

Dilrukshi Kurukulasuriya on how structured internship programmes accelerate employability and strengthen organisational readiness.

# From Interns to Impact Makers



As experienced professionals progress through their careers, organisations inevitably face the challenge of replenishing their workforces with capable, future-ready talent. For this pipeline to be sustainable, graduates must not only leave university with theoretical knowledge but also develop the practical skills and workplace behaviours expected in modern corporate environments.

Internships have long served as the critical link between academic learning and real workplace demands, offering undergraduates an entry point into professional life. Dilrukshi Kurukulasuriya, Executive Director & Chief Human Resources Officer at DIMO, emphasises that internships, when designed with intention and aligned to long-term talent needs, become a critical stage of early talent acquisition, benefitting both the organisation and the intern.

## Structuring Effective Internship Programmes

To enhance the value of internship

programmes, organisations must prioritise both structure and clarity in their design. The foundation of a successful internship lies in a thorough assessment of the company's present and future skill requirements, ensuring that the programme is closely aligned with strategic objectives rather than being treated as an isolated initiative.

In addition to aligning internships with business priorities, it is important to focus on developing the capabilities of fresh graduates. Even in cases where interns are not directly absorbed into the organisation, investment in their professional growth yields returns through strengthened employer branding. By equipping graduates with employable skills and competencies, companies not only contribute to their career development but also enhance their reputation as employers of choice among future talent pools. Meaningful internships revolve around real work assignments, clear learning outcomes, mentorship and access to cross-functional interactions that help build employability skills.

Corporations must also recognise that today's undergraduates are highly purpose-driven. If they understand how

their internship links to the organisation's larger impact and strategy, they become more committed and engaged. In short, design the internship as a pathway for potential employees, not as a temporary placement, she says.

## Bridging the gap between academia and industry

Universities must forge stronger, more consistent industry linkages that move beyond guest lectures and annual career fairs. Industry input should shape curriculum design not as an afterthought, but as a central pillar, especially in engineering, IT, business, and technology, where trends evolve far faster than academic syllabuses.

A more collaborative model, where industry practitioners co-deliver modules, review projects, and mentor student teams, can significantly elevate graduate readiness. Equally important is cultivating workplace behaviours early: communication, ownership, problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability competencies are as critical as technical knowledge. When universities embed practical learning, sustained industry exposure, and structured internship preparation into their programmes, undergraduates emerge far better equipped to contribute from day one, Kurukulasuriya elaborates.

## Factors Students Consider When Choosing Internships

Today's undergraduates increasingly prioritise meaningful learning over company name alone. They look for internships that offer real responsibility, structured development, and cultures where they feel included and respected. Mentorship, access to leaders, and clarity around potential career pathways are highly attractive factors.

In line with these priorities, Gen Z also



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## Best practices for effective internship programmes

Mutual value between interns and employers stems from shared clarity and respect. Companies should begin by setting clear objectives, so interns understand what they are expected to learn and deliver. In return, interns must demonstrate ownership, curiosity, and a willingness to adapt.

Dedicated mentors guide interns through real organisational work, while continuous feedback on behaviours, thinking patterns, and performance helps them grow throughout the programme. Exposure to cross-functional perspectives, values and interactions with leadership enhances understanding and motivation. For companies, reviewing conversion rates, interns' feedback, and programme outcomes ensure ongoing improvement. When both sides invest in the process, interns develop meaningful capabilities, and organisations strengthen their talent pipelines.

## Learning from global internship models

Globally, leading countries such as Germany, Singapore, Australia, and the Nordic nations treat internships as a cornerstone of national workforce development. Sri Lanka can adopt similar models by setting minimum standards for learning, mentorship, and work exposure; creating a national internship framework; incentivising companies that maintain high-quality programmes; and fostering industry-university clusters that mirror applied learning ecosystems globally.

Institutionalising these practices, Kurukulasuriya says, would elevate internships from ad hoc placements to strategic nation-level talent development mechanisms, strengthening Sri Lanka's competitiveness and preparing its youth for the future world of work.●

values flexibility and work-life balance. Organisations with strong reputations for developing people, such as DIMO, recognised as a Great Place to Work for over a decade, naturally draw more interest because students trust they will be supported and challenged in the right ways, Kurukulasuriya explains.

## "Internships" are not just low-cost labour opportunities

Changing the outdated perception of internships begins with how companies design and communicate their programmes. Interns quickly recognise whether they are treated as contribu-

tors in development or simply as extra hands for low-value tasks. According to Kurukulasuriya, organisations must "walk the talk" by clearly articulating the purpose of their internship programmes.

When internships are positioned as investments, not expenses, the narrative shifts. Showcasing real employee journeys from interns to leaders reinforces the message that internships can catalyse meaningful careers, and transparent and ethical practices, combined with visible leadership involvement, further build trust. Over time, positive intern testimonials serve as evidence that an organisation genuinely supports emerging talent.