Internships – ensuring a quality experience for all

By Ian Jeffreys and Graeme Close

Introduction

With the increased acceptance of the role strength and conditioning (S&C) plays in maximising performance across a range of sports and levels, there has been an associated increase in the number of people considering strength and conditioning as their preferred career option. This has had a knock-on effect on the number of people undertaking a range of activities designed to enhance their employability within the field.

A typical job advertisement for a S&C coach asks for three things: firstly, applicants are usually expected to have an appropriate level of education – a Bachelors, or increasingly a Masters, degree; secondly, it is expected that they possess a formal professional accreditation; and thirdly, that they have an appropriate degree of experience.

In many instances it is this latter requirement – ie, the experience – that provides a challenge, especially for aspiring coaches coming from an academic development route. And it is this requirement which has led to a massive growth in the number and popularity of internships within the S&C field. Undoubtedly, a high quality internship can provide an appropriate route for gaining excellent experience and can be an effective route into the profession for many aspiring S&C coaches. However, there are also internships that do not reflect the highest standards, and often do not enhance the employability of the intern. The ability to evaluate the quality of an internship and the benefit to be gained from the programme is essential. This article will attempt to look at the characteristics of a good internship and to give guidelines on effective internships for both employers and interns.

What are internships?

Internships have existed for many years and in a variety of professions; they have often been associated with higher education establishments, providing a key vocational element to various courses. In their simplest form, internships are essentially a form of work experience. However, they differ markedly in terms of what kind of qualification that the interns possess at the outset, and in the specific role that the intern is expected to fulfil. It must be pointed out at this stage that work shadowing or the carrying out of menial tasks unrelated to the professional role are not internships. Internships must be seen as a method of gaining experience for a specific professional career, and must involve the carrying out of key roles associated with the profession. This should all be conducted under the guidance of an appropriately skilled and experienced practitioner.

It is important to note that high-quality internships should be beneficial to both the employer and the intern, and be highly specific in the benefits to be gained for both. For the S&C intern, an appropriate internship should consist of developing the required applied and professional skills involved in the effective delivery of the discipline. For the S&C coach this would involve the planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of training. In this way, a quality internship can provide the link to experience that prospective coaches are missing. This type of experience can also enhance the likelihood of gaining professional accreditation, as interns will learn to plan, deliver and evaluate the training of an athlete – as required for the case study element of the ASCC.

The employer should be able to use the internship programme as a means of identifying talented S&C coaches, who are then able to move into employment within their organisations. Having an intern also means that they have an additional member of staff who can assist a current professional carrying out his or her job.

Internships – cure or curse?

It has long been a goal of the UKSCA to foster the development of strength and conditioning to the point where it is seen as a key profession within the coaching and sports science setting in the UK, where strength and conditioning coaches are regarded as highly skilled professionals with appropriate levels of remuneration. A high quality internship can provide for an excellent learning experience for an intern and provide a route to employment within the industry. However, poor
Internships will not enhance an intern’s employability, and may well also hinder the development of the profession. For example, since some clubs are now advertising for unpaid interns with a masters degree and professional qualifications (such as UKSCA accreditation) and it appears that they are managing to recruit to these posts, there follows that there is a significant danger of our profession becoming devalued and turning, ultimately, into a voluntary service.

And, although internships can offer clear benefits to both employer and intern, not all internships adhere to the highest standards of provision. Internships should be linked directly to a specific role, and the employer should be able to provide appropriate employment routes for the interns, to similar roles within the organisation. But all too Often internships are used by employers to plug a gap in the organisation’s current provision, and seldom, if ever, lead to a full-time job there. And these jobs are sometimes unrelated to the type of activity an intern is interested in pursuing, with the result that they spend far too long on something they are not interested in, often with little or no direct supervision or mentoring.

It is also becoming common practice that the internship requires long, structured hours, often on 12- or 24-month contracts and employers are therefore in danger of contravening UK laws on minimum wage. In the UK, the legal definition of work includes a job with set hours, a defined role, and being engaged for an extended period of time. If an intern fulfils these criteria then it could well be the case that they are entitled to at least the minimum wage. It is at this point that the benefit of the internship to the intern starts to become unclear, and it can be charged that organisations are simply using interns as unpaid staff and are not focused on developing a clear learning path for them.

So, to sum up, disturbing trends that have emerged on the internship front, include:

1. A large number of roles within sports organisation being fulfilled by interns at the expense of full or part-time strength and conditioning coaches
2. Supervisory or management roles (eg, head of sport science) being advertised as internships
3. Organisations advertising for interns but with little or no detail on the supervision and mentoring provided within the internship
4. Internships that never lead to full-time employment, with organisations simply employing interns on an annual basis
5. An increase in the skills and qualifications being asked for internship applications, (eg, UKSCA accreditation, Master’s degrees) – qualifications appropriate for a full-time strength and conditioning coach
6. Organisations advertising internships but simply not possessing the required personnel to provide appropriate mentorship and supervision of such individual
7. Internships working extremely long and structured hours with the vast majority of their time spent doing jobs that are unlikely to increase their skill set and employment opportunities such as cleaning gyms and washing supplement bottles.

Each of these has the potential to slow the development of strength and conditioning as a profession and to significantly reduce the employment opportunities available to skilled and qualified S&C coaches. If organisations feel that they can fulfil S&C roles with internships, this will ultimately impact negatively on the perceived value of a high quality S&C coach and the development of the profession will consequently be weakened.

Effective pre-planning

Quality internships require a great deal of planning, on the part of both the employer and the intern. Employers should think carefully about the roles they require interns to take, and how these will enhance the employability of the intern. Employers should carefully look at the typical skills, knowledge and abilities that a successful S&C coach will need to develop and then build their internship around this. They should then assess their own ability to provide for an effective internship that has direct benefit to the intern in relation to their chosen profession.

At no point should the aim of the internship be to fill a role via an internship because the budget precludes the employment of a full-time coach. Additionally, an honest evaluation should be made of whether the organisation can provide the appropriate supervision and mentoring required for an effective internship. Likewise, pre-planning should identify the most effective methods of recruitment to ensure that interns entering the programme are able to fulfil the roles and responsibilities required.

Interns themselves should also take considerable time in planning an appropriate internship. They should clearly identify the benefits they wish to attain with the internship, and then choose an appropriate organisation that can fulfil these goals. Ideally, they should communicate with the organisation to clearly ascertain key details about the internship, in terms of their roles and responsibilities and also in terms of the mentorship and supervision they will receive. They should also look at previous internships and, where possible, talk to past interns about their experiences.
Roles and responsibilities

Effective preplanning should then develop into a clear role description for the intern and for the organisation. This should clearly outline the tasks the interns they will be responsible for, and the key performance indicators by which their performance will be evaluated. For the intern, these should match with the benefits they identified previously which they wish to attain via the internship. The role description should also clearly outline the length of the internship, the expected engagement hours and any necessary details on remuneration, benefits etc. This should then guide the recruitment of an intern who will be able to fulfil the roles and responsibilities required.

Additionally, the roles and responsibilities of the organisation must be outlined. This should include details on any initial induction requirements for the intern, as well as any immediate training they may need to do to enable them to undertake the key roles and responsibilities associated with their role description. Critically, this must also highlight the personnel responsible for the supervision, mentoring, training and evaluation of the intern.

Supervision and mentoring

It is highly likely that a S&C intern will not possess the required proficiency in these skills to fulfil a professional role. For this reason, interns cannot and must not, be expected to work independently. Instead they must be allocated appropriate supervision and mentoring to ensure that a supportive learning environment is established. Although the quality internships do provide this, it is unfortunately not always the case and there have even been instances of organisations asking for internships to run certain parts of their provision. Clearly, there cannot be appropriate supervision in these instances and such opportunities should not be advertised as internships.

In all likelihood, the success of the internship will be closely linked to the quality of supervision and mentoring that the interns receive, and this should be a key element of an effective internship. For this reason, if an organisation is to run an internship then it must ensure that it has the appropriate supervisory procedures in place. Supervisors would be expected to have extensive experience in the related discipline and to possess the appropriate professional and academic qualifications. Additionally, they must allocate an appropriate amount of time to supervision and mentorship. All too often these tasks are not allocated appropriate time by the employer and this will prevent the appropriate supervision and mentoring taking place.

Supervisors should be expected to provide ongoing feedback on the intern’s performance, and appropriate support where required. This feedback process should involve regular performance reviews, where key development objectives can be established. Ideally, this should also involve the identification and allocation of appropriate training, as and when required, and this should be budgeted for in the internship planning.

At the end of the internship there should be a formal performance review, involving an evaluation of the entire process and work quality of the intern: he or she should be provided with a document outlining the roles they have fulfilled and their performance within these roles.

For potential interns, this supervisory and mentoring process is perhaps the most crucial in determining the overall benefit they are likely to gain from the internship.

In reviewing potential internships, interns are advised to investigate who will be responsible for the supervision and mentoring, and to ensure that an appropriate amount of time is ring fenced to ensure the quality of the supervision, mentoring and feedback processes. Additionally, they would be advised to find out about any past interns who worked in the organisation and to see how successful these have subsequently been in gaining employment.

Key requirements to look for in an effective internship

As has been highlighted, an effective internship can provide an excellent learning experience. However, not all internships are created equal and while a number of excellent internships do exist, there are as many do not adhere to the highest standards. Potential coaches entertaining the idea of an internship should do a great deal of planning and clearly outline the benefits they wish to gain from the internship. In searching for an effective strength and conditioning internship, the following may provide useful guidelines in evaluating the benefit to be gained from the internship.

### POTENTIAL GUIDELINES FOR EVALUATION OF INTERNSHIPS

| 1. Does the internship list a person responsible for supervision and mentoring? |
| 2. Does this person have the appropriate experience, vocational skills and qualifications to provide an appropriate level of mentoring? |
| 3. Does the person have time allocated to the supervision and mentoring of interns? |
| 4. Does the organisation clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of the intern? |
| 5. Do these roles and responsibilities match the key learning aims of the intern? |
| 6. Are the working hours and conditions appropriate for a professional internship, and fit in with any other professional commitments the intern may have? |
| 7. Does the organisation provide any specific training or professional development opportunities such as paying for part time masters degrees? |
| 8. Does the organisation currently employ past interns? |
| 9. Does the organisation have a successful record of interns subsequently entering employment? |

Summary

Quality internships provide a highly effective learning opportunity for prospective S&C coaches, giving them the experience they need to enter the profession. However, there is a growing and worrying trend for employers to look at internships as simply a way of adding to their staff, with little thought as to giving the internship the effective strength and conditioning internship, ultimately affecting negatively the perceived value of a S&C coach and subsequently the development of the profession as a whole. Interns are advised to use the guidelines listed above to closely examine the finer details of the internship, and to carefully evaluate the benefit they will gain from their investment of time and effort. Organisations looking to offer internship are also advised to look at the guidelines, and to honestly assess whether or not they can offer appropriate internships that provide maximum benefits to the intern as well as the organisation.