

Birthright pushes on with lucrative Israel internship program despite Covid-19

Participants hailing from top universities will complete their placements this summer virtually. Acclaimed behavioral economist Dan Ariely offered them career advice

Ron Friedman 12:59 08.06.20

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Be pushy, take advantage of your skills and experiment with things you think you might like, was the advice world-renowned behavioral economist and author Dan Ariely gave fellows in Birthright's Excel's summer internship project, which began Sunday with a celebratory Zoom call. While around the world, the summer plans of students have fallen apart due to the coronavirus pandemic, Birthright decided to enable the top university go-getters taking part in the program to go ahead with their scheduled lucrative internships, virtually.

The program, now in its 10th year, couples Jewish university students from the top schools in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Israel, and starting this year, the U.K. with coveted summer placements in some of the Israeli tech and finance ecosystem's hottest companies.



Participants in Birthright Excel 2019. Photo: Jane Peimer

Since its launch, the program was held for 10 weeks in Israel, with the students getting a chance to work out of the offices of companies the likes of Deloitte, Viola Credit, Mobileye, Lemonade, and EY, but due to the global pandemic, this year's plans shifted to a virtual summer with both the educational and internship components of the program taking place online.

Birthright Israel, also known as Taglit, is a philanthropic mission by Jewish American donors and the Israeli government to provide free trips to Israel for young Jewish people from around the world. Established in 1999, the project's goal is to improve relations between the State of Israel and the Jewish Diaspora by enabling participants to get to know the country and its society first hand. Since its early days, Birthright has expanded to include a variety of programs, differing in duration and focus, to accommodate people who want to deepen their relationship with the country.

Birthright Excel is the organization's entrepreneurship and leadership program in which 54 ivy-league and top university students are placed in leading global biotech, consulting, cyber, finance, marketing, and venture capital firms, that commit to providing substantive and educational work experience and mentorship from at least one senior manager. The program fulfills the participants' academic requirements and creates for them a powerful, continent-spanning network of peers and alumni. For most of the participants, it would have been a returning visit, all but nine having participated in prior programs geared to Jewish youth.

Out of the group, some 20 participants choose to partake in "Excel Ventures" which is an entrepreneurship training track. Because of their academic pedigree, the fellows and graduates of the program are seen as the next generation of Jewish leaders and supporters.

"This project is considered to be the most prestigious program in the Jewish world today, with only a few dozen young people being accepted from thousands of applicants," Gidi Mark, Birthright's CEO told the participants on the call. "Members of the community prove themselves every day as leaders of both the business and Jewish worlds."



Birthright CEO Gidi Mark. Photo: Erez Uzir

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Lisa Eisen, Co-President, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, one of the project's sponsors, called on the young people to already embrace their leadership roles, particularly in the turbulent times the U.S. is experiencing at the moment.

"Each of you, as individuals and leaders, are needed to stand up and play an active role in forging a new and better society," Eisen said.

While many interns find it difficult to find their places in unfamiliar organizations, where they are often treated as an afterthought, filling unspecified needs with managers who don't always have the time or headspace to guide and teach them, this year's group will have to go above and beyond to grab their supervisor's attention from half a world and several times zones away.

Though the fellows all seem like highly intelligent young people, hailing from universities like Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, Birthright organized a lecture from one of the world's best known experts in behavioral psychology and economics, Dan Ariely, who gave them tips on how to choose a job and how to make the most of their internships.



Dan Ariely. Photo: Tome Harpaz

"We have been doing lots of studies on remote working and what I think is very hard in this day and age is to remotely join an already established team," Ariely said. "Covid-19 had been going on for a while now, and the people who have been successful at adjusting to the new work mode are those who have a social relationship with the people that they work with, because they have a shared language, and they connect in a certain way, not starting from scratch. What I think you should do is

invite people for a beer over Zoom."

When addressing the wider challenge of choosing a new career, Ariely highlighted three major factors that should go into the decision. "When examining a new job, focus on the required skills, your own passions, and only then on salary. Something that we are really suited to do is something we really excel at, and that will always be a sweet spot for us," Ariely said, noting that "the world appreciates valuable and unique skills. If you are really good at data science, don't go and write poetry. Use your skills within a field you are passionate about. Salary is important, no question about it, but one of the things we know about salary is that it only matters up to a certain point, above that it becomes less and less important, the happiness curve becomes very flat."

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