High-Flying Interns Who Are Going Places
By Alicia Clegg

Christina Pelka caught the travel bug as a Californian schoolgirl holidaying in Cuba. So when she heard through the college grapevine that KPMG, the professional services firm, was offering overseas internships to students she made sure she was part of the programme.

“Every dinner, basketball game and campus event they hosted, I was there. I knew that if they had interns travelling abroad, they must be serious about international opportunities,” Ms Pelka says. She completed a four-week internship in London in 2008 and now works at KPMG’s Chicago office, and is optimistic about a transfer to Europe.

KPMG is one of a number of organisations giving student interns an early taste of cross-border working. As more businesses operate globally, they want employees who have experience of working in other countries. Graduates, for their part, say they are up for overseas challenges. In a multi-country survey for professional services firm PwC, 71 per cent of recent graduates said they would like to work abroad at some stage.

There are, however, extra complications for employers that send interns overseas. These range from flying young people abroad at the company’s expense, making sure they have a valid visa and finding them accommodation to the hassle of sharing responsibility for a number of students between offices in different parts of the world.

Designing programmes carefully may improve the return on investment. Some employers reserve overseas opportunities for potential high-fliers as a way of indicating that their abilities have been spotted.

As well as taking on undergraduates in its European home markets, cosmetics company L’Oréal has another, smaller group that has been nominated by local HR teams for follow-on placements abroad. “The original international programme launched in Europe three years ago and was so successful that this year we’ve made it global,” says Frédérique Scavennec, group recruitment director.

For some employers, internships are also an exercise in commercial diplomacy. They help with global expansion and forge a relationship with ambitious students who might one day become employees, clients or suppliers. When it was first entering the US market in 1999, Indian IT company Infosys brought US students to its futuristic Bangalore campus to dispel what Ganapathy Subramanian, head of corporate
planning, calls “the misconception” that emerging markets did not produce great companies. Today, Infosys’s eight to 12-week placements in India draw students from 30 countries.

Another Indian company, Tata Consultancy Services, part-funds and supports the Study India Programme, which is run by the UK-India Education and Research Initiative, a scheme to build educational links between India and the UK. Undergraduates from British universities spend three weeks in India learning about the culture, followed by a week’s placement with an Indian employer.

German national Radoslaw Nowak joined the Frankfurt office of Infosys after a stint as an intern at the Bangalore campus. “I wouldn’t have thought about working for an Indian company... I didn’t expect anything so modern,” he admits. He particularly enjoyed meeting candidates from other countries, and is still in touch with a fellow intern who joined the company’s French branch.

In recent years, more companies have been offering interns financial support so as not to miss out on bright but hard-up students. Paying travel and accommodation expenses plus a modest wage overcomes the problem but pushes up costs. **Sean Treccia, KPMG’s US director of campus recruiting, says a four-week overseas placement costs an extra $10,000.**

KPMG judges that the experience helps to prepare interns for working with international clients if they join the firm. But other employers are playing wait-and-see.

PwC stopped its global intern exchange programme, in which interns on two-month placements swapped with interns in other countries for three weeks. It concluded that they learnt as much, or possibly more, from spending the whole placement in the home country getting to grips with a meaty domestic project—especially when foreign languages were involved.

Despite these reservations, if more employers generally were to offer overseas internships, PwC would probably reintroduce them, says Charles Macleod, head of global sourcing. In fact, some PwC operations, such as in Germany, still allow some interns to spend time abroad.

Of course, there are no guarantees for travel-loving interns that they will become globally mobile executives. Despite championing overseas internships, Ms Scavennec says it makes commercial sense for recruits to prove themselves locally first.

Nor do graduates’ dream destinations necessarily tally with target markets.

Daniel Nivern, director of CRCC Asia, which organises internships in China, says enterprising western graduates have been seeking opportunities further afield. However, PwC’s study suggests the pioneering spirit is not typical. The countries most of the recent graduates picture when they imagine working abroad are high-comfort mature ones, particularly the US and UK, not high-growth emerging markets—with just 11 per cent aspiring to work permanently or temporarily] in India and 2 per cent in China.

So should businesses save their budgets for seasoned employees?

Shirley Jackson, global director of recruitment at professional services firm Ernst & Young, reckons that now many students use social media channels to communicate about their activities, overseas internships are good PR. “It’s part of our wider branding,” she says.

For Ms Scavennec, “people see they could go anywhere in the world”.

The key is to make sure the intern has a local sponsor who is happy to oversee them and give them a serious project, says Michael Römer, a partner with a division of management consulting firm AT Kearney, which is piloting a programme.
But the time outside working hours is also a consideration. Justine Thompson, UK recruitment manager for law firm Baker & McKenzie, says: “[Domestic] interns are usually one of a group – when they go overseas they’ll often be on their own.”

Among employers such as the big professional services firms where competition for people has never gone away an international internship programme helps distinguish one potential employer from another. Mr Macleod is pondering a kind of “overseas-internship lite” that would reward the best domestic interns with a fortnight’s work-shadowing abroad, without the heavy costs of a full-blown overseas programme.

As a former intern, Ms Pelka points out the prestige that is conferred by overseas work. “Having done the global internship programme is kind of a highlight on my résumé,” she says. “It’s seen as a prestigious programme in the firm. When I met our chairman, I made sure that I mentioned I had done it.”

Mapping A Scheme
● Be brilliant at the basics. Sweat the detail over where interns will live, who will meet and mentor them. Check there are no visa-related obstacles. Some interns are seasoned travellers, says Justine Thompson, UK recruitment manager for law firm Baker & McKenzie, but others may be flying for the first time.
● Respect local law. Some countries, including the US and China, have visa rules that can prevent the host office paying interns a wage. To avoid problems, advises Pattie Walsh, a partner at law firm DLA Piper, arrange payment from the home office.
● Don’t exclude. Ear-marked as high-fliers by head office, global interns have a head start. But make sure that interns from regional markets also have opportunities to gain experience abroad.
● Be strategic. Global internships can help open up markets Infosys organises get-togethers for former interns – some of whom are, or may become, clients and suppliers.