

A decorative graphic on the right side of the page. It features three circles: a large teal circle at the top, a smaller dark purple circle in the middle, and a large orange circle at the bottom right. Two thin, light blue lines intersect to form a triangular shape that frames the circles.

How to Make the Most of Work Integrated Learning: for Students

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Work Integrated Learning (WIL) requires a three way partnership between the student, the workplace organisation and the university. In return, the experience provides students with the opportunity to achieve the following:

- Bridge the gap between your academic present and a professional future;
- Apply knowledge gained 'on-campus' to 'real-life' experiences;
- Discover strengths to develop and weaknesses to improve;
- Integrate with professional people;
- Experience a professional organisation and its culture;
- Add value to an organisation by delivering project objectives;
- Develop personal and professional competencies:
 1. **Communication Skills**
 2. **Self Confidence**
 3. **Customer Relationship Management**
 4. **Enthusiastic Participation**
 5. **Industry & Business Knowledge**
 6. **Self Sufficiency**
 7. **Personal Organisation**
 8. **Professional Networks**
 9. **Professional Ethics**

COMPETENCIES

The following nine key competencies are derived from retrospective graduate feedback. Students in the work place should focus on developing these competencies if they wish to develop personally and professionally during their Work Integrated Learning experience.

“Learn how to talk to different people and realise that people need to be communicated with in different ways.”

Context

Communication includes **speaking** (e.g. one-to-one discussion, meetings, group forums, via telephone), **writing** (e.g. emails, letters, reports) and **listening** (i.e. with the intention of empathising with others).

It is worth remembering that during face-to-face contact, words only comprise 7% of the impression you make, whereas your tone accounts for 38% and your associated gestures account for 55%, e.g. eye contact, body language and handshake.

Hints & Tips for Students

- Make a good first impression by dressing appropriately, making eye contact and offering a firm handshake;
- Think about your audience because different people respond to different styles of communication;
- Use the English language correctly both in oral and written communication;
- Think of all written communication as a formal document, including emails, letters and reports;
- Rather than rely on email, endeavour to communicate in person, either face-to-face or via phone;
- When initiating conversation, always ask the respondent if they have a moment to talk;
- Seek opportunities to engage others in conversation, speak publically or make formal presentations whenever possible;
- Know the name and role of the person you are talking to;
- If you are required to make a formal presentation, plan a practise run beforehand;
- Allow time to proof read documents to check your spelling, grammar and format;
- Consider ongoing training to develop communication skills, e.g. a communications paper or Toastmasters;
- Always ask for help if you are unsure about your communication skills;

“Relax and enjoy the experience rather than becoming overawed... and understand that asking questions is not a weakness.”

Context

Self confidence among students in the workplace is important because, having become used to the academic environment where their performance is quantified by grades, their performance in the workplace is subjective, i.e. based on the perception of others.

Newcomers to the workplace must therefore be patient and realistic in the knowledge that it is impossible for them to know everything about the organisation from the outset.

Hints & Tips for Students

- Before you start, work with your workplace supervisor to establish what is expected from you and the goals you are aiming to achieve;
- Attempt everything to the best of your ability, but don't forget to enjoy the experience;
- Focus on what you do know and how much you are improving every day, rather than what you don't know;
- Absorb carefully how your supervisor and those around you conduct themselves professionally;
- Learn what you can from others by watching and listening carefully – then ask questions if there is something you don't understand;
- Remember that asking questions is not a weakness because asking for help actually shows a willingness to learn;
- Request feedback and be prepared to take on constructive criticism without being defensive;
- Be open-minded about the new things you learn and the advice you are given because too much pride will inhibit you from trying new ideas;
- Reflect positively on your mistakes because nobody is perfect and throughout life we improve by reflecting on better ways of doing things.

“Try to look through a different lens and put yourself in the shoes of the customer.”

Context

Success for all organisations is about pleasing the customer – either by the provision of an efficient service or an excellent product.

To please the customer, it is paramount to first understand their needs and desires. To elicit this information, organisations invest time, money and energy into nurturing their customer relationships. Students in the workplace must therefore understand the importance of interacting with each stakeholder group appropriately.

Hints & Tips for Students

- Ask your workplace supervisor to brief you on the customers of their organisation;
- Research your customers so that you are able to think about your role through their eyes;
- Remember that the better you know your customers, the more informed you will be to do your job;
- Attend as many events as possible to interact with your customers;
- Investigate as many sources as possible to understand what makes great customer service;
- Respect all customers and realise that your role only exists because you have them.

“Immerse yourself. Don’t go into a workplace situation trying to be an observer but to utterly embrace the experience.”

Context

‘Employee engagement’ is a top priority for many employers today – and this is linked to enthusiasm.

Research has indicated that ‘engaged’ employees **say** good things about their organisation; want to **stay** with the organisation; and **strive** to add value above and beyond expectations.

Employers therefore value students in the workplace who use their enthusiasm to add value to the organisation.

Hints & Tips for Students

- Consciously aim to demonstrate your passion; a willingness to be involved; a positive ‘can do’ attitude; and enjoyment of the task in hand;
- You may find yourself more enthused by project(s) that will provide you with relevant work experience after graduation;
- Secure a meaningful project that will add value to the organisation and provide you with a greater sense of satisfaction;
- Get involved in as many activities as possible from daily organisation to big events;
- Push your boundaries by getting involved in projects that challenge you and push your comfort zone;
- Support your team by finding ways to help, which may involve working longer than anticipated until the *team’s* work is done;
- Undertake some voluntary work beyond the scope of your project(s);
- Go the extra mile to show your dedication;
- Remain positive even in challenging situations.

“Be familiar with Microsoft documents, including Word and Excel, as well as other computer programmes and computers in general.”

Context

Students in the workplace have a unique opportunity to apply theory into practice and develop real-life knowledge of the industry.

Work placements also encourage the development of business skills that would not ordinarily be found among students, e.g. Project Management and / or computer software skills.

Students in the workplace should take this opportunity prepare themselves for life after graduation by absorbing as much business and industry knowledge as possible.

Hints & Tips for Students

- In preparation, research the organisation and the key people within the organisation;
- Ask your supervisor questions about the organisation that will help you to gain an overall perspective of the ‘bigger picture’;
- Seek opportunities to develop generic business skills, e.g. marketing and project planning;
- Familiarise yourself in advance with Microsoft programmes, including MS Word and MS Excel;
- Ask colleagues about working efficiently on computers, e.g. keyboard shortcuts and workplace related functions such as ‘out of office’ replies.

“Always think what else you can do in a situation: how can you make it better? What more can you do when you have 'nothing' to do?”

Context

Feeling confident to ask for help is a positive attribute, but becoming dependent on other people’s instructions is not.

It is important to remain pro-active not re-active because employers value people who use their initiative to overcome problems and who think creatively (outside the box) to add value.

Hints & Tips for Students

- Set some personal and professional development goals that give you direction;
- Take responsibility for organising your own work placement with the help of your supervisor, or by leveraging your own contacts;
- Take ownership of your project(s) and use your initiative to develop your role;
- Challenge yourself to think creatively by drawing inspiration from a variety of sources, including what you have learned on-campus and, not least of all, your intuition;
- Think ahead so that you have some ideas about what to do next and don’t have to always wait for instruction;
- Provide suggestions to your supervisor or think through some possible solutions if you think you have a problem;
- Ask questions and make suggestions to demonstrate that you are trying to think for yourself;
- Remember that future employees are often interested in examples of when you have used your initiative.

“Learn to prioritise tasks and make a plan of action for every task to ensure that you work ahead of time in order to meet deadlines.”

Context

Like all employees, students in the workplace will be required to deliver tasks on time and on budget.

Personal organisation is essential for people who want to be efficient and effective, especially when they find themselves under pressure in challenging work environments.

Personal organisation is about being able to set and prioritise goals, then planning how to achieve them in the time available. Given that situations change, it is also important to be flexible, which means being able to re-prioritise and re-plan.

Hints & Tips for Students

- Clarify the project(s) objectives with your workplace supervisor and discuss exactly what needs to happen to achieve each objective;
- Create an action plan for each of your objectives by breaking down big tasks into smaller tasks. As part of your action plan, think about contingencies, i.e. what is your back-up plan if something unexpected happens?
- Ask your workplace supervisor whether your team use any personal organisation tools (e.g. Microsoft Outlook) and to recommend the format for your action plan;
- Schedule a recurring meeting with your workplace supervisor to discuss your performance against the objectives you have set in your action plan;
- Alert your workplace supervisor if you feel that you have a problem that you cannot resolve;
- Alert your workplace supervisor if you feel overwhelmed and ask them to help you prioritise your tasks;
- Work smart, i.e. if you are working long hours ask yourself how you can work more efficiently;
- Diarise meetings and important deadlines;
- Be thorough but don't punish yourself with perfectionism.

“It’s not what you know, it’s who you know. Ask your contacts whether they can help you expand your personal networks.”

Context

Relationship building is important in most industries and therefore there are clear advantages to being well known for the right reasons.

Building a network of contacts is the best way to maximise your job opportunities in any career.

Hints & Tips for Students

- Introduce yourself to as many people as possible;
- Identify like-minded people that you might want to work with in the future.
- Keep a list of contacts and their profile, e.g. role, organisation, priorities;
- Research as much information as possible about new contacts so that you are able to leverage their association effectively in the future;
- Ask existing contacts if they are able to help you extend your network;
- Sell your capabilities modestly at every possible opportunity.

“When in the workplace, leave your student persona at the door and present / conduct yourself as a member of staff.”

Context

Professional ethics is about respecting the culture of an organisation while maintaining your own personal integrity. At the very minimum, organisations expect employees to be honest, trustworthy, courteous and conscientious.

Hints & Tips for Students

- Be loyal to the organisation;
- Be professional by treating your work placement as you would a permanent job and realise that everything you do counts towards the impressions that people make of you;
- Remember that bad impressions reflect badly on yourself and your university / programme;
- Always be respectful of others because people always remember the way you made them feel;
- Use professional language because colloquial language may offend some people;
- Enquire about the values, codes of conduct and regulations at your organisation;
- Respect confidentiality and discretion in comments to third parties;
- Observe the conduct of other members of staff for guidance;
- Be reliable, i.e. say what you're going to do and do what you say;
- Take responsibility for your actions and be honest about your mistakes;
- Be punctual to the daily routines of the organisation;
- Dress appropriately and remember that it is often better to be over-dressed than under-dressed until you have worked out what level of formality is appropriate.

‘Reflection’ should be an explicit learning objective of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experiences. The objective of reflection is to learn from experience by reflecting in action (reflection which occurs in the midst of experience) and through reflection after an event (reflection on action). Students are advised to undertake the following sequential stages:

- **Work Description** – Describe your experience in detail, including: what you were doing; what other people were doing; the context of the event; what happened; and the overall outcome.
- **Feelings and Thoughts** – Reflect on your self-awareness by recalling what was going on inside your head, including: how you were feeling when the event started; what you were thinking about at the time; how the event made you feel; how other people made you feel; how you felt about the outcome of the event; and what you think about the event in hindsight.
- **Evaluation** – Consider what was good and bad about your experience.
- **Analysis** – Break the event down into component parts to be explored separately in detail, including: what went well; what you and others did well; what went wrong; and what you or others did that could be improved.
- **Conclusion and Synthesis** – Make some concluding judgments based on the information you explored during the ‘analysis’ stage.
- **Action Plan** – Think forward in anticipation of encountering a similar experience and reflect on what you would do the same and what you would do differently.