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Managers need to understand the emotional roller coaster interns go through

Internship is a period of intense emotions to which managers must pay attention if they want to retain potential future employees. Jiaqing (Kathy) Sun and Courtney Masterson studied the experiences of 75 interns among US college students and found that their overall happiness only tells part of the story. Daily fluctuations in happiness also matter.

At their best, internships provide students valuable opportunities to apply their knowledge, develop new skills and build their professional network. They are a chance for students to be in the “real world” of work.

Internships can also be considered a trial period where managers can get a better sense of whether an intern might be a good fit for a more permanent position with the company. Interns are also trying to get a better sense of their supervisor. “Is this someone I’d want to work for?” Yet, **our research** reveals that this trial period can be filled with ups and downs and experienced as an “emotional roller coaster” for interns.

To better understand interns’ emotional experiences and the impact on job desires, we conducted a daily diary study involving 75 US college students who were beginning internships in various organisations. Over the course of their first ten days at work, we asked them to report on their most memorable daily interactions with their supervisors and how happy (or not) those interactions made them feel. By tracking these emotions day by day, we could see how their feelings and perceptions of their relationships with their supervisor fluctuated.

In addition to these daily reports, we also collected information about the interns’ optimism to see how these traits played a role in managing the ups and downs of their emotional experiences. At the end of their internship, we asked them to report to what extent they desired to seek full-time employment with the company after the internship ended.

Our research revealed three key insights:

- (1) Interns' overall happiness only tells part of the story – their daily fluctuations in happiness also matter;
- (2) Interns' psychological traits enable them to experience these ups and downs of happiness in different ways;
- (3) Supervisors need to be cognisant of even seemingly small interactions with interns.

Why interns' happiness fluctuates

Our findings show that supervisors play a pivotal role in shaping interns' daily feelings of happiness. Unsurprisingly, when interns consistently feel happy in their interactions with their supervisors, they are more likely to believe that the relationship is developing positively. Ultimately, when an intern believes that they have a high-quality relationship with their supervisor they are more likely to want to pursue a long-term job with that company.

But here's the twist: It's not just about how happy an intern feels on average; the ups and downs in their happiness also matter. Internships can feel uncertain, especially when you're just starting out. Interns often don't fully understand the organisational dynamics, the norms, or even their own role in the company. To further complicate things, their emotions can feel like a roller coaster, going up and down depending on their daily interactions with their supervisor. One day might bring smiles and approval, while the next might feel cold and disconnected. These emotional swings, or "happiness variability", provide clues about the quality of the relationship between interns and their supervisors.

The role of optimism

Not everyone experiences the emotional roller coaster of an internship in the same way. Our research found that the employees' optimism played an important role.

Optimism reflects how much people expect good things to happen. Interns high in optimism are more likely to assume future interactions with their supervisors will be positive. However, when their happiness fluctuates due to inconsistent interactions, these optimistic interns may start doubting the quality of the relationship. The variability contradicts their natural expectation for positive outcomes, which can reduce their overall sense of connection with the supervisor.

On the other hand, low-optimism interns, who might already anticipate negative experiences, may find a pleasant surprise when interactions with their supervisor turn out better than expected. For them, this variability can signal a positive trend and strengthen their perception of the relationship.

Managing the emotional roller coaster

If you're a manager, it's essential to understand that even minor interactions can have a big impact on your interns' emotions. Interns who develop a positive relationship with their supervisors are more likely to see a future at that company. But if their experience is marked by too many negative interactions or too many uncertainties, they may lose interest in seeking permanent employment.

Here's how you can use these insights to improve internship programmes and encourage future hires:

- **Create memorable, positive interactions:** Make time for regular check-ins and acknowledge good work. Interns are learning, so even when they make mistakes, give feedback that encourages growth rather than discourages them.
- **Be consistent, but human:** While positive interactions are crucial, it's natural that not every day will be perfect. The key is to build a foundation of trust and respect. Even small gestures — like acknowledging an intern's effort or explaining a challenging feedback session — can balance the emotional seesaw.
- **Stay attuned to emotional shifts:** Recognise when an intern seems unhappy and ask them what's contributing to their negative feelings. Address these emotional fluctuations early on.
- **Provide guidance through uncertainty:** Help interns navigate the uncertainties of their new environment. The clearer they feel about their role and your desire to develop a high-quality relationship with them, the more likely they will aspire to work at the company longer-term.
- **Understand individual differences:** Not every intern reacts the same way. Some may take setbacks in stride, while others may experience more significant emotional fluctuations. For example, interns with high optimism may be more sensitive to changes in their experiences.

By paying attention to the emotional journey of your interns, you are not only helping them succeed, but also laying the groundwork for potential future employees who feel connected, valued, and eager to stay with your organisation.

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- *This blog post appeared first in LSE's Department of Management [blog](#). It is based on [The roller coaster of happiness: An investigation of interns' happiness variability, LMX, and job-seeking goals](#), by Courtney Masterson, Jiaqing (Kathy) Sun, Sandy J Wayne and Donald Klumper, in the *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*.*
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