

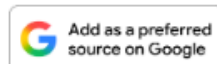
Should students opt for internships or independent projects?

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While live projects provide students with an opportunity to test-drive specific skills, an internship is akin to test-driving an employee's capabilities

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Both industry internships and industry-bound projects are gaining currency in evaluating candidates' potential employability | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

Seneca, a renowned Stoic philosopher, once said, "Fire tests gold; suffering tests brave men." Outstanding grades in the marksheet are a robust testimony to a student's dedication to academics. However, they also need an opportunity to apply their learning in the real world to test their academic knowledge.

Many companies today look tangible evidence of students' capabilities and competencies and no longer consider Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) and academic pedigree as guideposts to recruit. Instead, they consider prior industry immersion, innovative thinking, adaptability, and people skills as relevant criteria to assess a candidate. These are difficult to showcase in structured academic programmes that focus on knowledge dissemination and testing. Hence, both industry internships and industry-bound projects are gaining currency in evaluating candidates' potential employability beyond an understanding of subject matter.

While progressive educational institutions can equip fresh graduates with cutting edge skills and knowledge, knowing when and how to deploy these capabilities can come only from real-life exposure to routine activities at the workplace. Capabilities such as working with incomplete information, navigating corporate hierarchies, understanding the project requirements by asking a few but incisive questions, making pithy yet impactful presentations, and putting the team above one's self are on-ground realities of that cannot be simulated in classroom settings.

Corporate exposure

Academic institutions must, therefore, ensure that the academic curriculum integrates corporate exposure at various levels. Some business schools go an extra mile by facilitating students to work on live industry projects while simultaneously pursuing their academics. Such projects are generally time-bound, scope-bound, and align closely with curricular goals, giving students a preview of real-world business operations and being an effective bridge between academia and industry. Industry projects are symbiotic, as they also offer corporates a fresh pair of eyes and brains to look at their problems and get novel solutions.

While projects are relatively new phenomenon, industry immersion through mandatory (summer/winter) internships have been in existence for some time. Internships differ from projects in many ways. Generally, long-duration internships that range from two to four months require the student to assume the role of employee, work on more than one challenging assignment at once, and report to work like a regular employee. As interns, they have the flexibility and privilege to get familiar with the organisation, its protocols, and work culture. During this extended engagement, the company can not only to observe the student's work ethic, but also assess the culture fit. This also serves as an avenue to identify and recruit talented students.

While live projects provide the students with an opportunity to test-drive specific skills like coding, report writing, testing, selling and research capabilities for short periods, an internship is akin to test-driving an employee's capabilities. While both are useful tools for students and corporates to engage with each other, internships are a better value proposition to those corporates who have an added recruitment focus while projects are better for those looking for expedient workforce for short term assignments.

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