



eWBL – Making work-based learning work in an online environment

Case Studies – netherlands (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.

Prepared by: The University of Groningen



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. CASE STUDY REPORT 5

Name of the case	Dutch case study 5
Country(-ies)	Netherlands
Disciplinary sector	Hotel management
Case written by	André Perusso
Executive summary (summarise the case in 200 words)	
<p>This case described the online work placement offered to the BA students of the hotel management school of a HEI in the south of the Netherlands. It was delivered by one of the largest catering companies in the Netherlands. The work was performed at the human resource department of the company and was delivered entirely online. The case describes the transition from offline to online work from the perspective of both the HEI, the company and an intern. Insights include the importance of welcoming interns with a face-to-face event, regular meetings for feedback and alignment of expectations, encouraging interns to ask questions, if possible having face-to-face sessions to go through more complex discussions, among others. The case also discusses the advantages and disadvantages of online internships and makes recommendations for the future of eWBL.</p>	

Section	Answer
1) Organisations' background	<p>Hotel Management is a study programme offered by a university of applied sciences in the south of the Netherlands. The HEI has around 14,600 students, 34 bachelor's programmes and 9 master's programmes. The HEI is based on three Dutch cities: Heerlen, Sittard, and Maastricht. The 4-year BA programme is taught in English and Dutch and is grounded in a project-based learning methodology. Work placements are a mandatory component of the programme. The HEI has a placement manager and support staff that help students to find and apply for internship positions. They also work with partner companies to ensure a high-quality learning experience for the students.</p> <p>The catering company supplies catering services to the hospitality and healthcare industry as well as runs several company restaurants (canteens). The placement on which this case is based was offered at the catering company's HR department. Interns are typically responsible for the processing of the personnel administration, supporting new colleagues with their employment in the HR system, and entering changes and new contracts, among others.</p>
2) Design, delivery and management.	<p>Work placements are a significant component of the hotel management programme. Students can locate their internship on their own initiative or through the university database. Around 95% of students find their internship through the school database. The HEI placement management team support students in the application process through workshops and try to match student profiles with specific vacancies.</p> <p>Due to COVID-19, several positions at hotels, restaurants and event companies could no longer be offered. Thus the HE placement management team spent a significant amount of time trying to create alternatives for these students. Such time constraints did not allow the HEI to develop complex mechanisms to support students during their internship activities. However, the internship management team shared a series of recommendations to students, especially regarding a better work-life balance when working from home.</p> <p>The HE internship manager reported significant variance in how companies dealt with online internships. Some job roles in specific industries (e.g. operational activities in the event or hotels industry) could not be performed entirely online. For these, a full online internship simply was not possible and it was replaced by other activities. Management-based internships could be more easily delivered online (as in the case of the catering company). In addition to differences in job roles, some companies dealt with the online distribution of tasks better than others. In some companies, interns were more constantly mentored and better integrated into the work activities of the company (multiple meetings, close access to supervisors). On others, interns received tasks on Monday and reported the outputs on Friday with little contact with their supervisors, in a "freelance" type of relationship.</p>

	<p>From the company’s side, work placements were moved to the online environment without a specific plan of action at the company level. Despite this, the transition was relatively smooth. Employees already used cooperative work tools (e.g MS Teams) daily. With the transition to online work, the main change was that now practically all work was done through MS Teams.</p> <p>At the catering company, work activities typically started with a meeting at the beginning of the day to discuss the tasks that needed to be done. At the end of the day, another meeting was held to discuss the outcomes, questions, problems and the agenda for the next day. In the specific case of interns, the supervisor had to spend more time (2-3 hours) explaining the tasks to interns and following up multiple times a day. Yet once the internship progressed and interns got familiarised with the work routine, work was distributed and monitored as initially described. According to the interviewed students, this initial difficulty in understanding the task was related to the online environment. If the instructions were done face-to-face, the process would have been easier.</p> <p>The feedback and mentoring process was also easily transitioned to the online environment. Instead of face-to-face feedback sessions, the sessions were conducted online but still took place twice a week lasting for 30mins to 1 hour. Similarly, at the HEI the feedback and formal assessment were not modified by the online transition. However, the interviewed intern suggested that it would be beneficial if the HE mentor could visit the company premises once during the internship, especially if the internship is delivered online. This visit would help the supervisor familiarize himself with the nature of the intern’s tasks and its work environment to give more useful feedback.</p> <p>From an IT perspective, the transition from offline to online work was done using already existing software such as Zoom and MS Teams. No major problems were identified with the use of these platforms. Intra-day communication was done via emails and WhatsApp but especially via MS Teams’ instant messaging, audio calls and file-sharing tools. On their first day of work, interns went to the company’s offices to pick up their computers and other IT equipment. This event also allowed interns to meet their internship supervisors face-to-face at least once before they started working. The delivery of the equipment was followed by a lunch event.</p> <p>In addition to this welcoming lunch, the catering company organised once a week an online “happy hour” where around 50 employees (not only interns) could chat about life outside of work, play games and other socialising activities. In the last month of the internship, work from the office was allowed again in a hybrid model, where interns went to the office 2 days per week and worked from home the remaining 3 days.</p>
<p>3) Difference, similarities and impact on learning outcomes</p>	<p>Regarding the capacity to deliver the tasks, the internship supervisor believes that online work increases interns’ efficiency due to lesser distraction and more time dedicated to the task. That is, to some extent, offset by a lack of socialisation, which might lead to poorer work satisfaction. Interestingly, the socialisation issue seems not to directly impact the follow-up on tasks (how the work is progressing) – this can be done well online – but instead, it hinders the opportunity to talk with others about issues beyond the task at hand.</p> <p>On the development of <i>soft skills</i>, the interviewed intern mentioned that because all work was done online, she developed the capacity to work independently and manage her own time. On the other hand, teamwork abilities and interpersonal communication skills were not thoroughly developed. The HE internship manager shared a similar view. To her, when working online people are mostly on their own (at home) therefore they rarely meet in a “neutral” environment like during a coffee break. Consequently, online teamwork is typically one-sided; originated by one person in response to his/her problem. Also, online teamwork is more oriented towards the task at hand. “Offline” teamwork, on the other hand, tends to be more collaborative and often originates not only from someone’s demand but from a shared discussion on non-work situations. Additionally, being in front of a screen invites distraction as one</p>

	<p>can start working on other tasks as the other person is talking. This also undermines teamwork and collaboration. Finally, the HE internship manager stressed the phenomenon of replacing verbal with written communication in online work. Interns prefer to write an email than make phone calls, yet the former is often less effective than the latter; an issue that can be solved in a 15-minute phone call can take several emails to sort out.</p> <p>Regarding soft skills, the catering company placement supervisor added that their development is related to the type of work environment. If all employees (or at least all in the task team) are working online, then teamwork and communication skills can be tailored to that environment. However, if most people work offline and only the interns work online, soft skills can be severely undermined. The intern might become isolated from the rest of the team, being regarded as a “face behind a screen”.</p> <p>Concerning gaining <i>professional experience</i>, the interviewed student mentioned that in the hospitality industry some job roles are severely de-characterized if done only online; for example, dealing with customers. Managerial tasks, on the other hand, can be more easily transferred to the online environment. Still, as confirmed by the company’s internship supervisor, face-to-face time is a significant component of work in any area, even in managerial activities. Therefore, companies should find a time when employees can meet face-to-face. Participants also reported on the impact of online work on <i>networking</i>. The interviewed intern and the HE internship manager mentioned that it is still possible to create a network online but it is far more complicated because of the lack of association between the name and the actual person; an issue that can be reduced by video calls. Contrastingly, the online environment allows for a broader networking reach. For instance, one can communicate with people from other countries and other institutions far more easily than in a face-to-face situation. But the bond is also more superficial. The company’s placement supervisor added that networking capabilities depend on the intern’s personality. People with open personality traits can build a network even if they are just interacting online.</p> <p>Finally, on the acquisition of <i>company culture</i>, both the intern and the company placement supervisor agree that online meetings help interns to capture the company culture, including the level of formality, language and communication style. The 10 minutes before and the 10 minutes after the meeting are particularly useful to acquire this form of knowledge as this is the time when people disclose more about their personalities. However, the HE internship manager added that in industries where personal contact with clients is central (e.g. hospitality), the culture of the workplace can not be fully absorbed online.</p>
<p>5) Pedagogical innovations</p>	<p>The HE and the company introduced a few pedagogical instruments to facilitate online working. They include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Briefing meetings</i>: meetings at the company took place every Monday and Friday. Monday to plan the week, go over the main work tasks with the interns and establish deadlines. Friday to follow up on the work and to give an overview of the activities for the next week. - <i>Mentoring and feedback sessions</i>: Twice a week interns and the internship coordinator at the catering company have an online meeting where interns receive feedback and mentoring on the quality of their work and advice for improvement. Interns also have the chance to share insights. - <i>Online happy hour</i>: around 50 employees join an online session to talk about life outside work and socialise. - <i>Welcome lunch</i>: at their first day of work, interns go to the company office to receive their IT equipment. The delivery of the equipment is followed by a lunch with the internship supervisor and other persons that will be working directly with the intern.
<p>6) Technological innovations</p>	<p>Offer each intern a laptop with a series of programmes pre-installed to facilitate the initial set-up and onboarding of interns.</p>
<p>7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL</p>	<p>The main benefits of online work as reported by participants are threefold. First, increased flexibility both in terms of where you do your internship (e.g. in a different city) and how you organise your day (e.g start early or work until late).</p>

	<p>Second, one spends less time commuting. Third, there is an increase in productivity due to less distraction. This is combined with the easiness to share files, shared screens, and agendas if both persons are working online at the same time. However, the catering company placement supervisor added that it is important to offer interns all the IT equipment they need to perform their tasks: mobile phone, laptop and appropriate software. Doing this not only reduces IT problems but also makes the intern feels like he/she is truly working for that particular company.</p> <p>The main constraint of online work according to participants is the lack of social interaction. This is especially relevant for the development of soft skills as the skills developed for online work (e.g working independently, time management) are not the same skills you need for face-to-face interaction. Similarly, the level of bonding and socialisation that typically happen during non-working time (e.g. coffee breaks) cannot be replicated online. The absence of face-to-face socialisation might lead to an overemphasis on the task at the expense of collaborative and creative thinking and the acquisition of workplace culture. Or as the internship coordinator described, without any social contact it does not matter what company one did the internship at.</p> <p>A second major issue raised by both the interviewed intern and her supervisor at the company is the difficulty in capturing instructions online. The intern recommended that when a task is explained for the first time, instructions should be delivered face-to-face. This facilitates the process of asking questions and demonstrating things. If that is not possible, the internship supervisor recommended that interns always ask questions whenever an issue is not clear. Likewise, supervisors should continuously ensure, through questioning, if interns truly understood the task and if deliverables are still “on track”.</p> <p>Finally, as mentioned earlier, the interviewed intern suggested that the person responsible for the internship at HE should spend one afternoon or so with the intern at the company premises. That would offer the HE coordinator a better insight into what exactly the intern is doing and how to offer tailored feedback.</p>
<p>8) Long-term impacts of eWBL</p>	<p>According to the company placement coordinator, the operational component of work will remain online, where it is more productive. This is especially because it is easier to share information online. Conversely, face-to-face time is critical to creating the familiarity and trust that is necessary to be able to work efficiently online. Consequently, a combination of online and offline work is often ideal.</p>