

A decorative graphic consisting of three solid circles of different colors (teal, dark purple, and orange) and two thin, light blue lines that intersect to form a triangular shape. The teal circle is at the top, the dark purple circle is in the middle, and the orange circle is at the bottom right. The lines are thin and light blue, creating a minimalist geometric design.

How to Make the Most of Work Integrated Learning: for Workplace Supervisors

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An Introduction to Work Integrated Learning (WIL): Benefits for the Workplace Organisation

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

- Establish a cooperative working relationship with a University;
- Increase knowledge of current academic preparation;
- Increase awareness of new and innovative ideas in the fields;
- Gain assistance and expertise in related projects;
- Develop and/or create new programmes or projects;
- Survey and evaluate potential employees;
- Participate in the preparation of future industry professionals by helping them to 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. Workplace Supervisors should help students in the work place to focus on developing these competencies so that they may develop personally and professionally during their Work Integrated Learning experience.

“Give your student an overview of the types of communication that will be involved in the project and ask them about their confidence levels in each. This will give you an understanding of their capabilities and how you can help them develop.”

Context For Students

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 Workplace Supervisors

- Discuss how and when you prefer the student to communicate with you;
- Talk to the student about their comfort level with different methods of communication;
- Challenge the student to stretch their capabilities by providing a variety of communication opportunities;
- Lead by example by communicating with students in the manner that you would expect them to communicate;
- Explain the culture in your workplace, e.g. typically contact is via telephone or in person;
- Help the student understand the tone of communication required by different stakeholders;
- Highlight to the student which styles of communication are effective in different situations;
- Review important documents so that the student knows where improvement is required;
- Demand high standards from the student, particularly around external communication to customers;
- Provide feedback to students on their development of communication skills.

“Regularly discuss expectations, responsibilities and tasks with the student. Then, follow up with the student to provide feedback on what was good, not so good and what could be improved.”

Context For Students

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 Workplace Supervisors

- Recognise that you are the student’s mentor;
- Listen to what the student feels confident about and how they want to develop their capabilities;
- Organise a thorough induction to the organisation and its clients;
- Help the student to feel part of the team;
- Provide a clear role description and user-friendly instructions about what the job entails;
- Discuss key performance indicators (KPIs) with the student and schedule a performance review;
- Judge the student on their ability to improve over their ability to produce flawless results;
- Praise everyday work done well;
- Provide and invite feedback on a regular basis;
- Criticise constructively remembering that the students may already lack confidence;
- Ask the student to summarise your instructions if you are unsure if the student has understood;
- Create opportunities for the student to learn from others, e.g. work shadowing various roles.
- Request guidance from the university about how to create a reflective learning environment.

“Encourage students to put themselves in the customer's shoes and understand what it is that they want from the service you provide.”

Context For Students

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 Workplace Supervisors

- Share evidence with students from customer satisfaction surveys about what customers want;
- Discuss your Customer Service Plan with the student and explain how to achieve the standards expected;
- Present students to customers as much as possible;
- Allow students to shadow staff during interactions with customers; then debrief about what they have learnt.

“Help the student gain as much as possible from their experience.”

Context For Students

‘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 Workplace Supervisors

- Help the student enjoy the experience by understanding what interests and motivates them;
- Empower the student to add value by assigning them a worthwhile project;
- Reinforce to the student that their effort is making a difference;
- Invite the student to participate in a variety of opportunities;
- Balance tasks so that the student is not under-utilised doing menial tasks;
- Praise enthusiasm and a positive mentality.

“Be prepared to teach your student how to use computer programs if necessary and continue to mentor them until they feel confident.”

Context For Students

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 Workplace Supervisors

- Guide students through computer software;
- Provide the student with an overview of the whole business, including the business plan;
- Expose students to generic business skills, e.g. marketing, project management;
- Encourage the student to make a connection between theory and its application in industry.

“Ask your student lots of questions and encourage them to think for themselves by making suggestions on their own accord”

Context For Students

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 Workplace Supervisors

- Indicate to the student that you will be asking them for their opinions throughout the placement;
- Brief your team to encourage the student to share thoughts and ideas at every possible opportunity;
- Provide feedback on the strengths and limitations of the student's ideas but try not to dismiss them completely;
- Challenge the student to think about how they could go one step further;
- Expose the student to brainstorming and decision making processes;
- Encourage the student to look for answers before relying on you;
- If the student comes to you with a question or a problem, first ask the student what *they* think they should do;
- Empower the student to make their own decisions about certain things;
- Ensure the student has the information and resources necessary to do their job;
- Clarify when you want the student to review things with you / seek your approval;
- Allow the student, where appropriate, to have some leeway to learn from their mistakes.

“Make sure your students are involved in completing action planning documents. This may help them see the bigger picture and how things are broken down into smaller tasks. It will also help them to see how if one thing is late, other things are affected.”

Context For Students

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 Workplace Supervisors

- Ensure goals and expectations are understood correctly from the start;
- Demonstrate to the student how you personally organise your time;
- Provide user-friendly action planning templates;
- Help the student think through the smaller components of big tasks;
- Review the student’s plan and help them think through what might be missing;
- Build small milestones into the students’ plan, which will help them monitor progress;
- Guard against the student becoming overwhelmed by agreeing which tasks should be given priority;
- Agree on realistic deadlines with the student;
- Ask the student to review their work plan at times when they are under pressure with university assignments;
- Include the student in any formal status reporting meetings;
- Set high expectations for the student who should be aiming to perform at a professional level.

“Ask students what their job prospects are and then expose them to networks that may help.”

Context For Students

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 Workplace Supervisors

- Recognise that this workplace experience is probably the beginning of the student’s career;
- Provide the student every possible opportunity to build networks;
- Ask the student about their career ambitions and then expose them to networks that may help them in the long-term.

“Have clear expectations for the students about professionalism, and how the organisation operates. Ensure there is a good process in place to induct students into the organisation.”

Context For Students

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 Workplace Supervisors

- Be a role model by presenting yourself as you would expect the student to do;
- Provide information about the workplace culture / values / codes of conduct at the induction;
- Explain what professionalism means to your organisation;
- Observe and feedback on the student’s professionalism from the outset;
- Discuss the typical dress code and the advantages of following the dress code;
- Acknowledge when the student is making an effort to earn your trust and respect.

‘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). Workplace Supervisors should encourage students to undertake the following sequential stages:

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