

Understanding Work Experience

Introduction

Work experience describes the situation where a student spends a short period of time, normally one or two weeks, with an organisation, during which they experience what it is like to work for the organisation.

The main objectives of work experience placements are:

- for the student to gain an insight into the world of work.
- for the student to gain an insight into the industry.
- for the student to gain additional skills; and
- to help the student make decisions about their future.

The benefits of work experience for the organisation

The main purpose of work experience placements is to further the student's personal development. The student is likely to gain more from the experience than will be gained by the organisation.

Work experience placements can benefit the organisation that hosts the student by:

- helping to improve the organisation's image in the community.
- developing junior employees' management skills where they supervise the student.
- identifying talent at an early stage; and
- where appropriate and taking into account the student's skills and the work plan for the student's placement, having an additional member of the team to carry out meaningful tasks.

Therefore, it is important for you, as a line manager, to take work experience placements seriously and dedicate a sufficient amount of time to making them work.

Recruiting the student

Local education authorities and school governing bodies are normally responsible for work experience placements, although the student, the student's school or college or a work experience organiser may be involved in arranging the placement.

The organisation may have an agreement in place with the local authority or school in relation to the number of work experience placements it will offer or the process it will follow to place students.

You should check the organisation's policy and procedures on work experience, which may set out the process you should follow to place work experience students.

Some organisations place a statement on their website stating that the organisation welcomes contact from students looking to do work experience. This can help to extend awareness about the organisation and attract a more diverse range of work experience students to it than arranging placements through personal contacts. Contacting the local schools' careers adviser is another option.

Even though an interview is unlikely to be necessary for placing work experience students, conducting an interview with a student prior to their starting the placement will assist the student to understand how interviews are structured and give them experience for future interviews.

This might be the student's first experience of work, so having some experience of a real recruitment process is likely to help them with future job applications.

Dos and don'ts

- ✓ Do ask questions about the student's education and hobbies.
- ✓ Do ask questions about the student's objectives for the work placement.
- ✓ Do ask the student questions about their suitability for the role.
- ✓ Do encourage the student to ask you questions.

- Don't ask questions about or base your decision on whether or not to offer a placement to an individual, on any "protected characteristics" (see below).
- Don't ask health-related questions, unless they come within one of the specific exemptions (see below).

The "protected characteristics" are sex, gender reassignment, married or civil partner status, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation, age and disability, and are wholly irrelevant to the placement. Asking any questions related to these characteristics, or basing a decision on them, could expose the organisation to a discrimination claim.

You should not ask prospective work experience students health-related questions during the recruitment process. Health-related questions during the recruitment process should be restricted to one of a number of specified circumstances, including:

- to establish whether or not the student will be able to undergo an assessment as part of the recruitment process (for example an interview), and whether or not the organisation will need to make reasonable adjustments to it; and
- to ascertain if the student can carry out functions essential to the placement, after taking into account reasonable adjustments (this will apply only in very limited situations, for example if the student may be required to undertake lifting, which, in any event, will be subject to the stringent health and safety requirements that apply to the employment of individuals below the age of 18).

Pay

Employers are not required to pay work experience students. Work experience placements that last for less than one year and are part of a UK-based higher-education or further-education course are exempt from the national minimum wage rules.

Students of compulsory school age carrying out work placements are also exempt from the national minimum wage (in England and Wales, young people can leave school on the last Friday of June of the school year in which they are 16 (although a duty to participate in education or training applies in England.)

However, some organisations reimburse work experience students' expenses, for example travel and lunch expenses, as a matter of good practice.

Furthermore, organisations that offer work experience placements during the school holidays could choose to pay students during their placement to encourage those from less privileged backgrounds to take on a placement where they might otherwise seek paid work, and to further the reputation of the organisation.

Be advised

Placements that fall outside these exceptions (often called internships) will be subject to payment of the national minimum wage, under the intern is there simply to observe.

Preparing for the student's arrival

You should prepare for the arrival of a work experience student in good time, to maximise the benefit of the experience for the individual and the organisation.

Depending on any existing procedures you should send a document to the student prior to the start of their placement, confirming:

- the dates of the placement;
- the proposed hours of attendance;
- the location of the work placement;
- any dress code;
- your name and who the student should ask for on arrival at the workplace; and
- whether or not the organisation will pay the student and/or reimburse travel or other expenses.

It may be appropriate for the organisation to send the student a confidentiality or non-disclosure document to sign where they may be exposed to sensitive company information.

It should take into account the sensitivity of the work to which the student may be exposed or information that they may hear in the office. Where the student may create a document that may be used by the organisation in the future, it could include a provision relating to intellectual property.

Employers' data protection obligations under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) apply to work experience students in the same way as they apply to other workers, so work placement students are entitled to be provided with details and copies of records holding personal data if they make a formal request to see them. In line with the UK GDPR, these records should be held confidentially and kept for no longer than necessary.

Induction

A comprehensive induction will help to give a good impression of the organisation to work experience students and help placements to run smoothly. A work experience student's induction should include:

- health and safety training (which might be given centrally, for example where the organisation has several work experience students at the same time);
- showing the student the facilities, including the toilets, fire exits and kitchen;
- advising the student of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour (see [Behaviour](#));
- providing an interesting explanation about the business; and
- finding out what the student would like to achieve from their placement.

Work allocation

You can help to ensure that work experience students get the most out of their placement by consideration to the work that a student will be involved in prior to their arrival.

You should put together a work plan for the work experience student because it helps to ensure that the student will be doing meaningful tasks during their placement, rather than sitting around waiting for something appropriate to come along.

The plan could include goals for the student's work experience, which should help them to achieve the most out of the placement. You should, as far as possible, plan the student's work to take into account their expressed preferences (if any).

You should not treat the student as a full team member. For example, there may be sensitive areas of the business where it would be inappropriate to involve the student. You could deal with this situation by courteously asking the student not to attend a meeting where such issues will be discussed.

Furthermore, you should not expect the student to perform full duties or work beyond their capability. Although it might be appropriate to give the student some routine tasks, some of the work given to the student should be meaningful and require them to apply real skills. It can work well to give the student a mini project to work on throughout their experience, as long as it is pitched appropriately.

You should aim to give the student a variety of work and involve different members of staff. This helps to ensure that the student gets a real feel for the organisation, the organisation's people and the work. Prior to the student's arrival, you could ask all team members to consider how they could spend time with the student.

Supervision

It is good practice to give a junior employee the role of supervising a work experience student closely (bearing in mind the student's age) and to be the student's dedicated mentor during the placement. The mentor should:

- be approachable;
- communicate regularly with the student to ensure the placement is going smoothly;
- encourage the student to complete their school workbook or diary each day; and
- liaise with other members of staff regarding the student's work.

The mentor should be competent at their job, and willing to give the student career guidance and share skills and knowledge.

It may be appropriate to ask for volunteers for the role of mentor, or to choose a mentor on the basis of aspirations for development expressed in a performance review.

It may be beneficial to set goals for the team, particularly the mentor, regarding the student's placement. This can help to ensure that the team is engaged with the process. You could include the goals in employees' annual objectives or personal development plan.

You may be required to attend a meeting with the student's visiting teacher during the placement, to report on how the student is getting on. The mentor should try to attend this meeting too.

Engaging the student

You (and mentors) should take a genuine interest in work experience students and try to engage them, particularly if a student does not seem to be very interested in the work. This might be achieved by:

- inviting the student to team meetings;
- inviting the student to appropriate social events, for example a team lunch;
- inviting the student to attend talks and seminars at the organisation; and
- having discussions with the student to find out about their interests for the future, and linking those interests with projects that the student is involved in.

Behaviour

At the start of a work experience placement, you should explain to the student what behaviour is and is not considered to be acceptable. This could include:

- providing a copy of the organisation's equal opportunities and dignity at work policy, and explaining the importance of non-discriminatory behaviour in the workplace;
- setting out the organisation's attitude towards alcohol and drugs in the workplace;
- explaining what is considered to be appropriate use of the internet and social media in the workplace, and what the student can and cannot say about the organisation on social media sites such as Facebook;
- detailing in general terms what language would be considered inappropriate for the workplace;
- clarifying what would be inappropriate clothing;
- explaining the importance of turning up to work on time;
- stating that the student should make their best efforts to complete the work given on time and to a good standard; and
- explaining that the student should ask for help when they are unsure about something.

You should be aware that other members of staff may be affected if the student behaves inappropriately, including where they engage in bullying, harassment or discrimination. You could nominate the mentor to be responsible for ensuring that the student behaves appropriately during the placement.

If the student's behaviour is unacceptable, you should, if appropriate, issue a warning to the student. If unacceptable behaviour persists, you may need to consider terminating the placement via the school or local authority as appropriate.

Feedback

You should give work experience students feedback at the end of their placement. Ask for input from the team, particularly the mentor, before giving feedback to the student, and give the feedback at a private meeting.

Where a student asks for a reference at the end of the placement, you should consider providing one, taking into account the organisation's policy on providing references. It would be useful to set out the work that the student has undertaken and the details of any new skills that they have demonstrated. This could help the student to obtain employment in the future, particularly considering this might be their first experience of work. There is no legal requirement to provide a reference for work experience students, but if you provide one, there is an obligation to ensure that it is not misleading.

It is good practice to ask the student for their feedback on the placement, so that the organisation can improve the quality of its placements in the future.