Minor Internship Course UCG3RM01

Internship Final Report

The Existential Risk Observatory

Degree programme: Liberal Arts and Science specialising in Mind & Behaviour.

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Internship Supervisor: Otto Barten

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Introduction

This internship stood out to me because it was with such a small-scale NGO that was working for a good cause. Although I had never planned an online conference before, I was intrigued by the skills I would hopefully pick up while in this job. It involved a lot of office admin and organisation (sending/replying to emails, creating schedules and excel sheets, working with WordPress and managing various social media channels). The mix of responsibilities was enticing as I often strive toward a challenge and feel very comfortable with many responsibilities. Furthermore, this position offered a lot of independence and initiative which is how I prefer to work.

When beginning to search for an internship I was unsure of where to start. I didn't know what field of work I wanted to pursue or whether the ones I was interested in would accept an English intern. During my search, and after submitting a handful of applications already, I came across an advert for an "online conference organiser" for the Existential Risk Observatory. Admittedly, I had never heard of this organisation before as they were fairly new (being founded in the earlier half of 2021). The application procedure was straightforward and involved submitting my CV and a motivational letter arguing why I would be a good candidate for the position. After submitting my application, I received an invitation to an interview, where I would meet the director of the organisation - Otto Barten.

Prior to the interview I asked Otto if I should prepare anything which he seemed very pleased to hear. He asked for a draft conference plan which I eagerly delivered. The interview went very well, conversation flowed smoothly and he was impressed with my elaborate conference plan. After waiting two weeks for my results I got the news that I was accepted as their new intern and was excited to start.

Before starting, my initial expectations were that I would take a while to settle into the role and would often be asking for help and guidance with my tasks. I anticipated a lot of work as the role I had was a very flexible one; some days I would be inviting guest speakers and another day I would be creating social media posts. Although the job seemed like quite a big responsibility, I was willing to accept the challenge and do my best to exceed expectations - especially my own.

About the Existential Risk Observatory

The Existential Risk Observatory is a small NGO based in Amsterdam that is focused on informing the public debate about existential risks. They were founded in March of 2021 by Otto Barten, who became my internship supervisor. Beside Otto and I, there were five other members of staff during my internship period. Together we worked on sharing the latest updates about existential risk topics such as climate change and AI developments. By the end of this year, the Observatory hopes to have influenced the Dutch societal debate surrounding existential risk. They plan to measure this goal by the percentage increase of online web searches using the words “existential risk” or “existentiele risico”.

The structure of the workplace was very independent in that, most of us worked individually on our own projects and areas of expertise. Otto would check in with us both individually and as a team weekly. We all mainly worked remotely, which made connections difficult as we weren’t seeing each other every day or spending time together in an office. Although we were all communicating online, everyone was very friendly and helpful. If I needed help on something I didn’t hesitate to reach out via *Slack* and ask for it.

The objectives of the workplace were very different. Although we were all aware of and working toward the same goal, we were all working on very different projects. I was focused on the online conference and managing social media content and activity whereas my other colleagues were focused on writing and publishing articles to the website or conducting interviews to help understand what narrative the Observatory should use. At the time of my internship there were other job positions open at the Observatory so besides his freelance job, Otto was busy interviewing potential new employees.

About My Role

During my internship I had many different tasks, most of which involved preparation and organisation of the online conference. I did however, contribute in other aspects too such as conducting interviews to help the Observatory gather research and I took part in many team meetings/discussions to brainstorm what kind of message they wanted to deliver to the public and who their target audience was. I also created their Instagram account and YouTube channel which were mainly dedicated to the conference (Instagram posts to

promote the conference and videos from the conference on YouTube) but these accounts will continue to be used for general promotion, sharing of news and exposure.

When organising the conference I began by creating a mindmap plan[1] on Padlet.com of all the necessary steps involved. This started off quite general but as I started each task it became clearer what I specifically needed to do. I began by creating an Excel spreadsheet of all the potential guest speakers the Observatory would like to host, this included names, contact information and a short description about who they were/their work and expertise. For the first few weeks I sent personal emails to these speakers to invite them to speak at the conference. This involved researching a little about them and their work so I could personalise their emails to help encourage them to accept our invitation. I also designed a conference brochure[2] to attach to the emails which involved more information about the Observatory and the reason for the conference.

While sending emails invitations I was also designing a webpage for the conference on the Observatory's website. I created this with WordPress as this was the platform they had created their website with. I designed the webpage independently before editing certain aspects after I was given feedback from Otto. I was working on the webpage for 3 weeks before publishing it.

As mentioned previously I created an Instagram account for the Observatory. Here is where I uploaded social media posts to promote the conference and encourage people to sign up and attend. I did this by designing social media posts in Canva.com and uploading them to their social media accounts (I also posted on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn). I also wrote the captions and added hashtags to try to expand our audience reach.

After our speaker list was confirmed I began emailing invitations to possible attendees. Otto wanted valuable people in the audience so we created another Excel spreadsheet of people he wanted to invite to attend. I then repeated my task of researching these people and writing personal invitation emails to them. I also created a brochure to include in the attendee invitation emails[3].

[1] Found in Appendix 1
[2] Found in Appendix 2
[3] Found in Appendix 3

I then created an agenda[4] for the conference. I had to be cautious of the different time zones our speakers were in and schedule them at a reasonable time for both them and us. I also created a detailed agenda[5] closer to the conference to help the moderators and hosts understand the schedule for the day.

Throughout the planning process I was in contact with the speakers and hosts ensuring they had all the information they needed and were able to prepare successfully. A few weeks before the conference I then created a Swapcard account and a Zoom account for us to use during the conference. I had to input all the details of the conference into Swapcard (create a session for each speaker and breaks, input all the attendees, input the speakers and their info, create and input images for design, input information about each session etc.) and then ensure our Zoom call would be streamed live to our YouTube channel which will then be broadcast onto Swapcard.

On the day of the conference I was watching and ensuring everything was going smoothly. If we encountered any technical problems I would be responsible for fixing them immediately. I was also responsible for ensuring the speakers were in the Zoom call on time ready to present and that the audience could easily navigate through Swapcard.

After the conference, I edited the recordings of the day and made short videos of each speaker's talk and some highlight videos which were a few minutes long. The highlight videos were to show the "best bits" of the speaker's talks. Editing the videos also involved designing a thumbnail, intro screen, outro screen and including a video description. I also shared promotions of the YouTube channel and the videos on all of their social media accounts.

Attitude to Work

My attitude to work during the internship was a positive and efficient one. I appreciated the independence I was given and took that responsibility seriously. Each week I made a plan of all the tasks I needed to complete by the end of that week and made sure to follow

[4] Found in Appendix 4
[5] Found in Appendix 4

through on that plan[6]. It was important for me to work as efficiently as possible which is very doable when working independently on a project like this.

The supervision I had involved two meetings a week; one personal meeting with Otto and one team meeting with Otto and the other employees. Although I did enjoy the independence, it would have been helpful to be in more contact with Otto and to have more conversations about what he wants from the conference and from my day to day tasks. When designing the website for example, I made it clear to Otto that the sooner it was online the better as we could direct people to the webpage (he agreed with this). However, he took a few days to give me his feedback and after I completed his editing suggestions he then changed his mind again and I had to edit it again. Additionally, as I was finishing his second edit he took a week off work so I couldn't upload the page for a week as I needed his confirmation before uploading it. This is just one example of ways that I felt Otto was too absent from the organisation of the conference and from my internship.

Overview of My Tasks and Activities

- Create an overview of all steps involved in conference organising
- Interviews to help gather research
- Create a list of potential guest speakers and begin researching and emailing these speakers
- Create a speaker invitation brochure to share more information about the Observatory and the conference
- Create social media accounts and begin designing and sharing promotional posts about the conference and the Observatory
- Create the webpage for the conference
- Create an attendee list and begin emailing them with personal invitations to attend the conference
- Create an attendee brochure
- Create the agenda and a detailed schedule
- Research and decide on what online platform we will use for the conference
- Set up our Swapcard event with all details of the conference

[6] Found in the logbook in Appendix 6

- Attend team meetings to brainstorm what kind of message the Observatory should send to their audience and decide who their audience should be
- Monitor the conference in case of any issues
- Create YouTube videos from the recordings and upload to their YouTube channel
- Promote these videos on social media

Overview of My Personal Learning Process

Social Media in Business

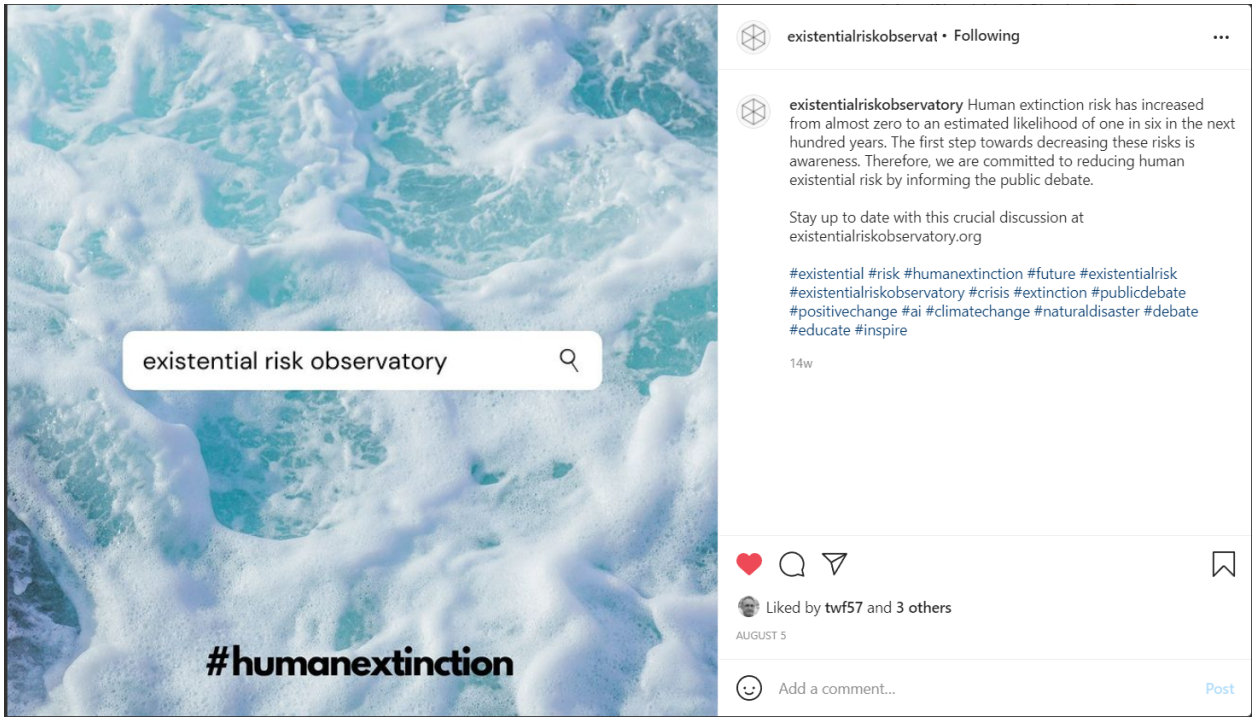
This learning goal was about developing my skills in using social media for business purposes and this was something I did a lot during my internship. I created their Instagram account and was the only one posting on there so that gave me a good opportunity to start from scratch with using social media for business. I designed and shared posts regularly to help gain followers and promote the conference. It didn't go as successfully as I would have hoped but I think it was difficult to gain a lot of traction on Instagram when they were a very new, small-scale organisation with very little following on other social media platforms too.

I feel that I didn't fully meet this goal in the way I had hoped. I think, if I were working for a bigger organisation who already had a large media following I would have been exposed to the ins and outs of social media management a lot more. Since the Observatory didn't have much online presence, there wasn't much influence I could make to help boost their exposure. I also felt that I missed out on being taught how to use social media for business as they didn't have a social media manager of any kind and so, it was my job alone to utilise social media. I did however, get to experience creating adverts via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn (even if all the ads weren't complete). When boosting posts for more exposure we mainly did so on Facebook as this was the cheapest and most straightforward (we are all very inexperienced in this department). I was in charge of designing the post and then setting it up to be boosted. This was a good experience as I had never previously paid for an online advert. It was interesting to see the results of boosting our posts on Facebook though. We reached a very wide audience but a lot of the interaction on our posts was very negative (particularly posts mentioning Covid-19). From this, I learnt that Facebook's audience may not be ideal depending on what you're promoting and that you should be

prepared for negative responses (and perhaps know how to react to these responses). I didn't respond to any comments on our posts as I am not well-informed on existential risks or on the organisation's purpose.

Another aspect of this goal was to track my progress in designing social media posts.

First Instagram Post



This was my first post to Instagram. It was very simple and was intended to introduce the account and the organisation. My more recent posts show my development with both design and description writing[7]. Next time I am using social media for business purposes, I hope I can experiment with a bigger audience and have a longer pattern to follow from the previous posts/activity from the organisation.

Management Skills

I feel that there were moments during my internship where I really developed this skill. One example would be having the confidence to disagree with my superiors. During a team meeting we were discussing who the target audience should be and what our message to

[7] Found in Appendix 5

them should be. Otto was making this task very difficult for everyone as he struggled to make a concrete decision. He wanted every type of message to reach every type of audience. By the end of the day we had multiple kinds of messages (positive, negative, hopeful, productive etc.) with no target audience. Before we closed off for the day I told Otto how his inability to have a specific goal made this task impossible for our team. I made sure to tell him this in a polite way but in a way that did get the message across clearly. After speaking another team member spoke up and agreed with me and my points strongly. This validated my thoughts and made me feel good about having said something to Otto. I feel that having this skill and being able to tell someone how they are going wrong and guide them toward a better decision is crucial in any manager role. Having the confidence and ability to speak up like this really helped me get comfortable with being in that position. In the future I will continue to share my thoughts and ideas to anyone whether they be above or below me in the working hierarchy.

Networking

I feel I accomplished my networking goal as I was in contact with everyone involved in the conference and I was also their first point of contact to the Observatory. I took advantage of this role and ensured to keep in touch as often as I could while also connecting with our speakers on LinkedIn. Not all the speakers were on LinkedIn but the ones who were have a very large following and their profiles boast a very impressive work history/education so I'm glad I was able to connect with them online.

I also had online meetings with one speaker and one host. This really helped me to experience a professional meeting with people who are successful in their field. In the future I will be less nervous to be involved in similar meetings and I'll be able to productively keep in touch with potentially valuable people.

Team Work

Developing this skill was a little difficult as my work was very independent and unrelated to the work the other employees were doing. My biggest learning curve was when I made a mistake when posting online about the Observatory. I was very keen to expand the online following and exposure of the Observatory so I began searching for existential risk-related subreddits on Reddit.com. After finding a subreddit, I posted on there from my personal

account, linking the Existential Risk Observatory's website and describing their organisation as a third-party person (as if I wasn't working for them at the time). Otto wasn't pleased with this and told me to delete the post. He explained that posting as if I didn't work for them looked sketchy and he didn't want that kind of image attached to the Observatory (understandably). I quickly deleted the post before it had much exposure and learnt to double check with him before posting about the organisation on my personal accounts. This action could have affected the entire team on the organisation if it had gotten a lot of attention on Reddit so I should be more mindful of how my actions affect the team in the future. This is therefore a skill that still needs a lot of improvement.

Independence and Initiative

As mentioned, this role came with a lot of independence and responsibility which I took very seriously yet comfortably. I was able to successfully work independently and with my own initiative by following my tasks each week. I have described my tasks in my log book[8] and this shows how I was able to make steady progress on my workload. I did however, manage to ask for help when necessary such as asking for suggestions/feedback on the web page I created and asking for help using Wordpress. However, this did frustrate me at times as it delayed my workflow. I then had to wait for the feedback before I could continue/complete that task which bothered me. This is the reason I prefer independent work and this is also why I need to work on improving my teamwork skills.

Organisation and Discipline

My organisation and discipline skills have been tested and improved during my work at the Observatory, especially since I was working from home 95% of the time. Each week I made a mind map on Padlet.com of my tasks each day. This plan included the next 5 days. I was also able to reflect on how well I had completed these tasks by writing in my logbook every Friday. I was able to work efficiently and met every deadline that Otto and I had set for the progression of the conference which shows that I successfully achieved this goal. The only time I feel I faltered was failing to tell Otto I would also be attending school classes during my internship hours (9am-5pm). Next time, I'll be sure to inform my employer if my working time will be taken up by another responsibility in the way it was here.

[8] Found in Appendix 6

Evaluation

Overall, most of my expectations were met but I was also surprised by things I didn't expect. My main expectations were the tasks involved in my workload and my end goal. These were clearly described to me before I started my internship and so they met my expectations. However, there were other tasks which I did not expect to be assigned; one of which being creating the web page. Using Wordpress to create the conference webpage was a surprise because I have no knowledge or experience with Wordpress or even with website design at all. This is also why I had so much trouble with this task. No one else in the organisation knew how to use Wordpress either because they had paid a freelancer to create their website so even after asking for help I didn't receive any. I explained to Otto many times that I was really struggling with this and that I had no experience or knowledge with this kind of task but he couldn't offer me any help and told me to keep trying. What made this task even more difficult was that even after explaining all of my troubles to Otto, he was still quite harsh when giving feedback on the web page I made. He asked for a lot of changes and very technical additions which gave me even more problems as they were somewhat complicated. In the end I did the best I could and I am happy with the outcome but it took me a lot of time to complete.

I was also surprised at just how independently I would be working on the conference. Ultimately it was entirely my job, any and all aspects of the conference fell on my shoulders and although I could ask Otto for help if necessary there wasn't much that he knew better than I did about this kind of task (this was the first conference being held by the Observatory so he had no experience). This mainly surprised me because I wasn't expecting so much responsibility because I have no experience planning a conference and I have no knowledge about Existential Risk or the organisation. Although it was unexpected I accepted the responsibility and produced an online conference to the best of my ability (to which Otto agreed was very successful).

Another difficulty I faced was communicating my problems and concerns with Otto. I have a tendency to avoid conflict and will usually agree to things I'm uncomfortable with because I don't want to say no. This became a problem when Otto would ask me to come to the office in Amsterdam every week. The journey took me over 3 hours and I felt like I really didn't

gain anything by visiting (if anything I felt like it was doing more harm than good). The office was located in an old prison, in a room on the second floor. It was a small room and if I did visit for the day, it would only be me and Otto in the office together. We would both be working on independent tasks so we rarely needed to discuss things together. Additionally, some days Otto had a lot of online meetings which made it difficult for me to work efficiently as I was distracted by him talking during his meetings. In the end I only visited the office 3 times and I do not feel that I should have visited more. I do wish that I would have told Otto that I no longer wanted to visit so that he didn't ask me each week. I still don't entirely understand why he was so persistent with asking me to visit, which is another reason why I regret not having a discussion about this with Otto. This is something I should work on in the future, although some discussions may be uncomfortable they may also be very necessary to avoid future issues.

Internship Feedback

As mentioned, I was working very independently and so, I got very little feedback throughout my time at the Observatory. There were times later on in my internship where Otto would mention areas that could've gone better or things I could've done differently. This bothered me a little because he didn't say anything at the time of doing these tasks so giving me feedback so much later on meant I couldn't do anything to change the outcome.

The mid-term evaluation I had with Otto helped me to understand his expectations of me and he said he was very happy with how things were progressing but that we wouldn't know how successful it was until after the conference. This is also a time where he gave me feedback on previous tasks which were now completed. I agreed with his feedback but I wish he would have mentioned these thoughts at a time when I could have put them into practice to get the outcome he would have preferred. However, I didn't mention this during our meeting and simply agreed with his feedback. This could have been a time for me to practice my managerial skills but because I genuinely agreed with his feedback I thought it'd be better to just accept it and learn from it for next time (e.g learn to ask for feedback instead of waiting for it).

I do feel the lack of regular feedback improved my initiative and independence but it did make me feel quite separate from the team which doesn't help improve my teamwork

skills. In the future, if I feel I am not receiving enough feedback from my employer I will simply ask them to give me more feedback more often. I'm not sure why this never occurred to me during my internship, perhaps because I was working from home and very often would just complete my tasks without needing to contact any other colleagues or Otto.

Tips For Future Students

For future students wishing to complete an internship with this organisation I would suggest they ask for more feedback more often from their supervisor. In my case, we had a weekly team meeting and I should have asked more specific questions about my work to see how happy/satisfied Otto was with my progress. I'd suggest trying to utilise these meetings because they may be the only time during the week where you can easily discuss your work.

Secondly, if another student were to do my role (online conference organiser) for the Existential Risk Observatory I have written a manual that explains how I planned and organised it the first time around[9].

For students who want to pursue an internship with an organisation similar to this one (perhaps also an NGO), I would suggest steering your learning goals toward a smaller-scale organisation. Some aspects of my goals could not be met because the Observatory is still such a new and small-scale organisation (such as the *Social Media in Business* goal). Writing goals that can be accomplished even in a smaller organisation gives you a more realistic chance of accomplishing them and perhaps of discovering new goals for yourself.

Future Career Orientation

From this internship I learnt that working for a small-scale NGO is not something I would like to pursue in my future career. I did enjoy my internship and I did learn a lot from it but the problems I faced, the dynamic of the team and the organisation's end goal was not

[9] Found in Appendix 7

something I enjoyed navigating. Although this seems like a negative outcome it really isn't because it has shown me what kind of company I wouldn't like to work for which helps me figure out what kind of company I *would* like to work for.

My role as online conference organiser showed me how capable I am at a task which I may have thought I couldn't do. It taught me perseverance, confidence and to believe in my own skill set and initiative. Prior to this internship I had no knowledge or experience about online conferences but by the end we had planned and held a successful conference with many YouTube videos to prove it. One of my learning goals was networking which I feel I did achieve. I was in contact with many different professional organisations and people and I would feel very comfortable reaching out to them again in the future. Furthermore, Otto expressed his openness to working with me again in the future and was enthusiastic in "leaving his door open" to me if I ever wished to contact him again. Lastly, the administration side of this job gave me good experience as I feel that all jobs, no matter what field, will have similar admin tasks (professional emails, documentation etc.).

However, I do regret not pursuing an internship that links closer to my specialisation (Mind & Behaviour) and in the future I would like to gain experience in a more psychological field however, this role taught me a lot about basic work environments (especially Dutch ones in which I had no prior experience) and how an organisation is managed. It also helped me improve my own personal professional goals and so I am leaving this position feeling more confident in my own abilities.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Original Conference Plan on Padlet.com

Google Sheets Version

Appendix 2

Speaker Invitation Brochure

Appendix 3

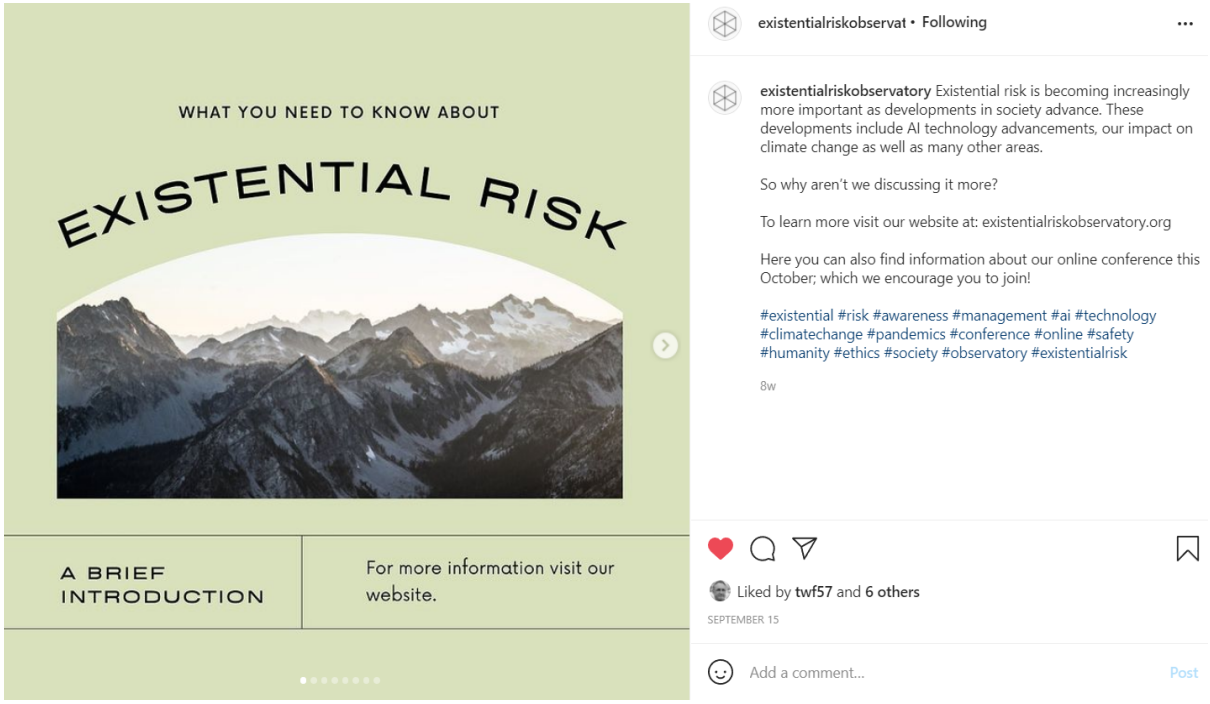
Attendee Invitation Brochure

Appendix 4

Basic Conference Agenda

Detailed Conference Agenda

Appendix 5



Appendix 6

[Internship Log Book]

Appendix 7

Online Conference Manual