eWBL – Making work-based learning work in an online environment
CASE STUDIES – GERMANY (WP1)

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Exploring the challenges met and the alternatives found by WBL providers across Europe in their shift from WBL to eWBL.

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CASE STUDY REPORT 1

Organisation(s)	1) University of Applied Sciences 2) Catering Company
Country(-ies)	Germany
Disciplinary sector	Business studies
Case written by	Alina Serafiniak

Executive summary (summarise the case in 200 words)
This case describes the online work placement offered for the Bachelor's program in operational information management (business informatics) at the University of Applied Sciences. Thereby, an internship was fulfilled by the student at the company, which offers catering concepts for communal catering. The internship was fulfilled over six months in 2020 in the department of process management, where one major task included process capture and modelling. The internship was completed 100% online. The study program was taught online for one year. The case demonstrates the different pedagogical tools used by the University of Applied Sciences and the student's participation in the online work placement, such as weekly meetings, mentoring, presentations, and feedback. The case also examines the drivers and barriers of eWBL, the learning implications of eWBL, and the recommendations given by case participants for the future of eWBL.

Section	Answer
1) Organisation's background	The University of Applied Sciences is a public university. The study program of operational information management (business informatics) is a bachelor's program of six terms. Students participating in this Bachelor degree must fulfil a practical IT project. The company is a family-owned business, offering catering concepts for communal catering such as companies, kindergartens, hospitals, schools, and retirement homes. The company is based in Rheine, Germany and operates in eight countries internationally. The company's earned a revenue of 1,007 billion euros in 2021and employed more than 11,000 people. The student studied from 2018 to 2021, including six months of internship and one year of online studies.
2) Design, delivery, and management.	The student worked in the department of process management in a team of eight people. The student's task was to model and visualise the existing processes within the company. Right at the beginning of the internship, the student got the necessary hardware like a Microsoft Surface and access to MS Teams, Skype and Outlook, as well as a web-based program important for fulfilling his tasks. At the university, Zoom was used for the lectures. Due to the governmental regulations in Germany, companies and universities were forced to move work and lectures online within one week. Accordingly, the

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	governmental regulations created the need for a fast switch from presence to online in the workplace and the universities.

The company equipped all its employees with the necessary hardware and software before Covid. The laptops had an integrated camera and a headset, which enabled the employees and the student to work from home. For the staff, daily calls with the departments were introduced in the beginning. Later, these calls were held less frequently.

At the university of applied sciences, every teacher received support to change their teaching concept from face-to-face to online learning. Some teachers, e.g., recorded their lecturers, while others did the lecture online, filmed movies or recorded podcasts. There was no guideline for the lecturers, and everyone found their own path on how to deal with the new regulations. Small training courses for the lecturers on technical aspects supported the transition to the online format. In terms of software and technology, the university accepted every format. The students did not receive support to deal with the transition to working from home during the internship but on how to use Zoom and do presentations and interviews on Zoom. In general, the transition to online learning was relatively quick and smooth.

The student had to pick up the hardware at the company on-site before starting the internship. The first day was about setting up the hard- and software. Every intern has a supervisor from the specialist department and the HR department. Accordingly, the supervisor called the students on the first day in the morning and evening to ensure everything was working. The supervision of the student took place via daily appointments with direct colleagues. They also did an introduction to the company on the first day. Thereby, the supervision of the team leader lacked consistency as more guidance and interest was desired from the student's perspective. The team leader was not interested in how the student was doing and only had a few appointments with the student towards the end of the internship. In contrast, the HR department got in touch with the students relatively promptly after one month, asking how things were going during the internship.

The assessment and evaluation of the students at the university took place via an internship report. The student had to write a report of more than 20 pages about the project during the internship. In terms of supervision from the university, the only exchange or communication with the professor responsible for supervision was about the internship report. There was no further contact about the student's well-being during the internship. |
| **3) Difference and similarities** | Using virtual meetings via MS Teams increased the coordination and flexibility in setting up meetings and bringing people together. Meeting coordination was perceived as more complex on-site compared to working from home. Further, the MS Teams meetings allow screen sharing and efficient discussions about the project according to the student.

According to the student, working from home can be more productive than working on-site as there are less distractions from colleagues (coffee breaks and smalltalk) and noise.

On the other hand, the student, the university, and the company identify a lack of personal contact with colleagues and other students compared to working and studying on-site. This led to lost communication, less group work and less |

	networking among students and colleagues. Consequently, the company provided more intensive support to the interns from the HR department to check in on the students and stay in regular contact. Compared to working on-site, the students are also required to be more structured in their work and have higher motivation and commitment to the tasks and the company. Regarding the quality of the student's work, the university identified a lower quality in general but not specifically for internships.
4) Learning outcomes	The student was not familiar with working from home before doing the internship. Accordingly, the necessary skills and knowledge to work from home were developed throughout the internship. For example, the way of giving presentations was perceived differently in an online environment compared to face-to-face presentations. The development of a professional network suffered due to less or no contact with other students and colleagues at the workplace. Communication skills are influenced positively and negatively, and there was a learning process on which kinds of presentations work better online and which work better offline. In direct communication with other colleagues, the company identified some difficulties in communication from some interns. They believe communication would have been better in a face-to-face workplace. In general, the university did not identify the negative impact of the online internship on the student's professional development. The company even reported that the interns who learned virtually during Covid were the best ones and the ones with whom the employees had the strongest interpersonal connection. So, most interns did a very good internship and integrated themselves very well.
5) Pedagogical innovations	Before the Covid pandemic, employees in the company's IT department were already partially allowed to work from home but it was not the norm in other departments. Due to Covid, people are allowed to work from home two to three times a week and allocate their days at the office and at home as they prefer. Thereby, there are no official rules communicated by the company, but the reconciliation takes place between the manager and the employee directly. The company introduced training sessions for their employees on how to work more efficiently with MS Teams and other digital tools to ensure that the employees could work effectively from home. Special training sessions were also designed by their interns for other interns. In these training sessions, the different departments and functions were presented by interns to new interns. The company developed a few best practices for the interns who had difficulties structuring their workday at home and discussed them with the struggling interns. The university assumes that the students did not fully understand the company's culture because they did not meet the colleagues or see the office. On the other hand, the company did not identify any difficulties for the students to understand, adapt and live the company's culture. Sometimes it was just a longer process than it would have been on-site.
6) Technological innovations	The company used MS Teams and other software for digital communication prior to Covid but increased their usage intensity due to the pandemic.

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| 7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL | The biggest driver to implementing eWBL was the governmental regulation, which required students and employees to study and work online.

Further, working from home is perceived as more productive than working on-site due to fewer distractions from colleagues or noise. Working in an open office with several people can be exhausting when many people are talking or have meetings simultaneously. Other advantages of working from home include sleeping longer, saving fuel costs for travelling by car, and being more flexible, e.g. in setting dates and appointments for craftsmen at home or with childcare. The flexibility of the location also allows working in one city and living in another city and not having to move for the internship. This also saves money for the students.

The university also identified advantages for working students as they could work more flexible hour in their jobs.

On the other hand, the onboarding process was more difficult, the basics of the software programs were a little bit harder to teach to the students, working from home can get boring in the long-run, and the personal contact and exchange with colleagues from other departments are missing. Accordingly, employees could miss interesting insights into their colleagues' work or synergies between different departments. Other obstacles to working from home included a few technical problems regarding the internet connection and the hardware. Nevertheless, these were only minor problems that occurred at the beginning of the internship. In contrast to the student, the university identified miscommunication due to online meetings as one major obstacle to introducing eWBL. Additionally, the problems with inappropriate communication led to obstacles in the online workplace.

The university got feedback from the students that there is less interaction and contact with other students in general, and it is more difficult to ask lecturers questions. This could create a barrier as the students are shy to ask questions and participate less in meetings.

Other obstacles from the university side include the technical knowledge of the lecturers on how to use the software. In the Bachelor of Business Informatics, exercising programming is part of the curriculum. Those exercises are usually carefully supervised to offer support to the students. Online lectures and exercises led to more difficult practice sessions as fewer students participated and asked fewer questions. |
| 8) Long-term impacts of eWBL | According to the student and the university, working from home will become more important in the future, and the freedom of choice for interns to work in the office or at home will gain importance. When interns can decide when they want to work at the office, the schedules and plans of their teammates should be kept in mind. Otherwise, the colleagues will likely not be at the office on the same day, and the benefit of personal exchange will be lost.

The company will continue to work in a hybrid model (three days at home and two days at the office) in the future while integrating the pedagogical innovations mentioned before. Nevertheless, in person days on-site must be ensured, especially at the beginning of the internship, to teach the basics. Therefore, training courses among the interns have been introduced. Besides, coordination |

appointments with the HR departments will stay online in the future to ensure higher flexibility of the interns for their daily work with their departments.

For universities, students value recordings of lectures in case they miss lectures or questions arise after a lecture. Recordings enable the student to watch the lecture again and clarify the lecture's content.

Universities also need to ensure interaction and exchange between the students. Further, group work among the students should be promoted.

In the long-term, additional tutorials, informational presentations, and quick meetings between university staff or lecturers and students are likely to remain online as they are perceived as more efficient. In contrast, lectures will get back to the face-to-face format. Hybrid is not preferred as it might be difficult to integrate the people in the face-to-face lecture and the participants on Zoom.

Finally, the universities will support students in doing online and non-online internships in the future, although there are no specific regulations regarding this topic yet.

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