The impacts and success factors of a work-from-home service-learning internship during COVID-19

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Abstract

Purpose – COVID-19 has changed the way we teach and learn, including service-learning (S-L). This study examines the impacts of the work-from-home (WFH) mode on the work performance and learning outcomes of student interns on an eight-week S-L internship programme, and the key factors in terms of its success.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative research methodology is adopted by interviewing nine student interns and four supervisors from three community partner organisations (CPOs) to understand their experiences of how the WFH mode has impacted intern work performance and learning outcomes. Thematic analysis is used for the data analysis.

Findings – The interns uncover a number of negative WFH impacts on the S-L internship, including ineffective communication and management practice, low work efficiency and quality, a lack of task variety and learning opportunities and distractions in the home environment. Furthermore, five critical factors for WFH success are also identified, including prior preparation, effective communication systems, personal motivators at work, the nature of the job in relation to it being suited to the WFH mode, and organisational support.

Originality/value – The study examines impacts on student work performance and learning outcomes in an S-L summer internship programme operating under the WFH mode as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key success factors and practical recommendations have been developed for enhancing the future success of S-L internships operating under the WFH mode.

Keywords Work-from-home, Service-learning internship, Remote/off-site internship, Work performance impact, Learning outcomes

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Service-learning and service-learning internships

Service-learning (S-L) is a popular pedagogical approach used in undergraduate programmes (Kolenko *et al.*, 1996), and such S-L internship programmes have been offered as summer courses in several universities in Hong Kong. The syllabuses of these programmes are designed to encourage students to apply academic theories to real-world problems outside the classroom (Kolb, 1984; Sigmon, 1990) and offer services related to organising activities to benefit service recipients in the community (Snell *et al.*, 2018). The current research studies an undergraduate S-L internship programme called Service Leadership Practicum. It comprises two components, service-learning and an internship, which have been conducted since 2013

using a face-to-face (F2F) mode. However, in 2020, the course was switched to an online mode, and the student interns (hereafter referred to as interns) were expected to perform duties via a work-from-home (WFH) mode instead of working in the workplaces of community partner organisations (CPOs) – the organisations that have formed partnerships with the university to offer internship opportunities to serve the community, as a result of COVID-19. This was the first time that this programme had interns serving the community from home, and hence, whether the internship could be successfully implemented using the WFH mode remained uncertain.

Terminology
This research focuses on examining interns who had to complete their internships on a remote basis, using technological means to support them in working from home. The paper uses the term "remote internship" rather than "virtual internship" or "e-internship" to differentiate the nature of the work conducted off-site. Remote internships can be defined as "field-driven assignments designated to students by third parties i.e. public or private organisations in which students work for the most part off-site and on flexible hours, herewith utilising generic and/or specific information and communication technology" (van Dorp, 2008, p. 4). Although the terms "remote internship" and "virtual/e-internship" have been used interchangeably, virtual/e-internships are mainly partially or fully computer-mediated internships that are provided by an employer or institution to candidates (Bayerlein and Jeske, 2018), and some virtual/e-internships in fact involve some in-person or on-site contact. In this paper, we emphasise the "remote" or "off-site" component of remote WFH internships as a differentiating characteristic in highlighting the requirement of forced social distancing measures in the current pandemic situation imposed by COVID-19. Due to the interchangeability of these two types of internship – remote versus virtual/e-internships – the following literature review also includes virtual/e-internships. However, it should be emphasised that the remote WFH internship under study involves both remote and virtual means when compared to traditional WFH roles, such as craftsmanship, which did not involve virtual measures. Since past studies on remote and virtual/e-internships were conducted on a voluntary basis, there is only scant systematic information on enforced, remote S-L internships during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature review of WFH internships
In this section, first, a definition of the type of WFH internship researched in this study is provided. Second, the extant literature on the success factors of WFH internships is also reviewed. Third, the prior literature on WFH internships, including virtual/e-internships, and their potentially positive and adverse impacts on interns is examined.

COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption of online teaching and learning modes and has also abruptly changed the traditional teaching and learning methods that originally relied on the F2F mode, including S-L. The WFH mode is defined by a working day spent in the home environment (Sayers and Monin, 2005), and it is a type of remote working arrangement where employees work in their home environments and do not need to travel to a central workplace (International Labour Organisation, 2020). An internship is a short-term trial work period that a non-employee engages in with the employees of an organisation (Youngblood, 2020).

Success factors of WFH internships
The past literature illustrated that there are four categories of success factors in relation to virtual internships: policy, preparation, social behaviour (Beard and Morton, 1998; Greer,

2013; Williams, 1976) and the nature of S-L jobs. First, the development of a pedagogically sound internship programme requires a sound internship policy, which includes objectives, student qualifications and requirements, planning decisions regarding the type of work the intern is to perform, how the intern is compensated and evaluated and supervisor-related decisions about how the supervisor is selected and how the supervisors conduct and manage the internship, such as through organising a weekly supervision meeting to monitor the intern's work and evaluate his/her progress and review the responsibilities of the intern and supervisor (Ross, 1985; True, 2008).

Second, preparation contains pre-internship issues, such as the internship's objectives, the supervisor's background and the intern's academic preparation. It has been argued that good planning alone cannot predict the outcome of an internship, and relationship factors play a significant part too because when interns interact with other stakeholders, many such interactions cannot actually be planned, even though supervisors perform pre-internship planning (Beard and Morton, 1998; Greer, 2013; Williams, 1976). Therefore, apart from good preparation, the imminent pedagogical issues for a WFH summer internship programme lie in balancing all stakeholders' expectations through planning, organisation and good communication.

Third, factors associated with social behaviour or relationships are also important. They include attitudes, the approach to the internship and work, how supervisors supervise and how interns interact with other interns. To succeed, interns on virtual internships need to possess two primary characteristics. First, they need to be self-starters since they will not be in an office every day. The interns must take responsibility and be diligent in terms of meeting deadlines through making good use of their time and taking the initiative to ask for additional projects (Massingill, 2013). Second, virtual interns must be excellent communicators and interact with their employers using various communication channels, such as web conferences, e-mails and phone calls, to manage the internship process. In addition, interns must be able to articulate their ideas and convey any needs they might have for more help and guidance (Huhman, 2009).

Fourth, the prior literature also found that the nature of some jobs requires intensive interpersonal relationships, which may rule out the possibility of using the WFH mode (Dingel and Neiman, 2020). One example is the provision of direct service (Taylor *et al.*, 1996). Therefore, there are many challenges for interns working from home on S-L internship programmes. Unlike industrial internship programmes, S-L internship programmes are predominantly developed pedagogically to allow interns to acquire learning experience by forming realistic perceptions of social problems (Godfrey, 1999; Jacoby, 1996), dealing with the reality of practices (Abeysekera, 2006; Barr and Busler, 2013; Chang and Chu, 2009) and applying academic theories to solve problems in the real world (Titley, 1984) to impact the community through providing direct service and interacting with service recipients in-person on-site (Rehling, 2000). In order to do so, interns need to have first-hand experience in the workplace by spending long periods of time there (Loyola University New Orleans, 2020; Zheng, 2008). In sum, the prior literature has suggested that the remote WFH mode is more likely to experience more communication problems than the F2F mode in S-L internship programmes as interns are required to interact intensively with stakeholders in the workplace.

Advantages and disadvantages of WFH internships
Besides success factors, previous studies also indicated that virtual internships offer many benefits in terms of building interns' careers by providing them with unique learning experiences (Alipour *et al.*, 2020). First, interns can work at their own pace remotely, and when difficulties arise, on-campus advisers are available to mentor them. Second, they can save on transportation costs (Wortham, 2013). Third, virtual internships offer interns an opportunity to engage in their jobs with higher levels of responsibility and autonomy than during an

in-person internship, without the need to commute or work to strict time constraints. Fourth, in most industries, virtual internships are as equally well-regarded as in-office positions on a resume (Babbitt, 2011).

However, remote WFH internships have downsides too. First, additional complications associated with establishing and sustaining work relationships emerge when an intern is unable to join the physical community or work with a supervisor in-person and is unfamiliar with the specific work environment or community (Youngblood, 2020). Sundar (2008) reiterated that remote internships might not offer sufficient networking opportunities since the interns seldom meet with their supervisors or colleagues. Second, remote interns, as a consequence of not being around supervisors, colleagues and other stakeholders, may find it hard to build personal rapport or management skills (Marte, 2009). Research found that people working from home suffer from a drastically reduced level of interaction and have to collaborate with people remotely, which is not as natural as interacting F2F and does not lead to the water cooler effect (Cowgill *et al.*, 2009). Third, without F2F engagement and casual meetings, people working from home find that the "flow" that makes things work is missing because the workplace serves as a social environment but one's home does not (National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), 2020). Fourth, remote interns may also be forgotten by overburdened programme coordinators (Sundar, 2008). Fifth, interns who have no/fewer ties to begin with may find it harder to engage and perform effectively in the workplace using the WFH mode (Levin and Kurtzberg, 2020). Therefore, remote WFH internships are not suitable for all students, especially those who cannot function well without personal supervision.

The extant literature also pointed out that a majority of WFH employees self-selected the WFH mode themselves before the pandemic (BeÁlanger, 1999), implying that people WFH out of their own preference. However, since the interns who participated in the current study worked from home to avoid contracting COVID-19, it is not known how the enforced WFH off-site mode has shaped the internship programme, particularly in terms of the working relationships between the stakeholders.

Significance of the current study
This research aims to investigate the impacts and success factors of a remote S-L internship conducted through an enforced WFH mode during the pandemic. First, the nature of the internship in this research differs from the internships reported in the majority of the extant literature as this internship programme is offered by three CPOs which serve the community and is not business based.

Second, the success factors – internship policy, preparation, social behaviour and the nature of S-L jobs – are examined and comprise the analytical focus in order to fill the research gap in the literature and contribute to emerging literature on the remote WFH mode. The contextual background of the S-L internship by WFH mode in the current study was a response of the university to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic which had started in early 2020. Owing to the constant changes in the severity of COVID-19 during the internship period, the use of work mode varied accordingly by the organisations, which signifies the importance to study the success factors as such sudden changes in the internship programme have not occurred before the pandemic.

In order to clarify the contextual background, the internship scheme under investigation is elaborated. The internship programme lasted for eight weeks from June to July 2020 which was originally planned to allow the interns to continue practising service leadership attributes (a type of S-L training) to the community on a remote basis while the interns' health and safety could be safeguarded during the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, the internship used to be operated on a direct service basis, and the interns' relationships with and

expectations of the organisations involved an in-person F2F supervision. Before the current internship began, both CPOs and interns were informed about the change of F2F to WFH mode in the internship. However, when the internship programme started in June while the severity of COVID-19 had decreased at the time, two of the CPOs decided to implement the internship by a hybrid mode – CPO2 let interns work in-office for 2–3 days and 1–2 days from home, and CPO3 let two interns WFH as the interns wanted to avoid the contraction of COVID-19, and one intern in-person (F2F) in the office. On the other hand, CPO1 used the WFH mode (see Table 1) as originally planned. Eventually, facing another outbreak in the last two weeks of the internship, the two CPOs using the hybrid mode were forced to let all interns WFH. Additional contextual information includes (1) CPO1 and CPO2 had experience of conducting other S-L programmes with the university, whereas CPO3 did not; (2) none of the CPOs and interns were prepared to conduct the internship programme on a remote basis due to the sudden forced social distancing; (3) CPO1 had prior experience in remote working, but neither the interns nor the other two CPOs had similar experience and (4) although the internship programme was planned by the university to be carried out by a remote WFH mode, CPO3 had indicated that it would use F2F mode throughout the internship, and only adopted WFH mode when the two interns requested to WFH by reiterating safety concerns. Therefore, this research of the current internship programme of a volatile nature highlights the meaningfulness of examining the internship policy, the preparation, the social behaviour and the nature of the S-L jobs of the current internship programme.

Third, prior studies on remote internship were mainly conducted outside Asia, and there are knowledge gaps in terms of how the cultural characteristics of Asian students affect their responses to forced remote S-L work. Last but not least, practical recommendations for S-L internship programmes are also developed to direct future development in terms of how organisations and interns can WFH effectively under the "new normal".

Methods
The main objective of this paper is to inform how an off-site WFH internship influences the work performance and learning outcomes of student interns, as well as investigating WFH success factors.

Data collection
A qualitative research method was adopted and contextually based on participants' lived experience, considering that the participants were experts in terms of their perception of that experience (Alasuutari, 2010). Intensive post-internship interviews were conducted with both

Label	Gender	Faculty	Year of study	Assigned CPO	Work mode
S1	F	Arts	2	CPO1	WFH
S2	F	Social sciences	2	CPO1	WFH
S3	F	Social sciences	2	CPO2	Hybrid → WFH*
S4	F	Social sciences	2	CPO2	Hybrid → WFH*
S5	M	Social sciences	3	CPO2	Hybrid → WFH*
S6	M	Social sciences	3	CPO2	Hybrid → WFH*
S7	F	Social sciences	3	CPO3	WFH
S8	M	Arts	4	CPO3	WFH
S9	M	Business	4	CPO3	F2F → WFH*

Note(s): S: Student Intern
CPO: Community Partner Organisation
WFH*: Student interns were forced to the WFH mode in the last two weeks of the internship

Table 1.
Profile of the student interns in the internship programme

the partner organisation representatives (PORs) – the representatives of the CPOs who were responsible for operating the internship programme – and the interns to solicit corroborative evidence (Plutchik, 1983); different perspectives on the same data helped reflect on the development of themes and sub-themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The participants included three CPOs and nine student interns, and their profiles are listed in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

All three CPOs were either social enterprises or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Hong Kong on a small to medium scale. Each CPO received two to four interns. The interns employed during the internship are listed in Table 1; they consisted of four males and five females from various academic disciplines and years of study, all of whom had no previous WFH experience.

Due to the social distancing measures enforced during COVID-19, online audio-conferencing software was employed to conduct the interviews. The interviews with the representative(s) of the three CPOs lasted between 35 and 45 min, and the intern interviews lasted around 15 min. Prior to each interview, ethical consent was sought, and the interviews were conducted and recorded. The participants were reassured about confidentiality, and this paper uses pseudonyms to prevent their identity from being disclosed.

The interviews followed two different interview protocols for the PORs and the interns, which were based on the research objectives. Previous similar focus group guidelines were referred to for collecting interns' and representatives' opinions about S-L internships implemented using the F2F mode (Snell et al., 2019).

The POR interview protocol covered five aspects, namely (1) the collaboration history with the university, (2) an evaluation of interns' performance, (3) the assessment of interns' contribution to the CPO and the community, (4) an evaluation of the effectiveness of the WFH mode and a comparison with the F2F mode and (5) the difficulties of working from home during the internship programme and suggestions regarding useful organisational support for facilitating work performance in the WFH mode. The intern interview protocol focused on four major areas, namely (1) the self-evaluation of their work performance, (2) the difficulties encountered during the internship and ways to cope with such difficulties, (3) a comparison between the WFH and F2F mode, as well as the keys to the success of the WFH mode and (4) suggestions for CPOs with regard to facilitating work performance. In addition to the protocols, an open-ended question with a probing questioning strategy was also used to facilitate full, descriptive narratives from the participants (Miles et al., 2020). The interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

Label	CPO type	CPO's Service nature	CPO position/CPO identity	Interviewee gender	The students assigned (in no)
POR1	NGO	Environmental protection	Project director/CPO1	Male	S1, S2
POR2	NGO	Relieving poverty	Project manager/CPO2	Male	S3, S4, S5, S6
POR3	Social enterprise	Start-ups and entrepreneurship	Co-founder and chief/ CPO3	Male	S9
POR4	Social enterprise	Start-ups and entrepreneurship	Development officer and impact catalyst/ CPO3	Male	S7, S8

Note(s): CPO: Community Partner Organisation
POR: Partner Organisation Representative

Table 2.
Profile of the organisations and their representatives in the internship programme

Data analysis
Thematic analysis was employed in terms of the data analysis and involved "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Student research assistants transcribed the data from the audio recordings into written form using a guideline with criteria for data transcription to ensure reliability and consistency. The researchers familiarised themselves with the content of the transcribed data, which supported the searching for meanings and patterns in the data set for data analysis. The themes were developed based on the specific patterns of meaning found in the data (Joffe, 2012).

Themes emerged during the analysis and were informed by the researchers' subjective experiences of the remote WFH mode through process explication (Conklin, 2007). In process explication, "researchers attend to their awareness, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and judgments as a prelude to the understanding that is derived from conversations and dialogues with others" (Brisola and Cury, 2016). Constant comparisons between the transcripts and the emerging system of themes and sub-themes were engaged, and the repeated re-description of the various aspects of each theme was performed until it appeared that no further changes could improve the consistency and accuracy of the analysis, signalling that the point of theoretical saturation had been reached (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). A coherent set of themes and sub-themes that explained all the salient data was accomplished, which was consistent with the understanding of the researchers' own experiences.

Findings
The findings on the WFH mode from the interns are presented under two major themes: how the WFH mode impacts work performance and learning outcomes and its success factors. Under the first theme, four sub-themes are identified. The first sub-theme is related to limitations in terms of communication/interaction. The second sub-theme concerns how the WFH mode affects the monitoring of work progress. The third sub-theme refers to how the WFH mode may diminish variety with regard to service and learning opportunities. The fourth sub-theme concerns the home environment and its possible effect on the interns' performance. Under the second theme of success factors, five sub-themes are also identified. They include active WFH preparation, personal motivators, the nature of the job, the communication system and organisational supports. In the next session, WFH's impacts on work performance and learning outcomes derived from the first theme are discussed.

WFH impacts on work performance and learning outcomes
Limitations regarding communication/interaction. One major issue concerning the WFH mode is that it hinders interns from interacting with their supervisors and colleagues due to communication problems. As a result, interns found it difficult to develop relationships and familiarise themselves with the organisational culture, which thereby limited their work efficiency and quality. An intern working for POR2 recalled:

> It was inconvenient to communicate with my mentor or supervisor when I was working from home. In the past, everyone was sitting in the office; therefore, I could immediately discuss and talk with colleagues when I encountered a problem. During the pandemic, however, we could only communicate through a screen (i.e. using Zoom) during the WFH mode. (S5)

A side product of the WFH mode is that sometimes such communication problems are good for interns' learning. Although not many, some interns revealed that the WFH mode forced them to be more autonomous and motivated at work and, hence, helped them to become more

independent, especially when they encountered work problems at home. An intern working for POR3 reiterated:

> I planned to use Adobe Illustrator (i.e. an image editing software). However, I was not able to use it because of technical problems. Therefore, I had no choice but to learn to use other image editing software by myself. (S8)

The PORs also agreed that the WFH mode encouraged interns to think more by themselves as they did not have immediate access to supervisors for guidance. Therefore, they had to learn and solve problems independently. A POR stated:

> I think making the interns think more is one of the advantages of WFH. They (interns) can learn by thinking more and really doing something, then presenting their ideas. In fact, they can have a better learning experience through this independent thinking process. (POR 1)

Hard to monitor work progress. Apart from the communication issues described above, the flexible work environment entailed by the WFH mode also generated management problems, such as difficulties in terms of monitoring, pending work issues, unclear work expectations/ guidelines and unclear work directions. All these problems resulted in hindering work performance and interns' learning outcomes. The following conversation with an intern working for POR4 highlighted a situation leading to difficulties for supervisors with regard to monitoring interns' progress.

> I am afraid of disturbing his [my supervisor's] work. I think my supervisor did not know the progress of my work exactly, but I know that he was very busy . . . We had communication delays because we could not contact each other immediately during the WFH mode, especially when I had difficulties in terms of my assigned tasks. (S7)

Regarding a few capable interns who were motivated by a sense of responsibility, their PORs commented that they showed better work efficiency because the WFH mode provided a more flexible working environment for them to better organise and execute the assigned work tasks. POR2 commented:

> If the interns' autonomy was relatively high, their WFH ability would be better. The flexible working arrangement had made them work more effectively and became more immersed in their work. Their task involved video editing. If they worked at the office, they also needed to complete it at home after the office closed. If they worked from home, they could organise better and completed their task at different times, but it did not affect the quality of their work. (POR 2)

These kinds of "personal motivators", such as autonomy, a sense of responsibility and high work motivation, can be regarded as key success factors for the WFH mode and will be discussed more later on.

Less variety in terms of service and learning opportunities. Since the WFH mode limited F2F interaction, and COVID-19 impeded physical activities from taking place, the variety of service types and learning opportunities available for interns was reduced under the WFH mode. Some interns and PORs recalled the difficulties they encountered when trying to organise physical activities, or how they were forced to switch original events to an online mode, resulting in compromised interaction with service recipients. This problem was shared by POR2:

> It is difficult to organise physical activities through the WFH mode. Although we were able to organise some online activities, it was difficult to interact with the participants (service recipients) and assess their performance. (POR 2)

Besides less service variety, the WFH mode had also affected direct service in the S-L internship substantially, as illustrated above. This minimised interns' learning outcomes as

S-L emphasised direct contact and interaction between interns and service recipients, which is rather difficult to achieve under the WFH mode.

Home as a double-edged sword: a way to save on costs or a distraction?. For some interns, working at home without the requirement to commute to the workplace is one of the advantages that they had highlighted as it had saved them time and money (e.g. transportation fares). In addition, a home office could also reduce the risk of arriving late. This is reflected in a comment by an intern working for POR3:

> I need to spend at least two hours making a round-trip each day [if working in the F2F mode]. I felt tired and spiritless after the long journey. Therefore, I like the WFH mode as it saves on transportation time, and I can concentrate more and have a better working arrangement. (S8)

However, this cost advantage did not apply to other interns as it depended on several factors, including possible distracting factors and whether one could concentrate on his/her work at home. One intern working for POR1, reflected on how her work efficiency was compromised because of the noise and disturbances created by family members at home:

> My brother would create noise and disturbances at home, and this was not good for me [when working from home]. (S1)

Furthermore, another intern working for POR3 reiterated that some of his WFH colleagues sneaked away from home during office hours to conduct other business:

> I could not reach one of my colleagues through WhatsApp, and I was told that he seemed to have gone out to do his own personal business. (S9)

After the first theme of how the WFH mode impacts work performance and learning outcomes are discussed, another theme – WFH success factors – is elaborated in the next session.

Success factors for the WFH mode

Both interns and PORs were asked to suggest ways to facilitate better work performance in the WFH mode to establish success factors for interns working from home, which was deduced as being the second theme. The five sub-themes identified with regard to success factors include active preparation, personal motivators, the nature of the job, the communication system and organisational support; and they are discussed below.

Active preparation. Active preparation was considered as a significant factor contributing to the WFH S-L internship programme's success laying a foundation for subsequent implementation. The interns' work was not interrupted when active preparation had been conducted. Such preparation included a clear set of work rules and expectations decided jointly by supervisors and interns, which also supported the interns in performing their work efficiently, resulting in fewer supervision requirements. This was illustrated by an intern working for POR1:

> We did some good preparation by getting to know colleagues before the WFH period, so I did not experience any big challenges in terms of communicating with my colleagues during the WFH mode. (S1)

POR1 also reiterated that preparation in relation to setting up work rules and expectations was vital for smooth communication during the WFH internship:

> Before we started the internship, I asked the two interns to come up with ideas regarding their preferences for what sort of work they would like to do, and then I told them to set up rules, regulations and expectations that they could follow during the internship. They seemed to be very

satisfied with their work, and now they know how to behave even though I cannot supervise them directly as I cannot see them when they WFH. (POR1)

Personal motivators. The interns regarded personal motivators, such as self-discipline, as one of the significant determinants of WFH success. The ability of a WFH intern to perform self-discipline could help turn his/her home into an effective office, which was indicated by an intern working for POR4:

I performed self-reflection after completing my assigned tasks. I reflected on the purpose of the tasks and how it could contribute to the agency. I think by keeping myself disciplined, I could figure out how to improve my duties, which helped me increase my contribution, even though my supervisors did not have time to give me much support and feedback. (S8)

The nature of the job. Most of the supervisors were not prepared to execute the S-L internship programme using the WFH mode since the Hong Kong government did not enforce WFH mode at work in Hong Kong amid the outbreak. Therefore, employers were not obliged to implement WFH mode for their employees (Randall *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, the internship programme in this study had involved interns in direct service for seven years before the COVID-19 outbreak, requiring intense interpersonal interactions between interns and service recipients because F2F communication with different stakeholders was inseparable from such services (Sigmon, 1990). However, the sudden nature of COVID-19 meant that the supervisors were unable to prepare suitable WFH jobs. CPO2 was relatively more well-prepared for the adaptation of the jobs offered, as expressed by one of its interns:

While the surge of COVID-19 requiring me to work from home in the last two weeks, I was assigned to edit videos or collect some opinions from service recipients. Actually, I think that I can complete these tasks at home where it is more comfortable and convenient for me. Thus, I do not feel I have any big problems. (S5)

Therefore, to prepare for the WFH mode, supervisors were able to turn some direct service jobs into independent tasks to be carried out at home, such as video post-production, social media marketing, poster designs and desktop research, which did not entail intensive human interactions.

Communication system. The communication system was one of the major obstacles for the WFH mode; hence, it is not surprising that interns highlighted an effective communication system as a significant success factor. They suggested that more channels, such as regular video-conferencing meetings, should be set up between interns and supervisors to build relationships and review work progress, as voiced by an intern working for POR2:

The key to success is that when we completed our jobs or when there was a problem, we could contact other colleagues. For example, I used Zoom or Skype at home to communicate with colleagues. An effective channel to explain and report my work progress is essential in the WFH mode. (S6)

Organisational supports. Interns reported that organisational supports – information technology/technical support and manpower support for both interns and supervisors – were crucial for the success of WFH internship. For example, more technical support for computer hardware/software, and guidelines should be provided by the CPOs, and teaching institutions to provide a better WFH environment. POR2 explained:

The first thing that the organisation can help with is related to technical issues. It is good to make use of some tools to help the interns interact with the service users. (POR 2)

Discussion

Owing to the negative impacts of the WFH mode outnumbering its positive impacts, the findings of this study show that the respondents did not prefer the WFH mode during the S-L internship programme, especially due to ineffective communication with stakeholders, fewer opportunities for building constructive work relationships with colleagues and less on-site time to understand the CPO's culture, resulting in lower work quality/efficiency and a reduction in learning for interns. Consistent with previous findings, it was observed that since S-L interns are considered freshmen in the CPOs and they did not have much prior interpersonal relationships with supervisors and colleagues before the internship began, employing online communication without personal interactions have become a problem during the WFH mode (Choudhury *et al.*, 2020; Levin and Kurtzberg, 2020). In addition, the WFH mode does not seem to suit a direct service oriented S-L internship programme as the interview data revealed that some activities and campaigns had to be cancelled due to switching to the enforced WFH mode in the last two weeks of the internship programme, further limiting interns' learning which was mainly generated through direct service experience and F2F interactions with service recipients.

Despite many disadvantages of the WFH mode, as discussed earlier, the data show that there are a number of benefits for the interns. The WFH mode can train interns to become autonomous in terms of planning and managing work, and to even seek solutions to work problems encountered and to learn new skills on their own initiative since they cannot rely on their supervisors and colleagues to provide immediate guidance and support when WFH.

Such benefits, however, do not seem to override the problems created by WFH S-L internship. While some interns were better motivated with higher work efficiency when operating under the WFH mode, more of them were distracted by the home environment, unable to keep track of communication with supervisors and their work progress and became less and less motivated throughout the internship hence undermining work quality/ efficiency. From the data, such negative consequences could be partly attributed to communication barriers and the difficulties encountered by supervisors when monitoring the interns' work remotely. This negative WFH consequence can be resolved by formulating a proper internship policy.

However, we argue that this phenomenon can also be partly attributed to cultural factors. Hong Kong Chinese has been regarded as bearing the cultural characteristics of high power distance and low uncertainty avoidance, leading to a more structured workplace with a more authoritarian management style (Hofstede, 1980, 1983). The influence of these cultural characteristics in educational settings is reflected in the fact that student interns prefer tight structures, close instructor guidance or even being spoon-fed (e.g. Chan, 1999; Law, 2018; Rodrigues, 2005), as well as in that the interns adopt more reactive/passive learning habits and are less willing to take the initiative to communicate with their supervisors (Tang, 2010; Li, 2014). Such socio-cultural behavioural characteristics of the interns further hamper their learning outcomes and the realisation of their potential in contributing to the CPOs and the community if a proper work structure and communication system is not in place. It was discovered that CPOs without prior WFH experience were often unprepared to react with suitable WFH organisational and communication structures with regard to the sudden adoption of the WFH mode during the pandemic.

Furthermore, reactive/passive learning habits of the interns can also turn their homes (workplaces) into a distraction when operating under the WFH mode as the interns are not prepared to self-discipline and self-manage themselves in terms of concentrating on their work and motivating themselves to communicate with supervisors/other stakeholders. As a result, some interns suffer from undesirable work efficiency/quality as their reactive/passive learning habits hinder their motivation to put extra effort into clarifying the situation when they encounter unclear work guidelines and directions.

As a whole, the findings of the current study show that the WFH mode in S-L internship results in more negative impacts than positive benefits for interns. The major obstacles include communication barriers and difficulty in monitoring work progress, which are further leveraged by cultural factors, meaning that interns in Chinese cultures are usually reactive and passive. The above findings are consistent with the past research findings discussed in the literature review, which have shown that remote and virtual/e-internships have problems in terms of communication and insufficient networking opportunities (Marte, 2009; Sundar, 2008; Youngblood, 2020). Furthermore, the job tasks and services provided in WFH S-L internship are usually not direct service and do not allow physical interaction as in the F2F mode, and this further limits the benefits for interns.

The findings also show that the success factors of prior preparation, a good communication system and organisational support echo the previous findings about good preparation and an effective internship policy (Beard and Morton, 1998; Greer, 2013; Williams, 1976). Furthermore, two other factors – interns' behaviours, especially their personal motivators, and the nature of the job in relation to it being suited to the WFH mode – are uncovered in this study within the context of S-L internship.

Prior preparation for the WFH mode is vital and paves the way for success in terms of its implementation later on. The prerequisite phase highlights two elements: (1) active preparation and (2) prior WFH experience. First, active preparation includes formulating a contingency plan and agreeing on work rules. As indicated in the results section, since CPO2 had prepared contingency plans before the internship began, it had dealt with many predicted issues and prevented them from occurring during the internship. Furthermore, a set of agreed work rules between interns and supervisors should be formulated, so as to clarify expectations and compensate for the communication insufficiency induced by the WFH mode, as performed by CPO1. These agreed work rules can be regarded as part of the internship policy, which should be set up beforehand. Second, PORs with prior WFH experience are able to deliver better WFH internship programmes than those without. In the case of CPO1, its previous WFH experience helped guide the POR to devise measures to overcome and offset some of the negative WFH factors, regarding such as communication, task assignment and the review/feedback system.

The second factor is an intern's personal motivators, which refers to whether an intern can be self-motivated to perform under and capitalise on the WFH mode. This social behavioural factor shows that a motivated intern can turn his/her home into an effective office rather than a distraction. It is also believed that interns with good self-discipline and learning drive can counteract the negative impact caused by culturally reactive/passive habits. Although other key factors, such as sufficient preparation and a good communication system, can help interns become more motivated; however, personal motivators are often related to one's personality traits, which usually cannot be altered in a short time such as the two-month period of the S-L internship programme under study. We therefore recommend that CPOs, when adopting a WFH internship policy, is better to select interns who are self-disciplined and motivated which in turn can benefit both the interns and CPOs as better work quality and learning results can be expected.

The third factor is an effective communication system which many interns and PORs mentioned that a lack of it under the WFH mode has produced many negative consequences. More specifically, another WFH internship policy that CPOs can adopt is to set up an effective communication system that can monitor interns' work performance and provide them with timely advice to solve work problems. Moreover, such a communication system also requires a regular feedback loop that enables both interns and supervisors to review the work progress and problems on a timely basis under the WFH mode.

The fourth factor is the nature of the job in terms of it being suited to the WFH mode. It is recommended that CPOs should adopt another WFH internship policy to request PORs to

assign WFH interns with tasks of an appropriate job nature, such as tasks that can be performed independently, with a wider variety in terms of a combination of tasks to be accomplished and an appropriate amount of workload. Supervisors can select tasks from other components of S-L types, such as indirect service, advocacy and research projects, when it is difficult to execute direct service (University of Minnesota, 2020).

The fifth factor is organisational supports. Since all interns under the WFH mode work on computers, with all their communication taking place online, CPOs should adopt another internship policy of providing more technical support, such as the provision of necessary hardware and software to improve communication and work efficiency.

These key success factors mentioned above are interrelated with each other in affecting interns' work performance and internship experiences. For example, interns' self-discipline is somehow a moderator of the influence of their work (home) environments. Whether interns are devoted to their work assignments is also affected by whether the tasks assigned to them are compatible with the WFH setting. Establishing a set of internship policies, as discussed, with better preparation in conjunction with a communication system can enable a wider range of job tasks to be assigned to interns. More importantly, the prior WFH experience of the CPOs can have a direct impact on their ability to implement an S-L internship programme smoothly when operating under the WFH mode. In addition, the WFH preparation performed by CPOs can ensure a good communication system is in place during implementation. This, in turn, can provide timely support to solve interns' work problems. Moreover, a well-prepared contingency plan can also help improve interns' work efficiency/quality during implementation, particularly when switching between different work modes.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the emerging literature on WFH internships in particular to the scantly researched field of S-L internships which have been observed to encounter problems during the pandemic because direct service S-L jobs require more interpersonal interactions. Overall, the interns favoured more on-site F2F rather than the remote WFH mode due to their perception of the latter having more disadvantages than advantages. Furthermore, we identify success factors that can guide CPOs in establishing internship policies, preparing and selecting intern candidates with suitable characters. Therefore, even when on-site F2F internship cannot be carried out in the future for certain reasons, remote WFH internship can still be implemented with positive intern learning outcomes.

Practical implications

COVID-19 has accelerated the transition of S-L internship programmes from F2F to WFH mode, resulting in certain pedagogical challenges, as revealed in the current study. Although this research was based on limited data with preliminary analysis, the results have uncovered major issues with regard to the WFH mode and its key success factors. Elements such as prior preparation, agreed work rules and personal motivators are believed to be such WFH success factors. Based on these factors, it is suggested that CPOs implement a set of internship policies and preparation to overcome the negative impacts of the WFH mode. Given that WFH will become a part of the "new normal" and is not expected to be relinquished, even after COVID-19, this study and the findings can serve as a guidepost for instructors, CPOs and interns when they engage in WFH S-L internship programmes in the future (Woodside, 2017). In addition, the findings from this study can also give potential interns ideas of how to prepare themselves for better engagement in S-L internship programmes.

Despite the main focus of the current study being S-L, the findings can also apply to other employers and organisations involved in student internships as the backgrounds of those students who enrol in these programmes are likely similar. Prior preparation and selecting disciplined and motivated candidates, therefore, become important when implementing the WFH mode. Likewise, for educators and S-L practitioners who are in charge of this type of internship, they need to ensure that preparation is well-performed and an effective communication system is in place, with regular monitoring during implementation under the WFH mode. Internationally, employers may need to provide more support to Asian candidates in terms of motivating them to be more proactive under the WFH mode, given their reactive/passive habits. This paper, therefore, serves as a primary and practical reference for different stakeholders involved in S-L internship programmes.

Limitations and further studies
There are two major limitations to this study. First, the findings are based on one Hong Kong S-L internship programme with a small sample. This may limit the generalisability of the research findings, including revealing whether other types of S-L internships encounter similar obstacles to their implementation and cultural influences on work performance under the WFH mode. Another limitation lies in the fact that how interns' initial work experience under the F2F mode impacts their subsequent work performance was not analysed when switching to the WFH mode. Understanding transition dynamics is particularly useful to organisations with regard to how to adopt the WFH mode smoothly and successfully when shifting from F2F mode. Further research is needed to explore this topic with a larger sample size across disciplines and service sites, instead of focussing on just one university, in order to enhance the level of generalisability and contribute to the development of a practical and theory based WFH model in the future. Furthermore, longitudinal studies with repeat observations of the same course over the next few years could also shed light on whether the WFH mode is still favoured in the post COVID-19 era (Young and Bevan, 2020).

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Appendix

The interview questions for the representatives of community partner organisations
Collaboration history with the university

(1) How many times have your organisation collaborated with the university on this internship program?

(2) Apart from this internship program, what other service-learning courses/projects have you worked with us?

Evaluation of interns' performance

(3) What did you expect about the interns' performance and outcomes? And particularly when the work is conducted in the work-from-home (WFH) mode?

(4) What do you think the interns performance in this internship? Are they good/not good?

Assessment of interns' contribution to the organisations and the community

(5) Do you see any benefits by the interns contributing to the organisation through the internship? Any particular contribution made through the WFH mode?

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the WFH mode and its comparison with the face-to-face in-person mode

(6) Do you think WFH facilitate or hinder interns' performance? Why?

(7) How does the amount of face time (both physical and passive)/or lack of it affect interns' performance? Please give detailed descriptions of specific instances.

(8) Do you think the tasks assigned to the interns consistent throughout the internship period? If not, would they be distributed by the work mode?

(9) When the internship had to switch to online due to the spike of COVID-19, how much do you think this affect the interns performance? Why?

Difficulties of working from home in the internship programme and suggestion to facilitate work performance in the WFH mode

(10) Did you observe any difficulties that the interns have encountered when they worked in the WFH mode?

(11) What kind of training and support do you think useful for the interns who work in the WFH mode?

The interview questions for the interns
Self-evaluation of interns' work performance

(1) What was your expectation of this internship?

(2) What do you think about your own performance? Good or not good? Why?

(3) What did you learn from the internship?

Difficulties encountered in the internship and ways to cope with such difficulties

(4) Did you encounter any difficulties when working from home? And how did you solve these problems?

Comparison between the WFH and face-to-face mode

(5) Do you like working from home? Why and why not?

(6) Comparing between working face to face and working from home, which is better? Why?

Suggestion of useful organisation's supports for facilitating work performance

(7) What do you think your internship organisation has done to facilitate your effectiveness when working from home?

(8) What do you think anything that your organisation or the university can do further to facilitate your job performance and learning outcomes?

(9) What do you think the key to success of WFH internship?

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