Maarten Brand

THE LITTLE INTERNSHIP BOOK FOR MENTORS

A Field Guide for Workplace Mentors

HAYSTACK

For everyone who is a mentor.

Sometimes on purpose.

Sometimes by accident.

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FOREWORD

Where Is the Toilet?

If you opened this book expecting a tidy handbook full of arrow diagrams and tables, put it down. Really.

I did not write this book to gather dust in a desk drawer. This is not academic literature where you have to look up what the author means by ‘the ontological validity of the learning process’. This book is different. In this book I describe your daily reality as a mentor. I write about the things that actually happen. The intern who gets lost on the way to the toilet on the first day. The mentor who forgets about their intern for weeks: ‘Oh right, that one was still around…’

Of course this book also has substance: solid, evidence-based and useful. There are checklists too. But it all reads easily. Because there are already enough sleep-inducing textbooks that mostly serve as doorstops or coasters.

In short: do not expect dry fare. Expect a mix of recognisable insights and a touch of irony. This book is a bit like an internship itself: chaotic, funny, occasionally annoying, but always instructive.

INTRODUCTION

Not a Luxury, a Priority

Congratulations: you are now officially a mentor. Not because you asked for it. Not because it is in your job description. Just because that is how it works: everyone is a mentor. Or rather: everyone should be. Look around you. Companies are crying out for people, schools need internship places, and students need guidance.

Once upon a time an intern was assigned a mentor and that was that. ‘Good luck.’ The student would tag along as if they were already a colleague. Handy for the work, but whether they actually learned anything was another matter. That does not fly today. Interns expect guidance and a meaningful experience. Schools demand it. And companies need it badly, because internships are a powerful tool for recruiting, onboarding and retaining talent. They are also great for your reputation as an employer and for your brand. That is why mentoring interns is not a luxury for a few enthusiastic colleagues with good intentions. It is a standard part of a professional role and it should be a priority for any organisation that takes itself seriously.

Everyone should be able to do it. Everyone should do it.

So the question is not whether you want to be a mentor, but how you want to mentor.

And yes, that pinches sometimes. You already have your regular job. You have targets to hit, clients to help, projects to finish. How do you do this without burning out or disappointing your intern? That is what this book is about.

A small note on what to call yourself

This book is for workplace mentors. But what that role is called depends entirely on which border you happen to be sitting near.

In **Germany** you are an *Ausbilder*, or, when a student is doing a shorter placement, a *Praktikumsbetreuer*. Solid, four-syllable, gets the job done. In **Switzerland** the same person becomes a *Berufsbildner*, which sounds slightly more official and probably has a 40-hour federal certificate to prove it. In **Austria** it is *Ausbildner* or *Lehrlingsausbilder*, depending on the trade. Same family, slightly different accent.

In **France** you are a *maître de stage* if you are senior enough to wear the title with a straight face, or a *tuteur de stage* if you are not. Same person. Different Tuesday. In **Belgium** it depends on which language the corridor is speaking. In Flanders you are a *stagebegeleider*. In Wallonia you switch back to *maître de stage* and start over.

And then there is the **Netherlands**, where the language has produced roughly as many words for the role as the Inuit are said to have for snow. You can be a *stagebegeleider*, a *praktijkbegeleider*, a *praktijkopleider*, a *werkbegeleider*, a *BPV-begeleider*, or, if your trade is old enough to remember guilds, a *leermeester*. Each word means roughly the same thing, but Dutch organisations have agreed to disagree about which one is correct, possibly forever.

In **Italy** you are a *tutor aziendale*. In **Spain** a *tutor de empresa*. In **Portugal** an *orientador de estágio*. The Romance languages have settled the matter: you are a tutor, and the company belongs to you, or possibly the other way round.

Cross into **Poland** and you become an *opiekun stażu*, which translates roughly as *guardian of the internship*, which is rather lovely and possibly the most accurate title in this entire list. In the **Czech Republic** you are an *instruktor odborného výcviku*. In **Slovakia** an *inštruktor praxe*. In **Hungary** a *gyakorlati oktató*. In **Romania** a *coordonator de stagiu*. In **Slovenia** a *mentor v podjetju*.

Head north and the language stiffens up a bit. In **Sweden** you are a *handledare*. In **Denmark** a *praktikvejleder*. In **Norway** a *praksisveileder*. Three words that all mean roughly the same thing: the person who shows the way. In **Finland** you are a *työpaikkaohjaaja*, which is a single word containing roughly seventeen consonants and means *workplace guide*. In **Estonia** a *praktikajuhendaja*. The further north you travel, the longer the word and the shorter the daylight.

Add **Ireland** (placement supervisor), the **United Kingdom** (workplace mentor or work-based learning supervisor), **Greece** (*επιβλεπων πρακτικη&sgr; α&sgr;κη&sgr;η&sgr;*), and **Iceland** (*verkstjóri* or *leiðbeinandi*), and the list grows again. Twenty-something countries. Twenty-something titles. Twenty-something forms to sign at the end of the term.

And underneath all of those words, the same job.

Now here is something the dictionaries quietly skip over. *Mentor* comes from Homer. In the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus leaves for Troy, he entrusts his young son Telemachus to an old friend called Mentor. A trusted colleague. A bit grumpy, probably. The kind of man who has seen things and now mostly wants his coffee in peace.

At the decisive moments in the story, when Telemachus actually needs guidance, Mentor is not really Mentor at all. He is Athena, goddess of wisdom, who has taken on his form. Same beard. Same voice. Same slightly creased tunic. But underneath, something larger is doing the work.

That is the job, almost exactly. You bring yourself: your mood, your bad back, your strong opinions about how the printer should be loaded. And at the same time, in the moment it matters, you are also playing a role that is bigger than you. You are vocational education with a face on it. You are the labour market in a fleece pullover. You are the trade itself, leaning over a workbench. The intern does not always know which of the two they are talking to. Honestly, neither do you.

That is why the title stops mattering after a while.

Standing next to a young person at the photocopier, explaining for the third time why the toner needs replacing. Wondering whether anyone is learning anything at all. Noticing, three weeks in, that they have stopped flinching at the phone. Catching them, six months later, explaining the same machine to someone newer. That is the moment the work shows itself.

Because the intern you are guiding today is the colleague who will guide someone else in five years. And that someone will guide another. The trade you practise, the standards you uphold, the small repairs you make to a young person's confidence on a Tuesday afternoon. All of it travels forward. Through them. Past you.

So whatever your card says, *Ausbilder*, *tutor*, *handledare*, *opiekun*, *maître*, *guardian*, *guide*, this book is for you.

To us, you are not just doing a job.

You are quietly shaping what European working life will look like a decade from now.

How to read this book

This is not a novel you race through to find out who the murderer is. This is a reference. You can read it cover to cover. On a campsite, on the train, at home in the evening when you really cannot face another series. But honestly, it works much better to pick this book up the moment your intern does something that makes you think: help, what do I do now?

So read this book in bits. A chapter here, a tip there. Treat it as a toolbox you open when the situation calls for it.

And yes, there is logic to it. The book is built like a three-stage rocket:

1. First, the basics: roles, building blocks and lenses. The engines that get the rocket off the ground.
2. Then, the practice: the situations where you need to switch gears, stop or push through. The second stage that takes you higher. Twenty real situations submitted by working mentors.
3. And finally, the depth: reflection, pitfalls, a glossary and a toolbox. The capsule that keeps you flying. Into space.

You will not need everything in the toolbox at once, but there is always something in there that helps. A self-scan. A checklist. Some conversation tips.

You will find short summaries throughout. Short enough to fit on a post-it on your screen. Useful as a reminder, without having to leaf through the whole book.

Safety as foundation

Learning theory talks, loosely, about friendly versus hostile learning environments. Hostile does not mean there is a panther lurking among the office plants near the printer. It means that learning is not a given. A company is usually a hostile learning environment. The workplace is built for output, not for learning. Chaos, pace, clients, urgent jobs. And there is always one colleague riding the forklift like they are auditioning for The Fast & The Furious: Warehouse Drift.

In learning theory this is called a hostile learning environment because three things are missing:

- predictability,
- quick, clear feedback,
- the psychological safety to ask something dumb.

In a hostile environment, experiences pile up but craftsmanship does not emerge. The intern sees a lot but learns little. It is like walking into an escape room without hints, without a time limit and without knowing whether you are even in the escape room or have wandered into the storage cupboard. Not pleasant.

That is why everything starts with safety. Without safety, no one learns anything. You end up with interns who nod along for three months, blend in, and then vanish as if they have entered witness protection.

Safety means, concretely, that an intern dares to say: ‘I have no idea what is going on.’ Or: ‘That explanation made no sense.’ And that you think: good, there is trust here.

CHAPTER 5

Embrace the Discomfort

The previous chapter was about your own biases. But even with self-knowledge you still bump into the messy reality of learning. It is not a straight road. It is a winding path full of bumps and misunderstandings.

This chapter sketches situations I have come across in the thousands of conversations I have had with mentors over the past twenty years. You may recognise them. The intern who turns up late three times (‘Lazy.’) or who gives you feedback over coffee as if you are the one being assessed (and seems to find that perfectly normal). Small frictions that show learning never sits with the student alone, and mentoring never sits with you alone. It happens between you, in the form of misunderstandings, silences and unexpected reactions.

The United States Marine Corps has a fine phrase for it: *embrace the suck*. Embrace the wet socks, the mud, the awkward moments. Because that is where the real learning lives, in the trembling web between you and your intern. Do not push the discomfort away. Lean into it.

This chapter walks through twenty-two dilemmas and how to handle them.

Dilemma 1.
How do I keep the relationship with the school going?

You know the moment. You are halfway through a deadline, the printer has jammed, and that is when the teacher calls. 'Just a quick word about your intern...' You think: I do not even know how I am doing. Or a coordinator suddenly turns up at the door, armed with a folder full of tabs and assessment forms. You feel caught out. Like a teenager at a parents' evening, complete with a red face and bad excuses.

And yet: the relationship between the school and the company is crucial. Mentors often see it as hassle. Another meeting. More boxes to tick. But in reality this contact can make the difference between an internship that runs smoothly and one that ends after three weeks in grumbling, spreadsheets and an intern who 'needs to talk' to HR.

Partner or police?

For some companies, the school is the police. An institution that turns up to check whether everything is being done 'by the book'. A bogeyman with a checklist. For others, the school is a partner. Someone who helps when you get stuck, who provides context, who understands what is going on inside students' heads.

The truth? They are both. Sometimes they show up with a whistle and a yellow card. Sometimes to put an arm round your shoulder.

When do you raise the alarm?

Mentors often wait too long. They think: I will sort this out myself. Brave, but rarely smart. Because much of what you see in practice also shows up at school. The intern who shuts down whenever they get feedback. That does not have to be your puzzle alone. Bring the school in to spot patterns together.

The intern who keeps clashing with colleagues? That same student often has conflicts with classmates. Time to look together at what is underneath. Or take the perfectionist who keeps postponing everything. They hand in school reports late and forget deadlines on placement. You will not fix that just by 'being stricter'. You fix it with a wider conversation. A simple email or phone call stops you from having to figure it all out alone.

A sore point

Research into the quality of internship companies keeps showing the same thing: communication between school and company is the most fraught issue. Companies find schools slow and bureaucratic. Schools complain that companies never feed anything back. Meanwhile, the intern is stuck in the middle. The result: frustration, misunderstandings, and sometimes early dropout.

Example

An internship coordinator at a college got a call from a mentor at an advertising agency. The mentor had had enough. His intern was late every day. Five minutes, ten minutes, sometimes half an hour. He had already told the intern it might be better to stop. For him the cause was simple: no motivation, no commitment. Until the coordinator explained what was going on. The intern was a carer for his mother. He had to help her every morning before he could leave the house. Not an excuse, not unwillingness. Pure overload. That was when the penny dropped. Being late was not a sign of disinterest, but the result of a practical problem. A problem the student needed the courage to share. Practical problems can be solved: a later start, agreements about catching up, flexible hours. Of course the company wanted to help. But they had to know about it first.

This is why communication matters so much. Without the information, you only see half the picture. With the information, you can act instead of judge.

Short and honest

Teachers also have full diaries. So keep it short. Not a novel by email, but three lines. This is going well. This is not. This is what I want to know. Do not write a polished success story. Honesty works better. Because if school and company give the same signal, it lands ten times harder with the intern.

Share the wins

Contact does not have to be only negative. Share a success now and then. 'The intern gave a presentation today. It went brilliantly.' An email like that, with the intern in cc, costs you two minutes and gives you three things. The intern feels seen. The school sees that it is working. And you do not come across as a complaints desk with a mentor's mood.

Take the lead

How you organise the contact does not really matter. Some companies use software where school, student and company all look at the same progress overview. Useful. Like watching one clock together instead of three watches that are all slightly off. Others do it the old-fashioned way: a phone call, an email, a group chat.

The point is: take the lead. Do not wait for the school to call or for the intern to stumble. You can start this conversation. Often that is what saves the placement.

Think of it as a table. With three legs, it stands firm. You. The school. The student. Take one leg away and your coffee ends up on the floor. And believe me: nothing demotivates an intern more than cold coffee and soggy paperwork.

Conclusion

The relationship between school and company is not a side issue. It is a chance to tell one story to the intern together. Because nothing is more deadly than a mentor saying ‘You are doing fine’ while the school says ‘You are failing.’ Or the other way round. Consistency is the key. So: call earlier than you think you need to. Email more briefly than you are used to. Use software when you can, your phone when you must. But above all: do not treat the school as a police officer. Treat it as a partner. Because every study shows the same thing. Poor communication between school and company is a recipe for frustration.

The Internship Canvas

Mentoring can disappear into stray emails, chat messages and half-completed forms. The Internship Canvas brings it all back to a single sheet. What goes on it?

- Goals: what does the intern need to learn (school) and contribute (company)?
- Agreements: working hours, contact moments, assessment criteria.
- Progress: what is going well, where is help needed?
- Responsibility: who does what. Intern, school, mentor.
- Outcome: what products or results do you expect at the end?

How to use it

- Fill it in together at the start.
- Pick it up every four weeks for a quick update.
- Use it as the basis for your final assessment.

Dilemma 2.
What if my intern and I just don’t get each other?

Your intern is sitting opposite you, grinning broadly, and after your carefully built explanation says only: ‘OK boomer.’ You think: I am not even a boomer. You drop a meme from 2020 (you thought it was still hip), and your intern looks at you as if you have just sent a fax. Or you ask careful, considered questions while they fire back answers in turbo-tempo. Result: you are talking, but no one is understanding anyone.

Why this happens

Learning and working together is not just about tasks. It is about language, pace and codes. Humour, word choice, even emoji are a kind of lens through which you look at the world. Your lens: spreadsheets and email. Theirs: short videos and gaming chat. No wonder you sometimes talk past each other.

The three classic misunderstandings

1. Meme mismatch. You quote one viral moment. They are thinking of a completely different one. Result: awkward silence.
2. Identity mix-up. You think you are talking neutrally. They hear assumptions you did not realise you were making.
3. Tempo twist. You take your time to give a careful example. Your intern races through three half-sentences and a GIF to get to the conclusion and back to their phone.

What you can do

1. Try a different lens. Not your own (‘That is how we always did it.’), but try to see through theirs. What do they mean by that odd word, that little laugh, that sudden silence?
2. Work with the web. Think of communication as a web hanging between you. Everything moves. Often at the wrong moments. Usually on exactly the strand you were not paying attention to. Sometimes there is a beautiful drop of dew on it. Sometimes a sticky fly. One tap on the right strand is enough. The rest will tremble along.
3. Make it explicit. Just say: ‘I do not get the joke. Explain.’ Or: ‘I am slow. You are fast. How do we deal with that?’ It feels clumsy. It works. Looking blank also helps.
4. Look for the shared battery. You differ in style. But there is usually one thing that drives you both. Pride in a result. Pleasure in working together. A weakness for good coffee. Find that shared battery and charge it together.

Example

You: ‘Can you have this report done by Friday?’

Intern: ‘Bet, easy fix.’

You: ‘Sorry… what?’

Them: ‘Just yes.’

You: ‘OK, I am writing down: Friday, done. And I have learned a new word.’

What not to do

- Twist yourself into knots trying to sound ‘young’. No one is buying it.
- Dismiss your intern with: ‘They do not understand anything any more.’ Fastest route to zero motivation.
- Try to smooth everything over with HR training. It is just practice. Some fumbling. Some trying again.

Lesson for mentors

The point is not that you suddenly have to talk young. The point is that you make the barely visible web between you discussable. The different lenses. The pace. The misunderstandings. If you respond with appreciation, you charge the batteries and turn the language gap into a learning moment.

In short	If you react dismissively	If you react with appreciation
Lenses	• Principle: 'I am right, they should adapt' • Structure: stiff (my pace = the standard) • Insight: intern learns that humour or style differences get punished • Skill: waiting until you are done • Activity: complying and going quiet	• Principle: 'differences are open for discussion' • Structure: clear, agreed together • Insight: intern experiences 'I am allowed to explain my own language' • Skill: translating their own style into a shared working language • Activity: actively building bridges
Batteries	Autonomy and Enjoyment drain. Motivation drops.	Autonomy charges ('I get to bring my own style.'). Enjoyment rises ('We are laughing about it together.').
The result	You feel old and frustrated. The intern feels misunderstood.	You learn a new word. The intern feels seen. Their motivation and confidence rise.

What if you completely fail to understand each other?

- Accept that you are wearing different lenses.
- Make the web discussable. The strands tremble messily and never all at once.
- Ask, instead of pretending you got it.
- Find a shared battery to charge.
- Laugh at the misunderstandings (yes, at yourself too).

Mentoring is not a language exam. It is learning to ride a bike on the same road, even if you are on a heavy old roadster and your intern is on an e-bike with turbo.

EPILOGUE

Where This Book Began: in the Cracks

So there you are. At the end of this book. And you may be thinking: nice, sharp, sometimes confronting, but what good is it to me tomorrow? That is almost the answer already. Mentoring is exactly that. Cosy and useful at the same time. And every now and then you find yourself standing next to a wheezing coffee machine with an intern, wondering why this feels like an Olympic sport with a flat-pack instruction leaflet.

This book starts where my previous one left off. *The Big Internship Book for Employers* was about grip. Processes. Phases. Hooks to hang things on. Useful stuff. But anyone who works with interns for more than a week knows: practice rarely behaves like a tidy coat rack. It is more like the cloakroom of a sold-out concert venue in November. Coats on the floor. Keys vanished. Umbrellas that turn out to be yours. And somewhere in the middle of it, someone is also trying to learn something.

That tension came into focus when someone asked me, after a talk, where exactly learning sits in the internship cycle. Recruitment, selection, onboarding, mentoring, assessment, exit. I said: ‘Everywhere.’ It sounded reassuring. Almost wise. But ‘everywhere’ is also nowhere in particular. Because learning does not sit neatly in step three. It runs through everything. By the coffee machine. In a customer’s raised eyebrow. While someone presses the wrong button by accident. When a colleague mutters something that turns out, three days later, to be exactly what was missing.

Learning is the gravity of the workplace. Always on. Even when no one is paying attention and no one feels like it.

In the face

And here, two philosophers walk into your workshop together that you would not expect to see side by side. Mike Tyson, philosopher of direct experience, says: ‘Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face.’ Loosely: your planning is beautiful, until reality says hello. A machine that breaks down. A schedule that shifts. A colleague who is ‘working from home’. An intern who, halfway through, says they might want something else after all.

Then Karl Popper joins in. With language. He says the world is made of clocks and clouds. Clocks tidily do what they are supposed to. Clouds keep changing shape. They drift. They obey nothing. They turn a sunny afternoon into the kind of day where you go looking for your coat.

Tyson throws the punch. Popper explains what happened. And you think: ah, this is just called Tuesday.

The problem is that we keep treating organisations, teams and internships as if they are clocks. While in reality they behave like clouds. The internship is one big thundercloud of good intentions, lack of time, broken coffee machines and accidental learning moments that turn out to matter more than everything that was planned. You think you are building structure, but sometimes you are trying to measure the sky with a ruler. Pointless. And we keep doing it anyway, because without the ruler we feel uneasy.

That is why I have not worn you out with endless schemas and policy notes. Those are already lying in a drawer somewhere. What you got here are stories, hooks, pieces of equipment, metaphors. Not a heavy manual you have to lift onto the table with both hands. A pocket knife that always fits in your jacket.

And believe me: you do not have to be the perfect mentor. There is no such thing. You never see everything at once. And you always bring yourself along. Your mood. The headache from that meeting. The stress-coffee with no breakfast. On Monday you see your intern as a gem. On Tuesday as an assault on your nervous system. That is part of it. Mentoring is your day multiplied by your intern's. Sometimes it resonates. Sometimes it tangles. Sometimes it is like a stuck shopping trolley: one tap on the wheel and it rolls again.

And that is exactly the point. As professionals, we like to seal up the cracks. Looks tidier. Less bother. But learning happens in those cracks. Leonard Cohen said: 'There is a crack in everything; that is how the light gets in.' Not in smoothed-out plans. In unexpected moments, frowns and small breakthroughs. In the cracks that open up.

The difference

So the difference is not in your perfect protocol. It is in your small taps, in a world that is never quite a clock and always a little bit a cloud.

A question.
A smile.
A pat on the shoulder.
A strand you let tremble.

Just begin. The internship is a continuous, restless state, and your small taps make the difference.

It really is something.

THE LITTLE INTERNSHIP BOOK FOR MENTORS

A field guide for workplace mentors

Congratulations. You are now a mentor.
Maybe not because you asked for it.
Usually because that is how it goes.

A Field Guide

The workplace is where interns really learn.
But work is busy.
There are deadlines, customers, routines,
broken coffee machines and colleagues who say:
'Just watch me for a bit.'
Somewhere in all this, an intern has to learn the job.

That is where you come in.

As a workplace mentor, you help an intern learn,
work and grow.
You are the link between school,
the workplace and the future professional.

This little book gives you practical help:
clear language, simple roles and useful ideas
for real situations at work.

No heavy theory.
Just a field guide for workplace mentors.

For workplace mentors, managers and organisations who know internships are too important to leave to chance.

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