

# Exploring MBA Internship Effectiveness: Intern Goals and Outcomes

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## Abstract

MBA summer internships are brief, learning-oriented work experiences that are popularly referred to as “10 week job interviews” (Adler, 2004) and are common in full-time MBA programs. Despite the widespread use of internships for MBA learning and hiring, little research is available on interns’ goals and internship outcomes. The purpose of this report is to address this gap by answering two questions:

1. What goals do MBA interns have before starting their internships?
2. To what extent do they achieve their goals?

## Background

MBA internships are 8- to 12-week job experiences that usually take place in the summer between the first and second years of a full-time MBA program. MBA internships offer a number of benefits to both students and employers. For students, internships provide an opportunity to develop skills and experience in a new industry or functional role. This is important because MBA applicants consider “career enhancement” and “skill development” to be their top two reasons for pursuing an MBA (Schoenfeld, 2006). Internships can help MBA students “crystallize” their career interests (Taylor, 1988), evaluate a prospective employer (Beenen, 2008), and potentially secure a full-time job offer.

For employers, internships are a low risk, “try before you buy” approach to selecting potential employees (Coco, 2000). Employers can make employment offers to interns who meet their performance standards, and who are a good “fit” with the organization (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Schneider, 1987). Since MBA students have more prior work experience than undergraduate interns, employers also rely on MBA interns to fill short-term resource needs. Finally, employers can enhance their reputations as desirable places to work

by offering interns satisfying experiences (Cable & Turban, 2005).

Given the benefits of MBA internships for students and employers, the lack of systematic research on the topic is surprising. To address this gap, MBA interns were surveyed during the summer of 2007 concerning their pre-internship goals and post-internship outcomes. Before starting work, interns were asked about the kinds of learning and performance goals they hoped to achieve. After completing internships, they were asked about the kinds of learning they actually experienced, their satisfaction with their internships, and their estimated likelihood of receiving and accepting an actual or potential job offer.

## Methodology

A total of 796 Class of 2008 MBA students from 11 full-time MBA programs agreed to participate in this study. Participants completed Internet-based surveys two to four weeks before starting their internships (Survey 1), and one to three weeks after completing their internships (Survey 2). A portion of both surveys was completed by 562 respondents. The 514 respondents who completed both surveys comprise the study sample. Figure 1 displays demographic data on survey participants.

**Figure 1. Demographic Data on Study Participants**

Ethnicity	
African American	5.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	22.5%
Caucasian	60.4%
Hispanic/Latin American	7.0%
Other	5.0%

Experience	
Years experience before B-school	5.4

Internship Industry	
Consulting	15.2%
Financial Services/Accounting	26.5%
Products/Services	21.8%
Manufacturing	9.9%
Technology/Pharma/Biotech	22.6%
Government/Non-profit	4.1%

Citizenship	
U.S. Citizen	72.6%
U.S. Permanent Resident	5.1%
Other	22.2%

Gender	
Male	63.6%
Female	36.4%

Internship Job Function	
Marketing/Sales	36.6%
Operations/Information Technology	11.3%
Consulting	18.9%
General Management	8.0%
Financial Analysis/Accounting	36.6%

Note: N = 514; By industry: finance/accounting includes commercial banking and insurance; products/services includes consumer goods and services; manufacturing includes energy and utilities; technology includes pharmaceuticals biotechnology and healthcare. By function: general management includes human resources and administration (n=7).

Survey 1 measured interns' learning and performance goals orientations (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Learning goals focus an individual's attention and effort on developing skills or knowledge, while performance goals focus an individual's attention and effort on either outperforming peers (performance-approach), or on avoiding poor performance outcomes (performance-avoid). For a review, see Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien (2007). Previously validated goal orientation scales were adapted for this study (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). In all, Survey 1 employed three learning goal scales and two performance goal scales. Competency, company, and career learning measured interns' motivation for, respectively, acquiring job skills and abilities, acquiring information about internship employers, and acquiring industry or functional specialization knowledge. A

performance-approach scale measured interns' motivation to outperform their peers, and a performance-avoid scale measured motivation to avoid a poor internship performance outcome.

Survey 2 measured interns' learning, satisfaction, job offer outcomes, and acceptance intentions. Three scales with six items each measured interns' competency learning, company learning, and career learning outcomes. A fourth learning scale measured changes in 10 specific competencies traditionally considered to be either hard skills, such as technical competence in a specialty area and quantitative analysis, or soft skills, such as interpersonal and negotiation skills (Schoenfeld, 2005-2006). A previously validated scale measured intern satisfaction (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins & Klesh, 1983). Interns were asked if they had received a job offer. They were

also asked to estimate from 0% to 100% their chance of either accepting their actual offer, or of receiving or accepting a potential offer—if a job offer had not yet been received.

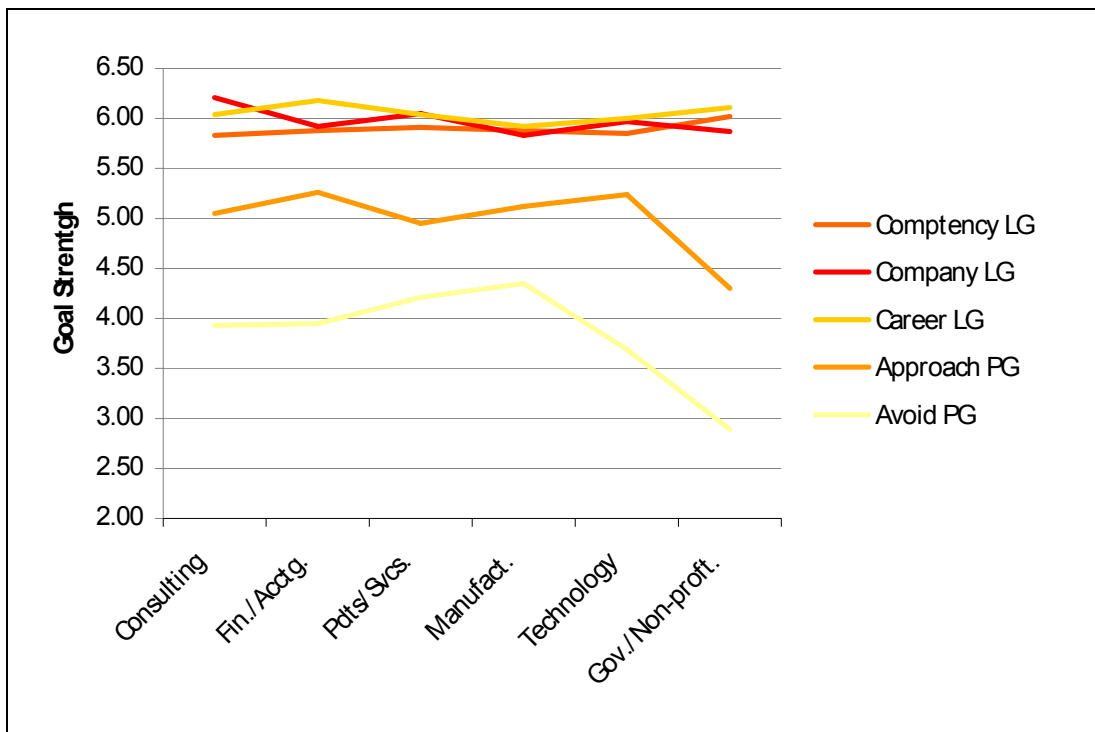
**Results**

**Pre-Internship: MBA Intern Goal Orientations**

Pre-internship survey results indicate interns have distinct goals focused on competency, company, and career learning, and on outperforming peers or avoiding poor performance.<sup>1</sup> This result supports the idea that interns have distinct learning and

performance motivations. Figure 2 displays the strength of interns’ goal orientations by industry. For example, as a group, interns in investment banking want to: improve their competency by learning financial analysis skills, increase their company knowledge by learning about employment opportunities within a specific bank, and enhance their career by learning about job options throughout the industry. The extent to which individual interns emphasize one or more of these goals over others may vary.

**Figure 2. Intern Goal Orientation by Industry**



Note: N=514; Higher scores indicate stronger goal orientations, on a 7 point scale. LG = learning goal; PG = performance goal.

Across industries, average learning goal (LG) orientations were stronger than average performance goal (PG) orientations (Competency LG = 5.89, Company LG = 6.00, and Career LG = 6.01;

Approach PG = 5.11 and Avoid PG = 3.92). These gaps between learning and performance goals were greatest for interns in government/non-profit sectors.

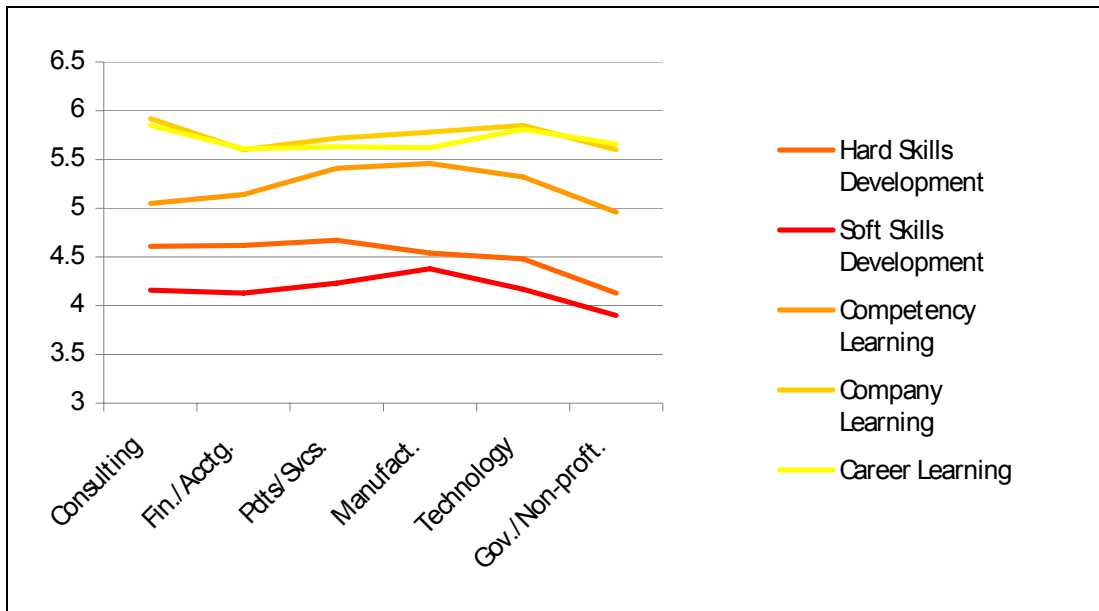
<sup>1</sup>For each survey scale in this study, factor analysis (principle axis, eigenvalues >1) was used to ensure items measured what they were intended to measure (i.e., item validity).

**Post-internship: MBA Intern Learning Outcomes**

Post-internship survey results indicate that interns experience distinct learning outcomes corresponding

to each of the three learning goals—competency, company, and career. Figure 3 displays interns’ learning outcomes by industry.

**Figure 3. Intern Learning Outcomes by Industry**



Note: N=514; Higher scores indicate more learning using a 7 point scale

On average, interns reported more company learning (5.72) and career learning (5.63) than competency learning (5.25). They reported the least hard– skills (4.57) and soft– skills (4.18) learning. This gap was greatest for consulting and technology industry interns. Manufacturing industry interns reported the most soft– skills learning (4.38) and government/non-profit interns reported the least (3.90).

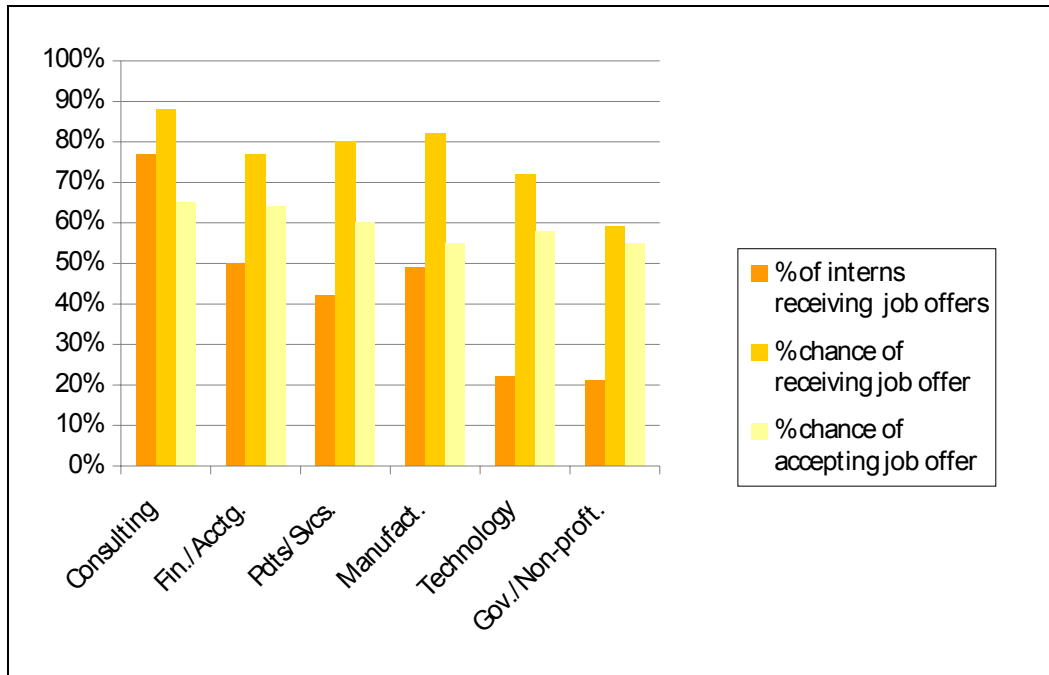
**Post-internship: MBA Intern Job Offer Outcomes and Acceptance Intentions**

In all, 44% of interns reported receiving a job offer after completing their internships. Those who did not receive an offer estimated they had a 63 % chance of receiving one. There was substantial variation across

industries in the proportion of Interns who reported receiving offers. There was less variation across industries in their intentions to accept actual or potential offers. Figure 4 contains interns’ job offer outcomes and job acceptance intentions by industry.

Interns working in consulting (77%) reported the highest proportion of job offers received, probably because consulting firms typically make offers by the end of the internship. Interns in the technology (22%) and government/non-profit (21%) industries reported the lowest proportion of job offers received, probably because fewer interns in those industries thought their employers intended to use internships for full-time recruiting; only 16% of government/non-profit interns thought so, compared with 95% of consulting interns.

**Figure 4. Intern Job Offers and Acceptance Intentions, for both Actual and Hypothetical Job Offers**



Note: N=514; Interns who reported a 100% chance of receiving an offer coded as receiving such an offer; For interns who had not receive or were not expecting an offer, “% chance of accepting job offer” refers to a hypothetical job offer.

**Correlation of Pre-Internship Goal Orientations and Post-Internship Outcomes**

A correlation analysis of both surveys was conducted to assess if pre-internship goal orientations were associated with post-internship outcomes. Appendix 2 contains the resulting correlation table. Correlations indicate the extent to which two factors are positively or negatively associated with one another. The stronger the association, the less likely it is due to chance. For example, two factors that correlate at the  $p < .01$  level indicate a less than 1% likelihood that the association is due to chance. It is important to note that correlations do not imply a causal relationship between factors.

**Goal Orientations and Learning Outcomes**

Table 1 summarizes the statistically significant correlations between intern goal orientations and

learning outcomes. The darkened circles represent correlations that are significant at the  $p < .01$  level and partially darkened circles represent correlations at the  $p < .05$  level. White circles indicate associations having no statistical significance. Competency (LG) had the strongest association with hard skills learning ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and task learning ( $r = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and a weaker association with career learning ( $r = .09$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Company LGs had the strongest association with company and career learning ( $r = .21$  &  $.22$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Career LG had weaker, though significant, associations with all learning outcomes. Company and career LGs were the only two goal orientations associated with intern satisfaction ( $r = .14$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $r = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Approach PG was associated with all learning outcomes, except soft–skills learning; it was most strongly associated with hard–skills learning ( $r = .14$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Avoid PG had no association with learning.

**Table 1. Summary Correlations of Intern Goal Orientations and Learning**

	Hard Skills Learning	Soft Skills Learning	Competency Learning	Company Learning	Career Learning
Competency LG	●	○	●	○	○
Company LG	○	○	○	●	●
Career LG	●	○	○	○	●
Approach PG	●	○	○	○	○
Avoid PG	○	○	○	○	○

Note: N = 537 to 562; LG = Learning Goal; PG = Performance Goal; ● p < .01; ○ p < .05; ○ no relationship

**Learning, Job Offer Outcomes, and Job Acceptance Intentions**

Table 2 summarizes the correlations between intern learning, satisfaction, job offers, and intentions to accept job offers. All forms of learning were associated with perceived chance of receiving an offer; hard-skills learning had the weakest such association ( $r =$

.09;  $p < .05$ ) and company learning had the strongest ( $r = .25$ ;  $p < .01$ ). All forms of learning were strongly associated, as well, with both intern satisfaction ( $r = .36$  to  $.57$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and intention to accept a job offer ( $r = .22$  to  $.34$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Task learning had the strongest association with intention to accept a job offer.

**Table 2. Summary Correlations of Job Offer Outcomes and Intern Learning**

	Hard Skills Learning	Soft Skills Learning	Competency Learning	Company Learning	Career Learning
Intern Satisfaction	●	●	●	●	●
% Interns Receiving Offer	●	○	○	●	●
% Chance Receiving Offer	○	○	●	●	●
% Chance Accepting Offer	●	●	●	●	●

Note: N = 537 to 562; LG = Learning Goal; PG = Performance Goal; ● p < .01; ○ p < .05; ○ no relationship

This study’s correlation analysis suggests that interns who were strongly oriented towards learning were more likely to actually experience learning during their internships than were interns who lacked a strong learning orientation. Moreover, those who experienced more learning were more likely to be satisfied with their internships, to report a greater chance of receiving a job offer, and to have stronger intentions to accept such offers (Beenen, 2007a). Interns who were strongly oriented towards outperforming their peers were more likely to learn, as well—though to a lesser degree than those oriented towards learning. It is

important to note that learning and performance goal orientations are not mutually exclusive. In fact, competency LG and approach PG were positively correlated ( $r = .22$ ;  $p < .01$ ; cf. Appendix 2). Approach PG also correlated positively with avoid PG ( $r = .20$ ;  $p < .01$ ) but, in this instance, did not correlate with any of the learning goal orientations. Furthermore, avoid PG was not associated with any favorable internship outcomes (cf. Payne et al., 2007). The implication is that interns with stronger learning orientations experienced, on average, more favorable internship



outcomes with regard to learning, satisfaction, job offers, and job acceptance intentions.

## Conclusions

MBA internships are important sources of learning and experience for full-time MBA students and offer a low risk way for employers to both select full-time talent and meet short-term staffing needs. In summary, pre and post-internship surveys of 514 MBA interns offer the following conclusions:

- Before starting their internships, MBA interns have distinct learning and performance goals. On average, they also appear to be more strongly oriented towards competency, company, and career learning than towards outperforming peers or avoiding poor performance outcomes.
- After completing their internships, MBA interns typically perceive that they learned more about the company or career in which they interned, and learned less in terms of job skills development.
- MBA interns also report more hard-skills than soft-skills learning; they learned more about quantitative analysis than negotiation, for example.

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- MBA interns who have stronger learning goal orientations, and to a lesser degree those who have strong performance-approach goal orientations, should be more likely to experience learning during their internships.
- MBA interns who experience more learning during their internships also appear to be more satisfied, and more likely to both receive and accept job offers.

## Contact Information

For questions or comments regarding study findings, methodology or data, please contact the GMAC Research and Development department at [research@gmac.com](mailto:research@gmac.com).

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