



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.

Prepared by: Science-to-Business Marketing Research Centre of FH Münster University of Applied Science



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CASE STUDY REPORT 4

Name of the case	Consultancy company
Organisation(s)	University of Applied Sciences and an auditing and consultancy company
Country(-ies)	Germany
Disciplinary sector	Master Degree – International Marketing and Sales
Case written by	Maynara Furquim
Executive summary (summarise the case in 200 words)	
<p>This case is from a hybrid internship format. The student worked in a consultancy company for three months – half of the time on-site and half online. Digital collaboration is key as the company has headquarters and teams spread throughout Germany. In this case, there is a buddy program the company has for interns, in which they assign a neutral person to help the intern in the adaptation, providing guidance inside the company, introducing colleagues, giving general feedback, supporting with general questions, and so on. The university has a new and innovative master's program that can be used as a model for future developments in eWBL practices. The future seems to tend towards more hybrid formats of internships, so the students can develop a complete set of skills that will help them in their professional life afterwards.</p>	

Section	Answer
1) Organisation's background	<p>The university of applied sciences was founded on August 1, 1971, from the merger of state and private construction and engineering schools and institutions offering vocational technical training. At that time, the number of students was around 2,300 - today, more than 15,000 young people are studying in over 100 bachelor's and Master's degree programs. Accompanied by an in-house doctoral college, around 110 cooperative doctoral students are also gaining qualifications.</p> <p>Over the years, the university has developed into a practice-oriented, international and interdisciplinary university. Lecturers and students contribute to successfully transferring scientific findings into practice. This pays off: today, the university is one of the largest and most successful universities of applied sciences in Germany.</p> <p>The Master's programme in International Marketing & Sales will optimally prepare the students for the challenges companies face when operating on global markets. In order to create international corporate strategies and to actively take advantage of the opportunities offered by globalisation, future managers must possess specialist knowledge that meets international requirements. In this respect, not only business expertise, but also excellent language and intercultural skills are required. They teach the necessary skills for solving business issues in an international context – from a practical and academic perspective.</p>

	<p>The company occupies a leading position in the market for auditing and consultancy. It supports clients from all sectors to enable them to obtain their objectives – thanks to its worldwide network, and the opportunities are boundless. They advise groups, family-owned companies, industrial and service companies, global players and local heroes, the public sector, associations, and NGOs. The services provided by the company are spread over three divisions: Assurance, Tax & Legal, and Advisory.</p>
<p>2) Design, delivery and management.</p>	<p>The university became more flexible and adaptable in administration (as far as possible legally), with which type and location of internships they accept, especially for the bachelor's students (mandatory component). For the master's, as it is not mandatory in the curriculum, they did not change anything, as they already had some previous experience with internships during their bachelor's. More than that, no other effort was made to prepare the students for an online internship, like mentoring or feedback; just some informal guidance by one or another professor. As an exception, the university has a master's of Digital Business and Innovation Management (DigiBIM), in which the digital component was crucial when creating the curriculum, so they had partner companies helping them develop the program. In this program, specifically, they have an onboarding session before classes start that approaches leading and working with people in a digital environment, how to use digital project management tools, etc..</p> <p>The company created a common online introduction day where all new interns and associates got together to get all relevant information, like training about values, IT-related stuff, etc. They also sent hardware to install prior to the internship. The communication between the HR department and students was more intense to deal with all the questions and health and safety issues. The company also organised some other training, but it was more related to individual assessments and requirements of each practice (Assurance, Tax and Advisory), so it was more a target-oriented training that happens after starting the internship (it also applies to other new employees). The intern's supervisor also spent time with him, explaining how things are handled and how the tools are used.</p>
<p>3) Difference and similarities</p>	<p>From the company side, the whole management stayed the same regarding tasks assignment, feedback, monitoring, and evaluation. It takes more time to communicate virtually, but there is no significant difference. The intern and the supervisor of this case always had three meetings per day to check the progress and quality ("check in" in the morning, "check-up" around lunch, and "check out" in the afternoon), and in between, used chat tools to talk and clear any doubts.</p> <p>For the university, it also stayed mostly the same. Assessment and evaluation were kept the same, all the forms were the same, and it is a "pass or fail" grade based on the self-assessment report the students write and the employer feedback letter. They are not evaluated differently for online or offline internships. In DigiBIM, this aspect is more open because the students set their learning objectives.</p> <p>From the technology aspect, nothing was mentioned. They just adapted what was used before (Google and SharePoint, for this last one, to restrict access to different projects if you are not working on them).</p>



<p>4) Learning outcomes</p>	<p>The company sees that the development of transversal and soft skills is different in an online environment, but it is necessary to divide them. Some skills can be learned 1 to 1 regardless of online or offline. However, for others, like “people skills” (e.g., communication, especially body language and leadership), the development is not as good as offline. Also, the loyalty of workers, and a good relationship with the employer, are more difficult to build when they start working online because becoming friends with colleagues is harder. This aspect impacts the people’s intention to leave the company (i.e., if you are friends with your colleagues, you probably will not want to leave). Also, the specialised skills have a slight impact, as it might take more time to learn, for example, how to design a good-looking slide or explain a topic visually. Networking is also impacted as well, as one of the purposes of an internship is to build a network, get information and get to know different projects and people. The company culture can be told to the intern online. However, it needs to be lived in daily life to be absorbed, understood, and felt – it is also relevant for employees’ loyalty. Otherwise, the intern does not see how it works in the whole picture. It is just one or another aspect of the culture.</p> <p>The university sees that soft skills and networking are not better or worse. It is just different as the work environment has changed. However, it also depends on the nature of the internship, as some skills are more relevant online than on-site. Therefore, the perfect world would be for the student having both experiences, online and offline (or hybrid), to develop all skills in all scenarios. So, it is a triangle: knowledge and skills that are the same regardless of the work environment, more relevant online, and skills that are very necessary on-site. For culture familiarisation, the university has little impact or actions, as they understand it is more related to the company side as it can vary a lot.</p> <p>The student got feedback, and it was given quite frequently, two times face-to-face and two times online. Both worked well, even though the student prefers it in person – for online, it is important to have the camera on. When at the office, he met some people, but they were not from his projects, so it was hard for him to get along with them. Skills-related, the student said interns need to be more proactive in connecting and communicating with the team and get out of their comfort zone. For other skills, more task-related, like PowerPoint slides or Excel spreadsheets, online works even better than in-person, in his view. However, it is the other way around for presentation skills, for example. Also, the fact that the university’s lectures have been held online for a while already helped him develop some digital skills. Moreover, it was easy for him to apply concepts seen in class to the daily work more deeply, regardless of being online. Lastly, networking was not beneficial to the online internship, as it requires a lot more effort, and you still are reluctant to contact someone; in his opinion, the company transported their culture well online, as they are placed in different locations, but no online events were implemented (only face-to-face with the whole company’s teams, with a digital alternative for those who could not join).</p>
<p>5) Pedagogical innovations</p>	<p>The company has implemented a buddy system, a stable contact person outside the intern project or department (neutral position), to help the intern to familiarise himself with the company, pass on knowledge, be there for support, introduce the intern to co-workers, give general feedback, and so on.</p>

	In the DigiBIM program, the university has onboarding sessions two weeks before the program starts to familiarise the students with online aspects, skills and tools.
6) Technological innovations	No new technologies were introduced in this case. They mostly worked with the Google environment and SharePoint (for documents). However, the student received a package two weeks before the start of the internship with all the tech instruments he would need, like a laptop, headset, and a second display.
7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL	<p>The main benefits, from the company's perspective, are time and location, as the intern can move to the company city and save time coming to work. The main negative aspect is the loss of personal connection for the intern, the culture, and the company; personal development is not as good as in an offline setting.</p> <p>The main driver for the university is to make sure students can get through the program, so it is a student-centred task to ensure they have a good experience. Furthermore, they see two main barriers: structures take a long time to change in Germany, and there is much uncertainty, as there needs to be more data to suggest the need for change.</p> <p>For the student, the biggest benefit is the freedom of location, especially in a short internship (it is tricky to move to big cities for such a short time), and also because even clients prefer online meetings to prevent travelling. This way, the company and their clients can get the best talent. The biggest challenge was the network aspect that could not be developed.</p>
8) Long-term impacts of eWBL	Hybrid formats are the future for the better development of students. Be more student-centred when developing the new/adapted programs, and talk to companies/partners to get the real needs from the market post-Covid.

