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Bridging HR Theory and Industrial Practice: An Internship Experience at Meta Laundry

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores an internship experience bridging academic HR theories with industrial practices at Meta Laundry, an MSME facing service challenges.

Method: Conducted over five months in the Frontliner division, the intern utilized experiential learning through shadowing, direct execution, and operational problem-solving.

Practical Applications: The internship yielded tangible operational improvements for the host organization, while significantly enhancing the intern's hard and soft skills in real-world settings.

Conclusion: Experiential learning in dynamic MSME environments effectively bridges the academia-industry gap, improving graduate employability and providing actionable insights for higher education curriculum enhancement.

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Introduction

The integration of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) or internship programs into higher education curricula has become a critical strategy for bridging the persistent gap between theoretical academic knowledge and dynamic industrial practices (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). In the context of management education, while universities equip students with comprehensive theoretical frameworks in Human Resource (HR) management, service marketing, and operational management, the unstructured, fast-paced, and resource-constrained reality of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) often presents a stark contrast to textbook scenarios. This gap necessitates immersive internship experiences where students can test, adapt, and apply classroom theories to solve real-world operational problems while simultaneously developing professional competencies that enhance their employability (Ansari, 2024; Xie et al., 2023).

Meta Laundry, a self-service coin laundry MSME established in 2021, operates in a strategic location at Jl. Raya Sigura Gura Kavling 2 No. 18, Lowokwaru, Malang City. The location is particularly significant as it is situated in a densely populated student district surrounded by several major universities, making it a prime area for laundry services. The enterprise is owned and managed by Mr. Kevin Brian and operates with a vision to become "the best self-service laundry in Malang City." The company's mission encompasses providing attractive periodic promotions, offering affordable prices for dry-cleaning services, and delivering excellent service quality. With a workforce of six employees operating in a three-shift system (Morning: 08:00–16:00, Afternoon: 16:00–24:00, Night: 24:00–08:00), Meta Laundry has developed a strong promotional strategy through its 18-column Member Card program, which offers rewards such as "Prize Spin" (on the 3rd, 9th, and 15th visits) and "Free Wash" (on the 6th, 12th, and 18th visits).

Despite having a solid promotional framework, initial observations during the early stages of the internship revealed that customer satisfaction and potential revenue growth were hindered by several managerial and service-related issues. The primary problems identified included: (1) the absence of a queuing system that triggered customer disorder and disputes; (2) technical constraints with the frequently error-prone Smartlink application used to activate washing machines; (3) recurring complaints regarding the quality of the drying process; and (4) inconsistent employee attitudes, with some staff members displaying unfriendly behavior under operational pressure. According to Sun & Jung (2024) and Akkartal & Mizrak (2024), HR is the driving force of any organization; their performance in handling operational barriers directly impacts customer retention and revenue stability. Hanejohan et al. (2023) also emphasize that self-service innovations must be supported by excellent service systems to maintain revenue in the post-pandemic era.

The rationale for selecting Meta Laundry as the internship site is multifaceted. First, the MSME sector represents the backbone of Indonesia's economy, yet it often lacks formalized HR management practices, making it an ideal laboratory for students to observe the practical application of management theories (Markonah et al., 2024; Sugiyanto et al., 2026). Second, the service industry, particularly laundry services, requires a unique blend of technical skills (machine operation, application management) and soft skills (customer emotion management, de-escalation), providing a comprehensive learning environment. Third, the gap between academic theories of Service Excellence (which often assume ideal conditions) and the chaotic reality of MSME operations (with technical failures, emotional customers, and informal workplace cultures) creates a rich context for critical reflection on professional practice.

This internship program aims to analyze the implementation of HR development strategies at Meta Laundry while simultaneously evaluating the intern's competency development. The specific objectives are threefold: (1) to identify the gap between academic HR theories and industrial execution in an MSME context; (2) to document the intern's concrete contributions to resolving operational bottlenecks, including the design of a manual queuing system and the formulation of error-handling SOPs; and (3) to reflect on the

acquisition of both hard and soft skills, as well as the navigation of professional ethics and workplace dynamics. Ultimately, this paper provides theoretical reflections on academia-industry integration and offers actionable recommendations for curriculum improvement at the Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Asia Malang, particularly in the areas of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) simulation and service recovery training.

Method

This internship was executed using an Experiential Learning approach, spanning five months from June 4 to November 15, 2022. The intern was placed in the Frontliner and Operational Division at Meta Laundry, Jl. Raya Sigura Gura Kavling 2 No. 18, Lowokwaru, Malang City. This division was strategically selected as it represents the primary touchpoint for customer interaction, operational execution, and the direct application of HR management theories. The placement allowed the intern to observe and participate in all aspects of the service delivery process, from customer reception to complaint handling.

The systematic workflow of the internship comprised four distinct stages, each designed to progressively deepen the intern's understanding and competency:

Stage 1: Observation and Shadowing (Weeks 1–4, June 4–30, 2022). During this initial phase, the intern engaged in intensive observation of daily operational flows, shift management, and employee-customer interactions. The intern shadowed senior employees across all three shifts (Morning, Afternoon, Night) to understand the informal workplace culture, baseline service standards, and the practical challenges faced by frontline staff. This phase also involved familiarization with the Smartlink application, machine operation procedures, and the Member Card promotion system.

Stage 2: Direct Task Execution (Months 2–3, July–August 2022). The intern transitioned from observation to active participation, performing frontliner duties under supervision. Tasks included operating the Smartlink application to activate machines, managing the 18-column Member Card promotions (filling columns, facilitating Prize Spin rewards), and executing the wash-dry-fold process for drop-off customers. This phase was crucial for developing hard skills in machine operation and application management, as well as soft skills in customer communication and service delivery.

Stage 3: Problem Identification and Intervention (Month 4, September–October 2022). Based on field findings and critical reflection, the intern identified key operational bottlenecks and designed concrete interventions. The primary contributions included: (a) designing and implementing a manual queuing system using laminated number cards (1–10) to manage customer flow and prevent disputes; (b) drafting a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and standard response scripts for handling Smartlink application errors; and (c) developing guidelines for customer emotion management and de-escalation techniques. These interventions were implemented in collaboration with the business owner and senior employees.

Stage 4: Reflective Evaluation (Month 5, November 1–15, 2022). In the final phase, the intern evaluated the impact of the interventions on customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and revenue stability. Data were collected through multiple sources to ensure triangulation and validity: (1) daily operational logs documenting customer interactions, complaints, and resolution strategies; (2) participatory observation of employee-customer dynamics before and after the interventions; (3) in-depth interviews with the business owner, senior employees, and selected customers; and (4) analysis of transaction data and Member Card fill rates. The reflective evaluation also included a critical analysis of the intern's personal development, challenges encountered, and lessons learned regarding the integration of academic theory with industrial practice.

The data analysis procedure involved thematic analysis of qualitative data (interview transcripts, observation notes, operational logs) to identify patterns in customer behavior, employee performance, and operational challenges. Quantitative data (transaction volumes,

Member Card fill rates) were analyzed descriptively to assess the impact of interventions on revenue stability. The entire internship process adhered to ethical standards, including informed consent from all participants, confidentiality of business data, and transparency in the intern's role as both a learner and a contributor.

Result

The internship yielded significant concrete contributions to the host organization while facilitating substantial competency development for the intern. The results are presented in three main categories: operational problem resolution, competency development, and strategic execution.

Operational Problem Resolution (Hard Skills Development). The intern identified that the absence of a queuing system was a critical operational bottleneck causing customer disputes and an uncomfortable waiting environment. As a concrete contribution, the intern designed and implemented a manual queuing system using laminated number cards (1–10), which were distributed by the cashier upon customer arrival. This simple yet effective intervention restored order to the customer flow, reduced disputes, and enabled employees to perform crowd control more effectively. Additionally, the intern drafted a comprehensive SOP for handling Smartlink application errors, including standard scripts for communicating with customers during technical downtimes. These scripts transformed employee responses from confusion and panic to calm professionalism, significantly improving the customer experience during service disruptions.

Table 1. Internship Activity Schedule and Learning Focus

No.	Period	Activities Conducted	Learning Focus
1	June 4–10, 2022	Orientation and SOP Introduction	Workplace culture, machine operation, shift system
2	June 11–30, 2022	Basic Service & Shadowing	Shadowing senior staff, Member Card management
3	July 1–31, 2022	Machine Operation & Smartlink	Operating Smartlink app, handling minor errors
4	Aug 1–31, 2022	Promo Strategy Implementation	Executing Member Card promo (Prize Spin at columns 3, 9, 15)
5	Sep 1–30, 2022	Complaint Management	Handling queue disputes, drying quality complaints
6	Oct 1–30, 2022	HR Performance Evaluation	Analyzing employee attitude impact on satisfaction
7	Nov 1–15, 2022	Report Compilation & Closure	Data collection, final evaluation, farewell

Source: Author’s Work, 2026.

Competency Development (Soft Skills Enhancement). Through direct interaction with diverse and sometimes emotional customers, the intern developed critical soft skills that are difficult to acquire in a classroom setting. The intern acquired de-escalation techniques and active listening skills to handle complaints regarding wet clothes, system errors, and queue disputes. For instance, when facing an emotional customer whose clothes were not properly dried, the intern learned to acknowledge the customer's frustration, apologize sincerely, and offer a practical solution (re-drying at no extra cost), thereby transforming a negative experience into a positive one. Additionally, the intern learned to navigate the informal and high-pressure workplace dynamics of an MSME, developing emotional regulation, professional adaptability, and organizational diplomacy. The intern observed that senior employees sometimes exhibited unfriendly attitudes (jutek) under stress, and learned to maintain professional integrity and model expected service standards without directly confronting senior staff, a delicate balance that required significant emotional intelligence.

Strategic Execution and Revenue Impact. The intern actively executed the Member Card promotion strategy, which is the core revenue driver for Meta Laundry. By enthusiastically facilitating the "Prize Spin" rewards and clearly communicating the "Free Wash" benefits, the intern contributed to creating a positive customer experience that observationally increased the repeat order frequency during the internship period. The intern's role in explaining the promo mechanics to new customers and reminding regular customers to bring their Member Cards was instrumental in maintaining high card fill rates. Data from the operational logs indicated that customers who actively participated in the Member Card program exhibited higher visit frequency and greater loyalty, confirming the effectiveness of the promotion strategy when executed with strong HR support.

The impact of these interventions was evident from the reduction in customer complaints regarding queue orderliness and employee attitudes. The moments of giving rewards in the Member Card program could now be executed more pleasantly, creating a positive customer experience that resulted in increased repeat order frequency and daily revenue stability. The intern's contributions were recognized by the business owner, who implemented the queuing system and error-handling SOPs as permanent operational procedures.

Discussion

The internship experience at Meta Laundry provides a critical lens to analyze the gap between academic theory and industrial practice, as well as the complex dynamics of professional development in a real-world setting. This discussion is organized into three main themes: bridging theory and practice, navigating workplace dynamics and professional ethics, and implications for curriculum improvement.

Bridging Academic Theory and Industrial Practice. In academic settings, Service Excellence is often taught as a standardized, linear process with clear protocols for customer interaction (Saputra et al., 2026; Tjiptono, 2015). Textbooks assume ideal conditions where employees can follow greeting protocols, handle complaints systematically, and maintain a positive attitude at all times. However, the intern experienced that applying these theories in an MSME requires high adaptability and contextual intelligence. For instance, when the Smartlink application crashed during peak hours, textbook "friendly service" was insufficient; the intern had to apply service recovery and emotion management to calm frustrated customers while simultaneously troubleshooting the technical issue. This aligns with recent findings by Prentice et al. (2020) that frontline employees in service industries must possess high emotional intelligence to mitigate the negative impacts of technological failures. The intern learned that theoretical frameworks provide a foundation, but practical application requires improvisation, quick decision-making, and the ability to read customer emotions in real-time.

Furthermore, the intern observed that HR management theories often assume formal organizational structures with clear hierarchies, written SOPs, and dedicated training programs. In contrast, Meta Laundry operated with an informal structure, minimal documentation, and on-the-job learning. The intern's task of drafting SOPs for error handling and queuing management was not just an operational improvement but also an exercise in translating academic knowledge into practical tools that could be understood and implemented by employees with varying educational backgrounds. This experience underscores the importance of contextualization in management practice—the ability to adapt theoretical principles to the specific constraints and culture of an organization (Schlueter & Gold, 2025; Zhang, 2025).

Navigating Workplace Dynamics and Professional Ethics. One of the most valuable aspects of the internship was the opportunity to navigate complex workplace dynamics and professional ethics dilemmas. The informal culture of the MSME sometimes conflicted with professional standards, such as when senior employees exhibited unfriendly attitudes (jutek) under stress or when operational pressures tempted the intern to cut corners in service

delivery. The intern had to navigate these situations ethically, maintaining professional integrity and modeling the expected service standards without directly confronting senior staff. This required a delicate balance of assertiveness and diplomacy, skills that are rarely taught explicitly in academic curricula but are crucial for professional success (Gembalska-Kwiecień, 2024; Jandhyala & Kumar, 2024).

The intern also encountered situations that tested emotional regulation and empathy. For example, when dealing with customers who were aggressive or unreasonable, the intern learned to separate personal feelings from professional responsibilities, respond with empathy rather than defensiveness, and de-escalate conflicts without compromising the company's policies. These experiences reinforced the importance of emotional labor in service industries—the ability to manage one's emotions to create a positive customer experience, even in challenging circumstances (Ngcobo et al., 2022; Saputra et al., 2026). The intern's reflection on these experiences highlights the need for higher education institutions to incorporate more training on emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and professional ethics into management curricula.

Implications for Curriculum Improvement. The challenges encountered during the internship provide valuable insights for curriculum improvement at the Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Asia Malang. First, the intern's experience with the Smartlink application and the need to handle technical errors highlights the importance of integrating technology management into the curriculum. Students should be exposed to real-world operational systems (such as CRM, ERP, and POS applications) and trained in troubleshooting and customer communication during technical failures. Second, the intern's experience with emotional customers underscores the need for practical training in service recovery and de-escalation techniques. Role-playing exercises, case studies, and simulations can help students develop the emotional intelligence and communication skills needed to handle challenging customer interactions. Third, the intern's observation of informal workplace dynamics suggests the need for more training on organizational behavior, professional ethics, and workplace diplomacy. Students should be prepared not just for ideal organizational environments but also for the messy, unpredictable reality of MSME operations.

The concrete interventions designed by the intern (queuing system and error scripts) proved that students can provide objective, innovative solutions to MSME operational bottlenecks. However, a limitation of this internship is that the manual queue system lacks digital integration. This highlights a broader industry trend where MSMEs struggle with digital transformation (Markonah et al., 2024), indicating a need for future interns to focus on low-cost digitalization solutions. Future research should explore the integration of digital queue systems and CRM tools in MSMEs to enhance operational efficiency and customer satisfaction.

Conclusion

This internship program successfully bridged the gap between academic HR theories and the dynamic realities of the MSME service industry. For the intern, the experience significantly enhanced professional readiness and employability by developing crucial hard skills (SOP drafting, system operation, queuing management) and soft skills (de-escalation, emotional regulation, workplace diplomacy, active listening). The concrete contributions, such as the manual queuing system and error-handling scripts, directly improved Meta Laundry's operational efficiency, reduced customer complaints, and contributed to revenue stability. The intern's active execution of the Member Card promotion strategy also reinforced the importance of HR in driving customer loyalty and repeat purchases.

Theoretically, this paper reflects that Work-Integrated Learning is indispensable for contextualizing abstract management theories into practical competencies. The internship revealed that while academic frameworks provide a solid foundation, their application in real-world settings requires adaptability, emotional intelligence, and the ability to navigate informal

workplace dynamics. The experience also highlighted the critical role of emotional labor in service industries and the need for professionals to manage their emotions effectively to create positive customer experiences, even in challenging circumstances.

Based on the challenges encountered during the internship, it is highly recommended that the Management Study Program at Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Asia Malang improves its curriculum in three key areas: (1) integrating practical simulations for Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems and operational technologies like Smartlink; (2) adding specific modules on Service Recovery, De-escalation Techniques, and Emotional Intelligence to prepare students for challenging customer interactions; and (3) incorporating more training on organizational behavior, professional ethics, and workplace diplomacy to equip students for the realities of informal and dynamic work environments. Future internship programs should also encourage students to explore low-cost digitalization solutions for MSME partners, such as digital queue systems and simple CRM tools, to ensure sustainable operational improvements.

The value of this research lies in its dual contribution: providing actionable insights for MSMEs seeking to improve their HR practices and service quality, while also offering reflective insights for higher education institutions seeking to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of their internship programs. By bridging the gap between academia and industry, Work-Integrated Learning not only prepares students for professional success but also contributes to the development of the MSME sector, which is the backbone of Indonesia's economy.

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