Will There Be Internships This Summer?

May 21, 2020 11 min read

Cecelia Nancarrow had gotten all her ducks in a row for a sought-after internship this summer with manufacturing and retail giant Hormel Foods. The 21-year-old Kansas native and incoming senior at Kansas State University – where she studies sales and data analytics and is a member of the school's National Strategic Selling Institute – had been chosen for a temporary relocation to Dallas, where she'd be learning some real-world wheeling and dealing at one of the Austin, Minnesota-based corporation's numerous satellite offices. But as her junior year neared conclusion and travel plans were booked, a public health emergency came crashing down, instantaneously upending the very opportunity she'd been compiling credentials for. In Nancarrow's telling, she didn't waste any time feigning disbelief.

"Almost immediately, I didn't even consider the fact that my internship would not be cancelled," she recalls matter-of-factly in a phone interview from her home in Manhattan, Kansas. "Restaurants, hotels, hospitals – those would be my customers. So as soon as all of those shut down, I was thinking, *if all these places are going to be closed for the remainder of the summer, I have no idea how I would be able to do my job.*"

As it turned out, Nancarrow was one of the lucky ones. Hormel, a publicly traded company with dozens of globally recognized brands under its auspices ranging from SPAM to Skippy, was able to marshal its resources and repurpose the geographically sprawling internship program as more of a centralized virtual experience. Nancarrow and her cohort will ultimately be staying in place, but Hormel has equipped them all with

computers and quickly strategized ways to remotely simulate everything from orientation to networking opportunities with executives and clients.

“Many of these interns had accepted jobs in October, so as you can imagine, they were quite anxious to understand what the future looks like,” says Amy Sheehan, Hormel’s director of talent acquisition, who oversees the internship program, in a phone interview. “So we worked with our leadership team and said, ‘What does this look like? Is it feasible? Could we still give these interns a virtual experience knowing that it’s so important to our pipeline and filling our needs each year?'”

Fortunately for Nancarrow, the answer turned out to be yes, albeit with a delayed start of June 15, “to give all the teams more time to figure out exactly how it’s gonna work,” she explains. The flip side is that for many of her friends and peers, similar programs, just like sleepaway camps and other summer extracurriculars, have been put on indefinite hiatus. And as a result, the future of student internships — historically both a rite of passage and real entree into building career prospects and contacts — rests in an uneasy purgatory.

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Pamela Nashel Leto can empathize. After more than 20 years working for New York-based music publicity house Girlie Action, where she repped diverse clientele such as My Morning Jacket and Wyclef Jean, Nashel Leto struck out on her own this spring with a new firm, Siren’s Call. Interns have always been an essential, if perhaps taken-for-granted, fixture of the music industry ecosystem, and Nashel Leto had intended to avail herself of one or two in the coming months. But right as she was set to open Siren’s Call’s Manhattan office for business, lockdown orders took hold. The artists she made a

living promoting could no longer tour, appear on late-night shows or do in-store performances, and surging unemployment meant less disposable income for people to spend on music – period. Nashel Leto was forced to focus on the walls closing in and couldn't afford to think about helping young hopefuls get a foot in the door.

Siren's Call PR owner Pamela Nashel Leto has had to press pause on internships for her just-launched firm.

Image Credit: Siren's Call PR

"I had planned on hiring interns," she laments in a phone interview from her home in Bayonne, NJ, which has been doubling as Siren's Call's HQ for the past two-plus months. "For a music PR firm, a lot of my [intern] work would be based around maintaining my social media, but if I've never actual met my intern in person and can't personally supervise him or her, I'd feel uncomfortable giving them such direct access to my business accounts. It's sad, because I'd love to just be able to virtually hire people and have trust in them enough to have them work from their house or dorm, but it's important for me to actually know somebody in real life."

Consequently, Nashel Leto will likely shift responsibilities normally delegated to interns over to her small staff of employees. That redistribution of tasks has become duly necessary at Champaign, Illinois-based independent record label Polyvinyl, which works hand-in-hand with Nashel Leto promoting one of its cornerstone acts, eclectic indie troupe Of Montreal. Polyvinyl has decided to halt hiring interns for the summer and likely into the fall, despite the fact that some of its full-time staff already works remotely from different parts of the country.

“We’ve always felt one of the biggest benefits to our internships is sitting bird’s-eye view at not only a small record label, but just a small business,” explains Polyvinyl co-founder Matt Lunsford, speaking by phone from Champaign. “They’re absorbing everything that’s going on at our small company, even if they’re working on a typical intern-like task, like research. I feel like there’s not a very obvious way to replicate that without someone physically being present.”

Polyvinyl Records artist Jeff Rosenstock, in the days when bands were touring and interns were helping promote.

Image Credit: Amanda Fotes

While Lunsford has the ability to, as he puts it, “pick up the slack and spread the work out to the departments that would have the interns, or put some of that work on pause or do it later,” he also recognizes that, long-term, continuing to defer intern-recruitment is in no one’s best interests. Among him and fellow upper management, “The consensus is, if this is ongoing for more than this calendar year, then we would probably be inclined to take the time to figure out some sort of plan that would involve making the internships more virtual or maybe coming up with something completely unique so it could be envisioned as virtual from the very beginning.” (Nashel Leto, for her part, says that, “When a vaccine is out there and I work from an actual office again, I can hire some interns, but doubt that will be possible until 2021.”)

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But what about an operation for which there is inherently no substitute for on-site support, like working the land on a multi-acre spread of field and forest? That’s the conundrum

for Unadilla Community Farm in upstate Otsego, New York. This is the seventh year that the farm and educational center has taken applications from interns from all over the world for what its mission statement characterizes as “an immersion into a rural, off-grid sustainable way of life.”

Unadilla has been acknowledged as an essential business since lockdown orders took hold in New York in mid-March, and it is also seated in a county that has been permitted to gradually reopen for some non-essential business by Governor Andrew Cuomo. Still, with participants typically arriving from all over the country and various continents, and safety precautions like social distancing a standing prerequisite even in areas of lower infection, this year’s program – while moving forward – has had to make some concessions.

“The difference this year is we are only accepting interns from the U.S.,” clarifies Greta Zarro, Unadilla’s co-owner and internship coordinator, speaking by phone from the farm. She adds that accepted applicants have also been asked to quarantine at home for 14 days before arriving, and “then once everyone is here, we all quarantine here and don’t have to leave the property, so we’re lucky in that sense.” (One accepted participant delayed his arrival after feeling ill prior to his departure. He tested negative, and then quarantined for two weeks before leaving.) They’ve also “worked to improve our sanitation and hygenic practices,” Zarro says, and will be making their own soap and sanitizer on the premises.

Field trips to other farms and related networking events have been postponed, but there will be some virtual webinars and workshops in their stead. Zarro’s optimistic that even in its somewhat compromised state, the program will reap all its intended rewards. “It’s not going to be 100 percent the same,” she begins. “There’s typically an element where they get to essentially work on another farm for the afternoon and see another operation, but overall, the program is still

relatively intact.”

Interns and staff enjoying the literal fruits of their labor on Unadilla Community Farm in upstate New York.

Image Credit: Unadilla Community Farm

If anything, as more traditional internship opportunities have ebbed, enthusiasm for what Unadilla offers has flowed. “What’s been interesting is we’ve actually seen an increase in applications,” Zarro remarks. “People are starting to plant gardens and trees and realize, ‘Wow, we need to be more self-sufficient,’ and that’s the primary thing we’re teaching.”

For companies like Hormel, the jury’s still out on whether its swiftly reconstituted arrangement will feel as close to, or even better than, the real thing. The one advantage across the board for both employers and interns is that this generation of students is wired for digital adaptation and distanced communication in a way none of its predecessors could fathom. That comfort level with all things virtual may help bridge the disconnect that leaves Hormel’s Sheehan in a precarious place of waiting for results and Polyvinyl’s Lunsford reluctant.

“When you think about what they’ve been thrown into with their classroom settings, they’re already used to this,” Sheehan reasons about student interns’ malleability. “It’s not so foreign to them.”

Nancarrow confirms that her age group is, by and large, apt to be less daunted by this sudden shift than perhaps even the higher-ups who recruited them. She’s even come around to see how this could be a unique crash course in the way business is going to be conducted down the road, and as a result of our current crisis, maybe much sooner than that.

“The world is moving to be so technology-focused,” she says. “I am definitely going to need to learn how to communicate in a virtual format. Having this opportunity this summer may not be ideal or what I had originally planned, but it’s going to be extremely beneficial for myself and everyone else in my generation.”

More pressingly, Nancarrow is hopeful that this unforeseen hurdle will be duly taken into account when she and her classmates – whether their internships have been modified or canceled outright – come out the other side: “I’m fairly confident a lot of business are going to be extremely understanding that my generation, as well as the ones around me, kind of lost out on that internship opportunity and be able to look past that and see our potential anyway.”

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