

Gilles Bousquet  
*University of Wisconsin-Madison*

BEYOND APPEARANCES: CROSS-CULTURAL  
ANALYSIS IN A BUSINESS INTERNSHIP PROGRAM  
WITH FRANCE

Crossing over to France to do business may not seem as challenging as setting operations in East-Asia or in Eastern Europe. After all, there is a great deal that is *familiar* in France to the American business person. But how *real* is such familiarity at first sight?

For all the so-called “Americanization” of French life and culture—a major topic of debate in the past ten years in France—French business culture still holds quite a few surprises for US companies, given that the workplace, the urban environment, consumer culture, all *appear* to be more and more similar, and will continue to resemble each other under the pressures of globalization. In reality, cultural forces and the socio-political environment continue to give French business distinctive traits that are all the more surprising given the more familiar landscape. For those who will be involved professionally with France, such specificity still needs to be identified and analyzed in the new context of seemingly recognizable signs.

In the present article, I will first introduce the Summer Business Research Internship at the University of Wisconsin-Madison discussing its structure, objectives, French host firms, and outcome. Referring to a sample of past internship assignments, I will then examine how the internship experience can provide a challenging combination of business skills, in addition to cross-cultural and language training. Lastly, I will consider some key social and cultural values bearing upon business practices in France that are uncovered during the internship.

THE SUMMER BUSINESS RESEARCH INTERNSHIP PROGRAM:  
STRUCTURE, OBJECTIVES, OUTCOME

The particular internship program to which I will refer is a joint initiative of the French department and the Business school at the Univer-

sity of Wisconsin-Madison. Since 1988, the program has featured a summer-long exchange of internship positions between the US institution and two counterparts in France: a school of Engineering in Marseilles, and a school of Business in Paris. The program is primarily designed for advanced undergraduate students who have a double background in French and Business. Since its inception, more than 120 internship positions<sup>1</sup> have been exchanged. Students spend six to eight weeks in a company or organization working on an assignment proposed by the company and agreed upon by the academic institution. Determining and agreeing upon a given assignment is an essential ingredient to a successful internship. In addition, the intern has access to people, to documents, and to records (with the obvious exception of personal or sensitive information). He/she may be invited to staff meetings and is welcome to go out in the field with the sales team or to meet with customers. The intern thus has significant entry points into the company's operations, history, and environment.

The internship program is open to students in French and Business. Language students are required to have had some exposure to business practices (as evidenced, at a minimum, by having taken a business French course). For Business students, the minimum requirement is a fifth semester of French or its equivalent. The selection criteria, however, may vary substantially depending on the students. Since each applicant presents a special case, rather than absolutely enforcing minimum requirements, the directors view the two areas of concentration as complementing each other: the less formal business training a student has (mostly the case of language majors), the more advanced his/her knowledge of the language and culture must be. Conversely, when a business student has less than the required five semesters of French, his/her functional skills must be very high and the internship to which he/she is assigned very specific.

The program is designed to allow each participant to interact with the French industrial, commercial, and business communities at the highest possible level. It seeks: 1) to enhance student's understanding of business systems and practices (in a regional, national, and/or European context);

<sup>1</sup>I will not go into detail about French students interning in American firms or organizations in this article. Data shows however that more than 60 French students have come (mostly) to Wisconsin. Out of those, 53 came from the school of Engineering in Marseilles. In this instance, we have more specific information which shows that 20 positions were held with industrial firms, 12 in engineering consulting firms and the rest in a number of service firms, including banks (8 positions), and various university research centers.

2) to significantly develop the language and culture proficiency of each participant, with an emphasis on business and economic terminology on the one hand, and on business culture as part of a broader socio-cultural framework, on the other; and 3) to establish ties with French firms and the French-American business community.

In our experience, the key to a successful business internship in the foreign country lies in the capacity for the student-intern to adjust, in a short period of time, to a different business environment and to become productive with often minimal guidance. The students must be able to participate in the firm's day-to-day activities, as well as to contribute in a measurable way to its operations. In a foreign firm, located abroad, to reach such a level of performance in a few weeks is in itself an accomplishment. Indeed, efforts made during the adjustment period are carefully taken into account in the overall academic evaluation of the internship experience.

On both sides of the Atlantic companies of all sizes have taken interns. Because of our alliance with a school of Engineering in France, American students have been able to work in a number of important *industrial* companies, which account for about 1/3 of all the program's French host firms—among them: Elf-Aquitaine, General Electric Medical systems, Jacob-Delafon.<sup>2</sup> Small and medium-sized industrial firms have provided great variety to the program. Among them are Veyront-Froment, a regional pharmaceutical firm, based in Marseilles; Procida, a company producing fertilizers; Ben Marine, a boat equipment manufacturer; and Syminex, a high-tech measuring systems firm; Joy informatique, a small software company also based in Marseilles.

Typically, however, *service* companies constitute the majority of our host firms. Three categories are well represented: 1) financial institutions, mainly banks, but also insurance companies and investment firms; 2) economic development organizations, such Chambers of Commerce and research/technology parks (such organizations value American interns for their ability to help explore a contact point in America or in an English-speaking country); and 3) consulting/research firms, in particular those in marketing and public relations. Overall, it is worth noting that banks have greatly contributed to the program, in particular Crédit Agri-

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<sup>2</sup>Jacob Delafon is the largest French producer of sanitary wares (bathtubs, whirlpools, shower bases, lavatories, etc). It employs 1600 people worldwide, of which 1200 work in France. It is now owned by the Kohler Company, of Kohler, Wisconsin.

cole, Crédit Lyonnais, Crédit Mutuel, Banque Populaire Provençale et Corse, and State Street Bank.<sup>3</sup>

Interns are required to write a ten- to fifteen-page report, with full documentation, in which they are asked to provide a detailed overview of the host firm or organization (or department), with specific references to products or activities, clients and competitors, partners and the economic/regulatory environment, promotion/communication strategies, as well as plans for short-term development. The program directors (in French and Business) have always emphasized the importance of the report as: 1) a reference, in particular when a company hosts an intern several years in a row or if the company turns out to be a case-study in the interaction of business, language, and culture; 2) a tool for observation and analysis (to which a diary can be attached); 3) a means for the intern to intensify contacts with people in the company (through informal interviews, in particular); and 4) a way to learn more broadly about the firm's past and current operations (for instance, through written records), as well as to understand the firm's position in its business environment.

Finding well-suited internships is by no means easy. Today, the value of internships is well-recognized as an intricate part of international business training. A decade ago, however, university credits given for internships were viewed with a degree of skepticism, if not suspicion. What has kept the Summer Business Research Internship Program going is the perception that small and medium-sized US companies, in particular, had a real need for internationally trained students. This gave our student-interns a critical edge during interviewing and hiring over other students. Starting with the internship experience in France, numerous non-business major interns have made a successful and rapid transition into business, often working in international positions. Three "success stories" are worth a brief mention. The first one caught the attention of the press and was featured in an article published by the *Milwaukee Journal*, entitled: "The Perfect Job: Student Brings Future from Abroad." During an internship at a regional development agency in Marseilles, our student made contact with a small French firm that had created an ultralight pressurized oxygen chamber for victims of decompression sickness, carbon monoxide poisoning, and other accidents. The firm thought the product had potential for sale in the US. The company, however, had very little

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<sup>3</sup>State Street Banque S.A. is a subsidiary of the prominent State Street Boston Corporation. The French entity was founded in 1991 and specializes in mutual funds.

knowledge of how business is done in the competitive US market. As part of his internship, the student assisted the company in establishing contact with possible partners and distributors in this country. He created product literature in English and sent it all across the US. The French firm was so impressed that it asked the student to act as their US export representative upon his return to Madison, a position that carried no salary but potential for sales commissions. Sometime later, a Florida company showed strong interest in the French product and the student assisted in the meetings between the two parties in the US, which led to a licensing agreement worth several hundred thousand dollars. This experience landed him several interviews with large international companies. He now manages his own company.

Over the years, our program has been successful in enhancing student-interns' international employment opportunities, in particular for French majors who have few previous business credentials. For instance, a French major who interned with our program in 1988 is now working in a prominent biotechnology company. She is heavily involved with the firm's European subsidiaries and distribution network. She has management and marketing responsibilities in France, Spain, and Germany, traveling to all countries. Soon she will be involved in the Asian expansion of the company. Her situation exemplifies the value of the internship experience for an employer, mainly that the demonstrated ability to work in a French business in France reveals cross-cultural and language skills that can also be transferred to other parts of the world. Two years ago, a French/International Relations major who interned in a small public-relations firm in Paris was hired within weeks in a Chicago-based automotive company to handle their European sales relations. She wrote back to say that her internship assignment had grabbed the attention of her future employer and made a great difference during the interview process. Business majors have also contributed a number of success stories. For instance, the Kohler Company (parent company to a number of French firms) has hired three of our former interns who quickly found themselves on their way to France. Having had to integrate into its corporate culture several hundred French employees, the US firm relied on American business graduates with fluency in French, and business and culture experience in France, as key intermediaries.

As certificates and joint degrees in business, languages, and area studies become available, the skills that our interdisciplinary internship program

provided in a more “hands-on” fashion are now offered in a structured sequence. The internship experience, however, still remains a key element in acquiring proven international expertise.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE INTERN AS “OBSERVATEUR ENGAGE”

A sample of past internship assignments will help us understand what makes the internship abroad such a unique situation. Two major areas of business activities have provided the most reliable and successful internships. The first area is marketing and the second is communication/public relations, which may be combined with administrative duties.

Marketing is an area in which language and culture majors are not at a disadvantage compared to business students. As Kamal Fatehi points out:

The higher the interaction between a functional area and the host culture, the higher its potential for experiencing problems. For example, marketing and sales functions interact with the host culture much more than the R&D function. (158)

Such interaction is what language and culture students have been training for and is an area in which they have substantial experience, as they may have already spent a year abroad. In 1994, an International Relations and French major (who had experience in the medical field) was assigned the following task in global marketing analysis at the General Electric Medical Systems subsidiary near Paris: to identify “generic indicators which can be used to assess the potential or actual market for mammography and surgical equipment on a global basis” (Goetz 1). This represented one of the most challenging tasks yet assigned to one of our student-interns. It involved reviewing and selecting key demographic information and market evaluators, as well as understanding patterns in the mammography market development. While two months proved obviously too short for such a project, the student-intern gained a first-hand knowledge of the G.E. marketing research methodology, an understanding of differences in health policies in European countries and how they affect sales of radiographic and surgical equipment, as well as some general differ-

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<sup>4</sup>Recently, the school of business at UW-Madison created an exceptional five-year Bachelor of Business Administration that requires a major in a “functional” business area (Marketing, Finance, Management, etc.), the equivalent of an Area Studies major, as well as a semester and a summer internship abroad.

ences in attitudes towards medicine and physicians across Europe in comparison to America.

On a more regional level, a student recently interning at the Crédit Agricole regional office in Le Mans was assigned to study “le marché des seniors,” i.e., to highlight key variables in the bank’s efforts to conquer a wider segment of the people aged 55 and over. Her study involved three parts: 1) demographic data; 2) income data; and 3) needs of that particular age group. She was to conclude by highlighting specific elements on which a subsequent marketing strategy would be based. Such a well-defined internship assignment shows a perfect balance between gaining experience in a functional business area (in this case, marketing) and understanding important socio-cultural differences. Some of these differences include: perception of old-age, pattern of investments, lifestyles, and health and retirement benefits. The study was conducted in close cooperation with the entire marketing department of the bank. The ten pages in the student’s report devoted to this part of her assignment are so revealing that they could be used as background and teaching material in a culture unit devoted to French retirees.<sup>5</sup> This internship assignment shows the importance of integrating business and culture and also of training students to analyze “mentalités” while in a Business French class.<sup>6</sup>

Working on a communication/public relations project has proved to be equally beneficial to students. Due to generally higher language skills, French majors have been successful at creating brochures, leaflets, and reports in both English or French that were needed by the company or organization. For instance, in 1992, a French/Arts major interned in the International department at the Regional Council of Provence Alpes Côte-D’Azur. Her assignment was to help finalize the French version, and write the English version, of the brochure presenting the regional pavillion at the Seville Universal Exposition. Such a task implied integrating a team already at work on the document as well as collaborating closely with a native for the French version. Communication/Public relations projects such as this one are linguistically very intense for the student who, in the end, will notice a definite improvement in his/her

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<sup>5</sup>Recently, France’s “personnes âgées” has become a well-identified topic in advanced language and culture classes. *La France dans tous ses états*, by Bragger and Chartier (Heinle and Heinle, 1995) devotes an entire section to this question.

<sup>6</sup>I presented a rationale for such an approach in “Vers une culture des affaires? Mentalités, comportements, représentations dans la classe de français commercial.”

knowledge of terminology and writing skills. Putting together a brochure or preparing a report (on a new service or product, for instance) has another key benefit: it forces student-interns to interact with a number of individuals in the organization as they, first and foremost, have to understand the product or service itself and the firm's overall communication strategy. A 1994 assignment with the regional office of the French insurance group AXA is exemplary. The student writes:

My training session took place in the "Development and Communication" department. In this department, salaried workers concentrated their efforts on the continuity of relations between AXA and the general public and the relations between the branch and the area agents. (Heilman 7; editor's translation)

Within this framework, the student's task was to create a report detailing financial results and agents' performance for a particular investment product over a three-year period. Preparing an organization's written document is highly valued by the student for there is tangible proof of their accomplishment in bilingual communication. It can also become a useful portfolio item in a job interview situation, yet not all assignments are that focused. In the past, students may have had to answer the phone or to prepare letters. Provided such tasks remain a small part of the overall internship, students have encouraged us to have future interns tackle the telephone switchboard for a day or two. They found it to be the most challenging comprehension and response exercise they had ever done.

The above assignments show how real the American intern's contribution to the host firm can be. The internship abroad does more, however, than provide work experience for the student. A participant in the firm's operations, the student-intern is at the same time a direct observer-analyst of the host business culture. We can compare the intern's situation to that of an ethnologist who studies a group of people belonging to another culture. Success, as measured by the wealth of observation and analysis, depends on one's capacity to become temporarily part of the group studied.

The student-intern constantly moves across the "border" separating the "insider" (an employee of the host firm) from the "outsider." The complexity of the situation derives from the fact that the American intern in a French firm is an "outsider" on two levels: 1) because of the tempo-

rary nature of his assignment in the firm, as the case would be for a French intern; and 2) because he is a “foreigner” in the country. The intern must learn about a given *corporate* culture, within a *national* business culture. The intersection of the two areas provides the intern with a complex comparative analysis that involves differences in the context of national identities as well as in reference to regional and corporate specificities.

In a business setting, identity and otherness—“Eux” and “Nous”—can refer to differences between the host firm and companies in another region, in another trade, or in the same region, thus defining a corporate identity that can very well leave out the national/foreign dimension.

It is now clear how an internship abroad provides many opportunities to observe and make sense of cultural differences in business situations. A student observes and reflects but also reacts and adapts to different behaviors, assumptions, and values. After several weeks of such constant training, definite cross-cultural skills are acquired that allow the intern to make the necessary adjustments to a new company environment, within a given country. Comparative analysis has only begun since such cross-cultural skills can be transferable. It is often the case that students interning in France do come back with remarks about regional differences, as well as French views about other European countries, since student and business exchanges within Europe are more common. Comparative analysis generates multiple perspectives as, for instance, perceptions by one European country of its neighbor’s business culture can be contextualized when a third party (the American student-intern) reflects on what one country’s perceptions of another country tell us about the country itself. Such shifts in points of view teach us to effectively avoid stereotyping while developing relative operating principles.<sup>7</sup>

Comparative analysis enables student-interns to cross cultures and to function in different countries, evaluating events from a different view point, in a different language. Due to these skills, international interns may become valuable to the home country firm not only because they

<sup>7</sup>On January 9, 1993 *Le Monde*, published a remarkable article entitled “Luther contre Descartes,” written by Ludwig Siegele (who subsequently received “Le Prix franco-allemand de journalisme” for this very piece). The article dealt with differences in management styles between the French and the Germans. “Having stayed in Germany for extended periods of time, I became very excited about what appeared to me as a shrewd analysis and made it a central piece for discussion in my advanced French business class . . . until students tactfully reminded me that I was indeed also a French person. From that point on, the article was discussed in three steps: a) my reading of the article [,] b) the students’ reading of the article and of my reading [and] c) multi-cultural perspectives and reading strategies.

can work abroad but also because of their ability to be an intermediary (and a mediator) between the host firm and firms abroad. Cross-cultural training enables interns (now employees) to adjust, reformulate, or establish communication between the two sides (the firm in the 'home' country and the firm 'abroad'), at the various levels where communication breakdown can occur. Having been on both sides, interns provide the key link to cross-national business ventures. Such a function was exemplified a few years past in the case of Kohler Company acquiring a large French manufacturer, as I detailed above.

#### KEY SOCIAL AND CULTURAL VALUES UNCOVERED

Interns are expected to follow the overall work schedule of host firm's employees as a basic commitment on their part. By being present in the company an average of seven to eight hours a day, the fundamental observation that American interns make during their summer internship is that the French conceive of "work" in a fairly different way compared to Americans. For instance, interns can become well acquainted with one or several individuals in the company and find out that these people may have invested a sizeable portion of their free time (and sometimes of their financial resources) into another area than "work," a "jardin secret" that they cherish. This investment in time and skills is completely separate from the company activities. Some employees turn out to be avid "cultural consumers" of movies, concerts, festivals, exhibits, museums; others are respected leaders of an "association";<sup>8</sup> still others have refined a special talent (in arts and crafts, for instance), while others have developed some very useful and specialized skills (i.e., masonry, electronics, etc.). While other people in the world value "hobbies," what is specific about the French is that these "other" activities are on an equal footing with "work" and play just as important a role (sometimes even more) in measuring a person's success, visibility, or "rayonnement."

These talents, responsibilities, or activities belong to the personal realm, yet they are highly valued not only at the individual level but also at the level of society as a whole. It is fair to say that interns discover that the French do not lead a "work-centered" life; work is definitely only one of the elements of the definition of self, and only one of the measures of

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<sup>8</sup>Various studies give details about French people's interest and participation in associations. About 50% of the French belong to an association, according to *L'Etat de la France* (150–51).

social existence. The nature of, and the relationship between, the professional realm and the personal realm in France must be observed carefully and analyzed, for it is more complex and unpredictable than first meets the eye. Unfortunately, six or eight weeks is not enough to reach any significant conclusion. Such first-hand, prolonged observation of the workplace, however, creates a definite awareness in the American student that there are a number of cultural differences that warrant more study, reading and observation. A process of reflection has started that more advanced courses and subsequent work experience will develop further.

Exploring the relationship between the personal and the professional is immediately relevant to doing business in the foreign country. In France the importance of the personal realm in self-definition gives social activities (parties, dinners, outings) a particular value. Good conversation showing an interest in and knowledge of topics far distant from the professional area can be highly valued as a sign of a "cultured" or "well-balanced" individual for whom one has some respect. The relationship of the personal and the professional is also an important consideration when reflecting cross-cultural communication, negotiation, and motivation.

The internship experience in France brings to the forefront a number of other business areas that are culturally sensitive or even culturally-determined. Among them, we find hierarchical relations. A French company organizational chart does not differ much from that of its American counterpart. Yet, while physically present in the company, interns quickly notice some of the following: 1) that some individuals have a decision-making power and others do not. The network of power relations may differ considerably from the organizational chart ("organigramme"). As Ludwig Siegele recalls in his article: "In Germany decisions are made around a table. The French prefer a pyramid with the boss on top" (18; editor's translation); 2) that spatial relations may signify hierarchy just as much as titles or the way people address each other. Space is managed in a strategic way, such as the location of offices in relation to each other, whether doors are open or closed, whether people move around, where they go and for what reasons. All of the above are important rules and rituals to observe carefully and adjust to. Hence, the open-door model of American offices is obviously still not the norm in France.

The internship opens up a number of differences that have to be taken into account when doing business in France. The crucial part, however,

may not be that there are “Do’s” and “Don’ts,” but rather that to make sense of these cultural differences in the long term, one must examine some of the historical, political, socio-economic, or ideological forces that have shaped these differences. For instance, the attitude toward time appears as a culturally-sensitive item. Should we thus simply tell foreign managers (or student-managers) to follow an expected schedule or should we encourage them to uncover some events or part of the thinking that has shaped the way French employees conceive time? Interns often comment upon the long hours that many French people spend at work. Little by little they understand what use the summer vacation may have in a society fraught with tension. As members of unions point out to students, paid vacations have marked major historical gains in social movements (The Front Populaire, May 1968, May-June 1981). In addition, the message about the economy that Americans hear at home, namely that of boundless opportunities through hard work, is not always supported in France. Various ideological stances depict work as exploitation and alienation, and maintain that the social fabric perpetuates cultural and economic inequalities. Lastly, work-sharing has a whole different ring for people in a society where unemployment has reached dangerous levels and in which official political discourse praises “le partage du temps de travail” [work sharing] as a socially responsible measure to “jump-start” the economy.

The skills needed for long-term cross-cultural analysis in business requires an interpretation of those deeper, partly hidden, long-standing layers of societal life. Students need to understand history, politics, ideology, and culture (popular and traditional). It is at this level of understanding that students of cross-cultural differences in business are able to identify other cultural determinants, perceive change and evolution, as well as transfer such a mode of analysis to other areas of the world.

For a long time “internships” did not figure in the higher education picture in the US. There has been a change in recent years, partly due to the pressures of accountability and the need to make our training truly integrated. A decade of internship experience with France has shown us the following: 1) that international internships are placed high on many companies’ lists of priorities for hiring; 2) that in addition to significantly improving their language skills in a professional environment, student-interns become quickly aware of culturally-determined business views and practices; and 3) that international expertise should be less content-

based than skill-based, emphasizing observation, conceptualization, experimentation, and documentation. Such expertise is less a ready-made package than the result of a *process* that links in a creative way the academic, the personal and the professional. In the same way, an international internship is a unique personal experience that provides a significant early professional advantage, while crossing many academic and disciplinary boundaries.

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