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THE POWER OF STUDENT INTERNSHIPS

Internships have emerged as a powerful tool to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical skills, benefiting students, universities, and businesses. It is a win-win situation, yet there is still untapped potential to be explored, addressing some of the current challenges of the Slovak graduate labor market.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BRIDGING THE GAP

Academia has traditionally been regarded as the fountain of knowledge and innovation, equipping students with critical thinking and a strong foundational understanding. However, employers frequently express concern over graduates' lack of practical, job-ready skills. Internships act as a vital bridge, enabling students to apply academic theories in real-world settings while gaining essential industry-specific skills. At the same time, businesses gain from the fresh perspectives interns bring, along with the opportunity to shape potential future employees. Universities, too, can enhance their curricula by incorporating feedback from industry partnerships, ensuring that their programs remain relevant and competitive.

Student internships, however, can have transformative power to impact other interesting areas.

RETAINING TALENT THROUGH LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES

Internships can play a pivotal role in addressing the challenges of brain drain, when talented students leave their home country and companies face the skill shortages. By creating meaningful connections between students and local industries, internships can serve as a strategic tool to retain talent and bridge the skills gap. Internships

expose students to rewarding career paths within their home country, demonstrating that they don't need to leave to find fulfilling work. When students experience growth, mentorship, and valuable opportunities through internships, they are more likely to consider local companies as viable long-term employers. It helps to build a sense of loyalty and belonging to local businesses and encourages students to envision a successful career without relocating abroad.

ATTRACTING STUDENTS BACK POST-STUDY

For students who study abroad, internships with local companies can serve as a bridge to re-integrate them into the country's workforce. Offering internships during summer breaks or as part of alumni engagement programs can lure them back with attractive career opportunities. It provides a pathway for returning students to reconnect with their local economy and encourages highly skilled individuals to contribute to the home country.

CULTIVATING EMPLOYER BRANDING

Nowadays, students have a wide range of quality employers to choose from. Companies that invest in quality internship programs establish themselves as desirable employers. By offering mentorship, skill-building opportunities, and clear career progression, these companies become more appealing to young

talent. The key element is the effective promotion of the programs or projects companies offer to students, combined with the sharing of best practices from past collaborations. It enhances the company's reputation among students and universities and positions the organization as a preferred employer for graduates.

BROADENING REACH FOR GREATER IMPACT

Marketing an internship program exclusively to students from specific study sectors and the region where the company operates may seem logical, but this approach can limit the program's potential benefits. Restricting marketing to a narrow audience reduces the chances of attracting diverse candidates who may bring unique perspectives and skills as well as attracting relocation ready talent. By promoting the internship program more broadly, companies can enhance their brand visibility among a wider audience. This not only increases interest in the internship program but also builds long-term recognition among students who may later become customers, partners, or employees in other roles.

ATTRACTING FOREIGN STUDENTS FROM ABROAD

Foreign interns bring unique perspectives, skills, and cultural experiences that foster creativity, innovation, and fresh problem-solving

approaches, helping organizations adapt to global markets. They serve as a gateway to international talent, potentially becoming long-term employees or ambassadors for the company in their home countries. Hosting foreign students also strengthens ties with their universities, opening doors to research partnerships and access to future talent. These collaborations enhance visibility and branding for companies and universities alike, while fostering cross-cultural understanding and inclusivity in the workplace. Additionally, foreign interns address labor market shortages with their language skills, specialized knowledge, and technical expertise. Their economic contributions through housing, transportation, and leisure spending boost local economies and promote the host country as an attractive destination. For instance, the EU program Erasmus+ offers a unique opportunity for companies to host foreign students on internships.

As the founder of the Slovak Consortium of Universities specializing in international student internships through the Erasmus+ program, I firmly believe that attracting and retaining foreign students also contributes to positioning Slovakia as an attractive career development destination for Slovak graduates. An international environment is often one of the key elements that current Slovak students seek when exploring opportunities abroad, and creating such

an environment at home can encourage them to consider Slovakia for their professional growth.

UNLOCKING THE FULL POTENTIAL OF INTERNSHIPS

Internships are much more than a bridge between academia and the professional world, they are a transformative force capable of shaping talent pipelines, retaining skilled graduates, and fostering innovation. By addressing challenges like brain drain, skill gaps, and global competitiveness, internships empower students, strengthen businesses, and enhance the quality of education.

For Slovakia, embracing the untapped potential of internships, particularly through initiatives like the Erasmus+ program, is key to becoming a destination of choice for both local and international talent. Companies, universities, and policymakers must work collaboratively to create inclusive, impactful programs that not only address current labor market challenges but also position Slovakia as a hub for career growth and development.

The win-win nature of internships demonstrates their value, but their full potential lies in a broader, more inclusive vision. By continuing to innovate and expand opportunities, internships can play a central role in building a thriving, interconnected future for students, businesses, and academia alike.