



Quality Internships for SMEs in IT sectors

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A Practical Guide for SMEs

An Evidence-Based Best Practice from Erasmus+ INTERNSHIP4SMES Project

1. Introduction: The Role of Internships in the Digital Economy

In today's rapidly evolving digital economy, the demand for skilled professionals in Information Technology (IT) sectors continues to grow at an unprecedented pace. Fields such as data science, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and cloud computing are expanding, yet many organisations struggle to find candidates with the right combination of theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

Internships have become one of the most effective tools to address this gap. They provide a structured opportunity for individuals—especially young graduates and career changers—to gain real-world experience, develop competencies, and transition more smoothly into employment.

However, despite their importance, not all internships deliver meaningful outcomes. Many lack structure, clear objectives, or proper supervision. This issue is particularly visible in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), which often operate with limited human resources and lack formal internship frameworks.

The Erasmus+ project *INTERNSHIP4SMES* was designed to address this challenge by developing a practical, tested, and evidence-based framework to support SMEs in delivering high-quality internships.

This guide presents the key findings, lessons learned, and best practices emerging from the project, offering a practical roadmap for organisations, trainers, and stakeholders.

2. Project Overview and Methodological Approach

The *INTERNSHIP4SMES* project was implemented under the Erasmus+ KA210 programme in the field of adult education. It brought together partners from Sweden, Estonia, and Türkiye, combining expertise in IT training, research, and SME consultancy.

Objectives of the Project

- To identify the main challenges affecting internship quality in IT SMEs
- To understand expectations and experiences of interns, HR professionals, and employers
- To develop a structured internship framework
- To promote best practices across Europe

Research Approach

The project adopted a mixed-method methodology, combining:

- **37 interviews:**
 - Stakeholders (education & policy)
 - HR and recruitment experts
 - SME internship providers
 - Interns
- **Survey data from 125 respondents**, focusing on:
 - Satisfaction levels
 - Learning outcomes
 - Skill development
 - Internship structure

This approach ensured that the framework was grounded in real experiences and practical needs, rather than theoretical assumptions.

3. Why Quality Internships Matter

For Interns

Quality internships provide:

- Hands-on experience in real work environments
- Development of both technical and soft skills
- Increased confidence and professional identity
- Better career orientation

For SMEs

Well-designed internships enable SMEs to:

- Identify and train future employees
- Introduce new ideas and innovation
- Reduce recruitment risks
- Build organisational capacity

For Society

At a broader level, quality internships:

- Reduce skills mismatch
- Improve labour market integration
- Support digital transformation

Key Insight:

Internships are not simply training activities—they are strategic investments in human capital and innovation.

4. Key Findings from Data Collection

The project revealed several critical insights:

✓ Structured internships significantly improve outcomes

Interns participating in structured programs reported higher satisfaction, clearer expectations, and better learning results.

✓ Mentorship is a defining factor

Interns with active mentors demonstrated stronger engagement, faster skill development, and better performance.

✓ Real-world tasks increase value

Interns working on real projects felt more motivated and gained more relevant experience.

✓ Lack of structure leads to poor experiences

Unclear roles, undefined tasks, and lack of guidance were the most common issues.

5. What Works: Core Elements of High-Quality Internships

5.1 Clear Structure and Planning

A successful internship begins with clear planning:

- Defined objectives
- Timeline
- Expected outcomes

This provides direction and reduces uncertainty.

5.2 Effective Mentorship

Mentors play a central role in:

- Guiding interns
- Providing feedback
- Supporting learning

Best practice includes assigning a dedicated mentor for each intern.

5.3 Real-World Task Engagement

Interns should be involved in:

- Actual company projects
- Problem-solving activities
- Team collaboration

This ensures meaningful learning.

5.4 Continuous Feedback

Feedback should be:

- Regular
- Constructive
- Action-oriented

It helps interns improve and stay motivated.

5.5 Alignment with Skills and Career Goals

Matching interns with appropriate roles ensures:

- Better engagement
- Higher satisfaction
- Stronger outcomes

6. What Doesn't Work: Common Pitfalls

The project identified several recurring issues:

- Interns assigned repetitive or low-value tasks
- Lack of supervision or mentorship
- No structured onboarding process
- Absence of evaluation or feedback

Key Insight:

Poorly designed internships can be counterproductive, leading to frustration and disengagement.

7. The INTERNSHIP4SMES Framework

The project developed a **4-phase model**:

Phase 1: Planning

- Define objectives
- Identify skills
- Design internship structure

Phase 2: Onboarding

- Introduce intern to company
- Provide tools and training
- Clarify expectations

Phase 3: Implementation

- Assign real tasks
- Provide mentorship
- Monitor progress

Phase 4: Evaluation

- Assess performance
- Provide feedback
- Reflect on outcomes

8. Practical Tools for Implementation

The framework includes ready-to-use tools:

- Internship Learning Agreements
- Progress Tracking Templates
- Evaluation Forms
- Feedback Checklists

These tools help SMEs implement structured internships without heavy administrative burden.

9. Practical Checklist for SMEs

Before Internship

- ✓ Define objectives
- ✓ Assign mentor
- ✓ Prepare tasks

During Internship

- ✓ Monitor progress
- ✓ Provide feedback
- ✓ Ensure engagement

After Internship

- ✓ Evaluate performance
- ✓ Collect feedback
- ✓ Consider employment

10. Case-Based Examples

Example 1: High-Quality Internship

- Structured onboarding
- Weekly mentoring
- Real project work

Result: High satisfaction and employment offer.

Example 2: Low-Quality Internship

- No structure
- Administrative tasks
- No feedback

Result: Poor experience and no skill development.

Example 3: Improved Model

SME adopted framework →

- ✓ Clear structure
- ✓ Mentorship
- ✓ Evaluation

Result: Improved outcomes and efficiency.

11. Recommendations

For SMEs

- Invest in structured programs
- Prioritize mentorship
- Use practical tools

For Educators

- Align curriculum with industry needs
- Prepare students with practical skills

For Policymakers

- Support SMEs
- Promote internship standards

12. Sustainability and Future Use

The framework:

- Can be adapted across sectors
- Will remain available online
- Will be used in future projects

Partners will continue promoting results through:

- Workshops
- Training sessions
- Professional networks

13. Conclusion

This guide has demonstrated that high-quality internships in IT sectors are not the result of coincidence or goodwill alone, but rather the outcome of intentional design, structured implementation, and continuous evaluation. The findings of the *INTERNSHIP4SMES* project clearly show that when internships are planned strategically and supported through effective mentorship and real-world engagement, they become powerful tools for both individual and organisational development.

One of the most important conclusions of this project is that structure matters. Internships that include clearly defined objectives, roles, timelines, and evaluation mechanisms consistently lead to higher satisfaction levels, stronger skill development, and better employability outcomes. In contrast, unstructured internships often fail to deliver meaningful learning experiences and may even discourage participants from pursuing careers in the sector. Therefore, adopting a structured approach is not an administrative burden, but a key success factor.

Another critical element highlighted throughout this guide is the role of mentorship and human interaction. Interns do not only learn from tasks—they learn from people. The presence of a dedicated mentor who provides guidance, feedback, and support significantly enhances the overall internship experience. This reinforces the idea that internships are not only technical learning environments, but also social and professional development spaces.

The importance of real-world task engagement has also been strongly confirmed. Interns who contribute to actual business processes, problem-solving activities, and team collaboration gain a deeper understanding of their field and develop competencies that cannot be achieved through theoretical learning alone. This type of engagement not only benefits interns but also creates value for SMEs by introducing fresh perspectives and innovative thinking.

For SMEs, the project demonstrates that high-quality internships are not out of reach, even with limited resources. By using practical tools, adopting a phased framework, and focusing on key principles such as clarity, mentorship, and feedback, SMEs can transform internships into efficient talent development and recruitment mechanisms. In this sense, internships should be seen not as temporary arrangements, but as long-term investments in organisational growth and sustainability.

From a broader perspective, the implementation of quality internships contributes to addressing key societal challenges, including skills mismatch, youth unemployment, and the need for a digitally skilled workforce. By improving the transition from education to employment, internships play a crucial role in strengthening labour markets and supporting economic development.

Finally, the framework and practices presented in this guide are not limited to the IT sector alone. While developed within a specific context, they are transferable and adaptable to other industries and organisational environments. This scalability ensures that the impact of the project can extend beyond its initial scope and continue to benefit a wide range of stakeholders.

In conclusion, high-quality internships represent a shared responsibility between SMEs, educators, policymakers, and learners. When designed and implemented effectively, they

create a win-win situation: interns gain valuable skills and career opportunities, organisations develop future talent, and society benefits from a more skilled and adaptable workforce. The challenge ahead is not to recognize the importance of internships, but to ensure their quality, accessibility, and sustainability in the years to come.