysis entailed a thorough immersion of researchers within the data, which included listening to recordings of the interviews, readings and re-readings of transcribed interviews (Willig & Roger, 2017). This is followed by coding the entire dataset thematically with the help of NVivo software to capture the work activities of interns during the initial weeks of their internship identified by broad themes encapsulating how interns navigated the early phases of their internship. Specifically, these broad themes focused on ‘materials’ and ‘experiences’ encountered at the workplace. ‘Materials’ were defined to encompass the physical tools such as software, documents and technologies that interns engaged with throughout their internship. Conversely, ‘experiences’ were characterized by the diverse work assignments, challenges encountered, and interns’ perception of their internship as a learning experience. This was part of the inductive analysis for coding and theme development that valued the
experiential orientation of interns as they described their internship experience both at the workplace and when they were working from home (Patton, 1990).

Salient at this stage was the structured as well as informal interactions at the workplace reported by interns as embedded within the workplace experiences explicated during the interviews. To immerse more deeply in the data, researchers identified and labelled segments of interest and relevance within the dataset for explicating challenges experienced by the interns. This was an iterative process necessary for making sense of data to develop insights into the process of organization socialization during internship.

With codes such as ‘onboarding activities’, ‘informal discussions’, ‘peer support’, ‘time management’, ‘working from home episodes’ written to capture emerging through data exploration rather than being predetermined, our subjective and interpretative perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2012) led to the second stage of analysis focused on work events and activities as described by interns. In doing so, we adopted the point of view of the intern as a reference which aimed to document a specific way of making knowledge emerge (Dieumegard et al., 2019). These episodes were narratives articulating workplace challenges and reflections as interns has transitioned to working from home. Rich descriptive accounts of subjects were written and discussed during team research meetings, using references to the literature on organization socialization to support the analysis. In doing so, the second stage of analysis identified functional work episodes where interns described their experiences and challenges.

Figure 1 shows the relationships of the codes and identified themes related to the impact of telecommuting on internship learning. This facilitated research team members to analyse across the dataset for repeated patterns of meaning. Selection criteria for the inclusion of these episodes for this manuscript were predicated on their ability to offer rich, contextual insights into the interns’ learning trajectories (refer to exemplar excerpts in Figure 1). Unpacking each episode involved a detailed examination of the language and narrative constructs employed by interns to convey their experiences, with a particular emphasis on their descriptions of interactions with digital technologies, software tools, colleagues, and workplace supervisors. This allowed researchers to develop a nuanced understanding of the interns' perceptions and engagements with the evolving work environment and the array of resources afforded to them during the pandemic. Through an iterative process, involving repeated reviews and refinements of understandings at the second stage described above, the initially identified analytical categories evolved, revealing more complex patterns and relationships within the data. The ensuing section presents the findings, explicating the modalities through which interns navigated and acclimatized to the work culture. This was particularly salient in the context of their transition from a traditional onsite workplace to a novel work-from-home environment during their internship period.

Findings

**Internship experience before the pandemic**

Interns reported at least three dimensions of socialization useful for learning about work processes and culture of their organization during normal circumstances where most workers commuted to a physical office space for work.

1. **Onboarding activities**
Onboarding plays an important role in integrating interns into their new work environments, serving as conduit for interns to acquaint themselves with senior colleagues as well as the operations of the company (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Many interns reported participating in physical onboarding programmes during the early days of their internship. These activities were reported as useful for familiarizing oneself with the business functions of the companies. Additionally, interns reported gaining insights into existing organizational policies and practices. A notable example includes Intern Joey at a public relations firm, who found the formal onboarding programme particularly useful for granting her access to the company’s internal server, an essential resource for enhancing her understanding of the scope of her internship role and work within the organization.

2. Peer support system

The interns reported having support systems in their workplaces, for example job shadowing and the assignment of a workplace buddy which afforded interns with opportunities to observe and work alongside fellow colleagues. This allocation of a workplace buddy plays a crucial role in facilitating the integration of interns into the organization. By pairing the intern with a more experienced intern or experienced colleague, this availability of a peer mentor provides an accessible avenue for seeking guidance and support. This was reported as very useful for consulting on work-related issues that interns may not feel comfortable approaching their direct supervisors about. Critically, peer support has been shown to play a significant in the clinical learning and professional development of junior medical staff when paired with more senior staff members (Moore et al., 2020). Similarly, this concept is applicable in the context of business and marketing organisations, where peer support plays a parallel role.

3. Regular meetings with supervisors

Interns also reported having regular face-to-face meetings with their workplace supervisors on a daily or weekly basis. They had access to key colleagues at the workplace to discuss issues concerning work performance and well-being. They commented that this socialization practice was helpful for them to receive targeted feedback for improving the quality of their work, as Samuel interning at a digital marketing department explains:

Every week, we are supposed to have a work-in-progress review... she will give me the task, and then after that I do it in the week, then the following Monday she will catch up with me...she will tell me, what I can do better; or how I can organize this information better. and also get me familiar with the software...

Critically, face-to-face communication with the supervisor was useful for interns to understand assigned work tasks. For Samuel, these interactions which happened within the context of ‘daily check-ins’ were helpful and preferred over digital communications when he was seeking task clarity:

from the beginning of the internship, maybe the first month, I meet my marketing manager on a daily basis... so sometimes when I have tasks that I
need to clarify with her, and it is hard to communicate over like, Microsoft Teams, or emails, so verbal communication is a lot better.

These developing relationships between interns and their colleagues were evident when supervisors encouraged interns to speak with them every week or asked after them, and also when fellow colleagues invited interns to join their lunch groups. The relationships and interactions were useful workplace resources for interns in helping them to adjust to the workplace as shown in the excerpts:

...we have this thing called one-on-one, every week, you always can jump on a call or meeting with your supervisor. And then you just talk about anything, talk (Intern Wendy)

(Workplace supervisor) does (check-in sessions) quite often actually.. once every two weeks... at the pantry. So he would just ask me how I was coping and things like that. (Intern Adam)

Sometimes she will just casually ask, ‘oh are you learning?’, that kind of thing... like during lunch and informal, casual. I think it is more comfortable that way, and then she will be able to find out what I am actually learning. my other colleagues will be there, they will ask also ‘so what have you learnt?’ (Intern Fiona)

Structured activities such as onboarding, peer support system and regular meetings afforded opportunities for interns new to the workplace to familiarize themselves with the system of work at the workplace. Alongside interactions with peers and supervisors, interns aligned their expectations of learning at the workplace with their work activities to enact internship learning as becoming a part of the workplace community (Authors et al.). Critically within the expected pathway of internship learning, the three dimensions of socialization for interns at the workplace were in fact useful learning resources which interns mobilized for sustaining their internship learning when the pandemic struck, consequently transforming their internship learning experience.

**Transformative internship experiences during the pandemic**

The pandemic fundamentally altered the experience of internship which had hitherto consisted of frequent and numerous opportunities to engage with others in socialization activities at the workplace. As work-from-home arrangements became the norm, organizations and the interns themselves responded by developing strategies for structuring their learning opportunities alongside the pandemic-induced changes to their usual work arrangements. Three main learning strategies were reported by interns for work continuity and elaborated below.

1. **Mirroring patterns of workplace interactions**

Interns reported attempts by their organizations to continue to stay connected with them through lunch meetings, daily Zoom calls and regular and frequent check-ins over an online platform. Specifically, Ginny mentioned how lunch meetings were ‘still’ conducted as a
means of bonding with co-workers, albeit over Zoom. She also connected with her colleagues via informal chat groups ‘once in a while’:

*We still do lunch meetings. So, we still bonded. I think once in a while, we still do chat on group chat, regarding other stuff, not really related to work. So, I think it is actually quite bonded.*

Workplace supervisor’s support is important for interns as the supervisor represents the organization and reflects the commitment of the organisation on providing career development opportunities for the interns (Chong & Yazdani, 2020). The effort by work place supervisors to maintain work practices when interns were working from home, this extra effort, did not go unnoticed by the interns. As Intern Isabel explains:

*In the past... my boss actually sits beside me, so it is very easy to just get him. But now, he actually made a commitment to talk every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, so things have been like going back to, like, the norm.*

While formal socialization methods ‘evolved’ with the shift to working from home, the essence of daily reporting by interns remained unchanged. For example, Intern Michal mentioned he and his co-workers would get on a Zoom call every morning (a ‘stand up’) to update each other about work plans even as these conversations would also inevitably lead on to ‘whatever under the sun’:

*Evolved a bit, I guess. Because now work from home... we have this stand up thing, if I mentioned before, every morning, we Zoom call... To update, but it’s not always about work, it’s just talk about random things. So... Then we just talk about, whatever under the sun, just share about anything, your girlfriend, your boyfriend, whatever.*

Interestingly, these Zoom calls formally set up for the purpose of discussing work were also observed by intern Micah to provide ‘a lot of opportunity for getting closer relationships, (becoming) more personal’. In some cases, the frequency of interactions increased as a result, explained by intern Gloria:

*In terms of daily check-ins, it’s still the same. In fact, as compared to working in the office, I feel we check-in more often online, because in offices we can see ‘okay, what you’re working on and everything’, I guess the managers are okay. But then when you’re working away from the office, it’s hard for them to control, so I think it’s because of that, we tend to check in more often also.*

It was clear that despite the disruption to work brought about by the pandemic-induced changes, work teams and workplace supervisors were keen to continue with business as usual and maintain as much normalcy as possible, even if the means for doing so took a different (online) format. However, and as can be expected, other patterns emerged in the ‘new normal’.
2. Extended contact time and work continuity

When interns performed their internship role from home, internship learning occurred over an extended period each day. At the workplace, interactions with co-workers took place during work hours and informally during lunch hours, but whilst in a work-from-home arrangement, interns can expect to interact with co-workers late into the night and on weekends as Hannah interning at an advertising agency explains:

*The big bosses can chase you at, for example, 10 p.m., because they’re working from home they have no official working hours. Yes, and right now we have a lot of campaigns going on. So sometimes I will just wait, 10 p.m., then they will text something. I think for me, it’s always to be prepared at any time. So I would say you must always be ready. Because last time, when we were still in the office, when you leave at 7, nobody can touch you after that. But right now, because you’re working from home, so you need to make sure you’re always on your phone…even on weekends.*

Hannah commented that she worked longer hours when working from home. She explained that one would simply ‘lose track of time’ when working from home and suggested that this was because there were no clear boundaries when work and rest shared the same physical space:

*I think the difference between work from home and in the office is definitely… I overtime more at home... Because you just lose track of time. In the office, you need to physically get out of the office to go home, but working from home, there’s no way you can get out, you’re already at home. ... there’s really no differentiation between your private space and your workspace.*

Without the clearly defined physical space of the organization and boundaries separating the personal and professional spaces, interns reported putting in more work hours than they did at the office and consequently the emergence of new work practices as described above. Interestingly, while working from home may have saved time for interns, the above suggests time saved may have been redirected to more work as opposed to recuperation (Grant et al., 2013).

3. Responding to ambiguity of internship learning

With direct guidance from colleagues less readily available when interns were working from home, the interns actively adjusted their method of accessing work-related information. They reported taking the initiative to attempt to seek out information by doing Google searches and trying to solve work related problems before asking their colleagues.

As reported by Intern Mandy who perceived texting a co-worker to ask her questions as being a ‘burden’ to the latter and refrained from doing so. She would instead run a Google search or refer to existing samples, and ‘be independent’ to seek answers to work related questions:
Because I feel that working from home also made me, not want to burden someone else, with my questions all the time. So it's not like in real life where you can just ask all questions and they will just answer you straightaway, and they won't feel annoyed... But I feel like during work-from-home, when you have to text someone for help, they will feel like a burden added to them. So I rather just Google for examples of writing, or see examples of electronic direct mails, be independent.

As interns adjusted to new ways of working and learning, they reflected on these adjustments as learning opportunities – wholly different from those available when they were working in the physical office and able to depend on co-workers for immediate answers to their work-related questions. This was a transformative learning experience for interns as they had to be working independently in the physical home space during the pandemic.

Interestingly for Intern Hillary, working from home not only afforded the opportunity for her to learn independently but also provided the space and time to learn at her own pace (‘to really like figure out how to do it’):

Instead of working inside the office where you are pressured by people sitting around you. I feel like work from home definitely affected the way I learn. So apart from my manager giving me a good brief and guide on how to do a certain task, I myself have a lot of space, to really figure out how to do it. I have time to like look through and review, being at home, in my own space, gives me the opportunity to do that. I don’t have the space or the time to do things by myself at the workplace.

The transformation of internship learning during the pandemic was however a learning development not experienced uniformly by the interns. In the words of some of the interns, they ‘tend to ask lesser questions’ and ‘feel a lot more distant’. Working from home had an impact on their interactions with co-workers as interns observed team calendars of supervisors that were ‘really full of meetings’ and consequently did not want to disturb them. The interns were making sense of their ambiguous reality as being a ‘burden’ and ‘no longer in the same space’ with limited pathways to workplace knowledge.

Hence it is not surprising that despite the transformative learning experience of learning on one’s own in contrast to learning from others during internship, most interns viewed remote interaction as less desirable and wanted to return to the workplace where they could easily approach members of the work team as expressed by marketing intern David:

Since we are now working from home, I prefer working at the office itself... Because there will be more interactions with other teams. Yes, I will say (that working from home has impeded my interactions with other colleagues). The workplace, we can just randomly approach other team, and then ask them if I can help them on certain projects, or if they need my help on anything. (Intern David)

Traditionally, socialization activities at the organization’s physical workspace were built on the assumption that newcomers’ face-to-face communication with other coworkers
enhanced learning of job-related and organizational information (Saks & Gruman, 2011). Absence from the workplace as reported above reduced the ‘random’ and spontaneous opportunities to work with other colleagues, thus reducing the scope of socialization experiences for these interns.

**Discussion**

The research findings on internship experiences before the pandemic emphasized how interns gained insights on workplace practices alongside increasing relational attachment with full-timers at the workplace vis-à-vis structured onboarding activities and collegial support systems. Useful within these socialisation mechanisms are also the relational attachments formed with coworkers—organizational insiders, which contribute to newcomer adjustment (Fang et al., 2011). Critically, these organization socialization activities afforded opportunities for interns new to the workplace to familiarize themselves with the content, context and culture of work at the workplace.

Before the pandemic hit, interns had frequent and numerous opportunities to engage with others in socialization activities at the workplace, and they learnt about their organizations and professions in much the same way as others had done before them. With the onset of the pandemic, these interns became the first cohort of interns to transition from working physically on-site at their placement organizations to working remotely from their homes. Structured internship learning pathways before the pandemic, useful for socializing interns into the world of work, vanished. From trainee teachers to health profession trainees, professional identities evolved as they adapted new ways of doing things through use of technology in response to the pandemic (Guiamalon, 2022; Singaram et al., 2022). Similarly, undergraduate interns enrolled in this study rapidly adapt to the home as their new workplace, challenging the assumption that the only workplace learning pathway possible for the internship is the physical office where the company is located and where multiple relationships that could facilitate learning are formed and maintained. In what follows, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our study.

**Theoretical implications**

We make a primary contribution to the literature on the learning occurring during the organizational socialization of newcomers. Viewing the internship as a socialization process highlights the critical influence of the social context for internship learning at the workplace (Eraut, 2007). With social interactions directly affecting the quality of learning in the workplace (Billett, 2004; Davis & Sandiford, 2014), our findings posit interns taking an active and agentic stance towards their learning. Even though these interns may have limited time at the workplace, the socialisation experience they had in the first few months contributes to the quality of their internship experience and for them to become, arguably, a resource unto themselves for facilitating and directing their learning experience during unprecedented, extraordinary times of the pandemic.

Our findings also highlight the importance of formal institutionalized socialization tactics as advantageous relational dimension of social capital for interns in a newcomer socialization context (Korte & Lin, 2013). By illustrating how institutionalized socialization activities such as onboarding, peer support and regular meetings with supervisors offered interns the
resources to mirror patterns of work from home and to respond to the ambiguity of engaging in internship learning remotely, our findings further corroborate with the notion that providing newcomers with support and acknowledgement from experience colleagues can positively affect their organisational commitment and learning processes (Filstad, 2011). At the same time, our findings suggest when interns are physically detached from the workplace, the lack of opportunities for learning through organizational socialization may result in feeling isolated and less connected to the scheme of work. Hence, for organizations expecting interns to be able to adapt to the realities of the pandemic, or remote working seamlessly, this outcome may be an unintended side effect that should be considered. Therefore, further research needs to investigate how organizations can enhance newcomer socialization in a contingent manner incorporating both institutionalized and individualized socialization tactics for workplace learning.

Finally, this study contributes empirical insights on workplace learning experiences taking place during exceptional times such as the pandemic (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020; Goh, 2022), which necessitated work-from-home arrangements for the interns. Confronted with the new situation, including ambiguity over how to function in this new context, and the feasibility of learning in an altered work environment, interns responded by reconfiguring pre-pandemic work practices to fit into the new work arrangements. They saw their companies adapting patterns of workplace interactions via digital technologies, rationalized extended work hours and navigated the dissolution of traditional work-life boundaries. Through these observations, interns engaged proactively with their learning environment that blended personal and professional domains in their home-as-workplace paradigm.

Professionals need to self-regulate their attitude to be better engaged in the different and unusual work situations of working from home (Yeo & Li, 2022). Similarly, interns were also engaging in reflective practices during remote internship as a result of the pandemic (Bhuwandeep, 2022). The reliance on self for internship learning opportunities was also a necessity amidst the complexity of work happening during the pandemic for the interns. Examining their learning experience across time and space of their internship gives rise to new understandings of the organizational socialization of newcomers in extraordinary times. Further research needs to investigate support mechanisms through organization socialization for interns to engage effectively online as well as in mobilizing knowledge gained at the physical workplace to make sense of the flow of work activities in hybrid work setting. Further work in this area can be useful for supporting newcomers’ integration into workplace organizational with work continuity taking place in hybrid settings. The ‘new normal’ of work is indeed an excellent opportunity for more research on how to design future organizational learning practices for newcomers in hybrid work environments.

**Practical implications**

Structured work activities for acclimatizing interns to the workplace environment can be beneficial for interns to gain knowledge of work processes and make new connections with colleagues to become a part of the organization. Our study showed how such activities might take place in a blend of onsite/offsite, online/in-person modes. Our findings have several important implications for practice.
First, our findings indicate interns despite their transient presence at the workplace organizations, engaged in learning the work and culture of the organizations when socialization tactics are institutionalized and interns themselves adopt an active orientation towards their role and work circumstances. At the same time, these socialization efforts and relationships supporting the learning at the workplace can be contingent on the level of support interns receive from the organizations (Lautsch et al., 2009). This has implications on the design of newcomers induction programmes central to the reproduction of an organization as they enable new individuals to become functional members of a collective (Harris et al., 2020). Programmes should expose newcomers to networking events where insiders of the organization share information and knowledge with newcomers. By nurturing informational relationships, interns are consequently afforded the opportunity to further develop themselves along the course of their work. This process can also be customized within the organisational context by including and improving managers’ and coworkers’ capacity to act as information sources for newcomers through scheduled frequent open conversations to communicate information and support needs. This is particularly useful in the absence of formal induction and team members can offer the learning experience for newcomers through indirect guidance (Mornata & Cassar, 2018).

Following this, our study attempts to open the black box of organization socialization in extraordinary times such as a pandemic, to offer practical implications for workplace organizations planning to offer hybrid internship placements. Our findings suggest support mechanisms for helping interns integrate into the organization need to be in place even if work activities are happening remotely. This can include assigning senior colleagues to speak with interns about work progress regularly and careful design of hybrid learning and development activities for self-training (Mikołajczyk, 2022). By doing so, workplace organizations can play a strategic role in supporting their interns to engage in substantive, authentic communication with colleagues to consequently develop a shared identity to build resilience (Mitsakis, 2019).

Workplace organizations will also need to recognize the interns’ ability to adapt to new work situations as an important human resource strategy for talent development. Despite the challenges of feeling isolated, the interns in this study reported on focusing on completing assigned work and availed themselves over extended working hours for continuity of work. Critically, the pandemic might have disrupted the learning experience at the physical workplace, yet the interns have responded by configuring patterns of work routines to become a resource for their own internship learning. Workplace organizations therefore need to enhance the socialization of interns into the organization and create the space for interns to learn as productive members of the workplace. Supervisor training can also be provided to enhance their knowledge and skills for integrating newcomers into the organisations (Lee, 2023).

**Conclusion**

As the pandemic swept through the world, the undergraduate internship learning experience shifted from the office to the home. This resulted in a shift of internship learning typically embedded within multiple social relations forged within close proximity to a remote and socially distanced learning experience. Perhaps whatever control the interns lost over such an
unfortunate situation befalling them was regained through their active and agentic control over their learning and reconfiguration of interactions online (Fang et al., 2017). Most significantly, learner agency emerged as they proactively seek for ways to handle their work, thus leaning on themselves to be resourceful and independent rather than on others for immediate answers. Pandemic or not, interns—newcomers at the workplaces are signalling additional ways of organization socialization (Saks & Gruman, 2019) through very apparent, overriding desire to learn, to contribute to their work teams and to ultimately make something meaningful out of the internship.

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References


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