



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

Case Studies – Ireland (WP1)

27/01/2023

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 3

Name of the case	Case Study 3 - Ireland
Organisation(s)	HEI 2 and a tech. company
Country(-ies)	Ireland
Disciplinary sector	Computer Science
Contacts	HEI Lecturer, Tech. company founder and student.
Case written by	Momentum
Executive summary (summarise the case in 200 words)	
<p>This case describes the online work placement offered to a BSc in Computing in Software Development student at HEI 2. It was delivered at a software development company in Ireland. The work placement was delivered entirely online. The case demonstrates the different pedagogical tools that were used by the company and HEI 2, and the student participant in the online work placement such as daily meetings, mentoring, feedback, and buddy systems. 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.</p>	

Section	Answer
1) Organisation's background	<p>The company is a software development company that provides a range of apps to capture mobile transactions and integrate them into their clients' accounting systems. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the tech. the company operated remotely with occasional office-based meetings. The focus of this case is based on the internship that was offered in the software development department.</p> <p>The HEI is a multi-campus technological university in the west and northwest of Ireland. It currently has around 20,400 students, 86% undergraduate and 14% postgraduate, and approximately 2,250 members of staff. It offers over 600 courses in disciplines such as business, engineering, humanities, and technology.</p>
2) Design, delivery, and management.	<p>Work placement is an integral part of the computer science programme at the HEI that occurs in the third year of the degree. As work placements were happening shortly before the Covid-19 lockdowns came into place the HEI had to be dynamic and proactive in their approach to preparing their students for placement. This approach was led by the Registrar's office which drew up documents regarding work placements during Covid-19 and agreements for students participating in work placements to sign. Students going on work placement took part in a LinkedIn Learning module on remote working to prepare them for the norms of remote working. HEI staff also took part in this LinkedIn Learning module to prepare themselves as advisory figures for students. The HEI students had gained some experience of remote working through online learning that had been conducted throughout their course. The HEI is a leading university in the online delivery of course materials. The HEI Registrar's office also prepared staff by making them aware of the requirements for working online during a Covid-19 lockdown. It put a strong emphasis on informing students that staff were available to them through email/MS Teams/ calls throughout their work placement for advice or to answer any queries.</p> <p>Some students on work placements were offered technology and equipment i.e. laptops by partner organisations, however, that did not occur in this case. The HEI has developed strong and mature relationships with many partner organisations for their students to go on work placement with and there are continuously new companies joining their work placement programme. During the pandemic, these relationships continued through virtual means i.e. email, video calls, WhatsApp, etc rather than through face-to-face interactions. The HEI found that it was dependent on the company as to whether the relationship was to be face-to-face or online with students.</p> <p>Before the pandemic, the tech. the company was largely remote working with some employees working globally, but there would be the occasional meeting in the office. It operates with an agile scrum methodology for project</p>



	<p>management where they meet every day at 17:15 GMT (to accommodate different time zones) and discuss what they did during the day, what they plan to do next and ask for assistance with any problems. These meetings act as a means for socialisation and allow the global team to meet and collaborate. It acted as though their intern was a new employee and as such gave him onboarding documentation that allowed for the student to be easily set up within the organisation. Support was also offered to the student through various team members and a buddy system was established to give the intern a soft introduction to the company.</p>
<p>3) Difference and similarities</p>	<p>The student participant was introduced to an agile scrum methodology where projects were managed incrementally during the work placement, and this was done through daily virtual meetings in the evenings rather than in-person meetings. The student participant found that the work was distributed through an online management tool called Shortcut and that communication between team members occurred through Slack which could easily be used to communicate with team members. The student participant was introduced to 'GitHub' which housed code for the company and allowed for collaboration between team members virtually. There was no face-to-face socialisation between the student participant and their team members, but they were able to converse socially online through email, Slack channels, and WhatsApp. The lead developer within the company acted as a mentor to the student participant and would teach the student how to conduct themselves professionally as well as review their work and give feedback to the student.</p> <p>The HEI ensures that students are not mistreated by any company and that the companies provide students with a new skill set and work ethos. It ensures that the work placements are academically in line with the course (i.e. this case involves a software development student doing a work placement in a software development position.) As a means for assessment, the HEI assessed the students' work placements by asking them to give a pre-recorded presentation online that was given a pass or fail grade. Previously students conducted these presentations live. Also, while on the work placement the student participant kept a work placement diary which would be signed by the employer each week, and at the end of the placement, the employer would be given criteria in which to evaluate the student i.e. quality of work and punctuality.</p> <p>Due to the pandemic, the company felt as though their momentum and culture had changed. They felt that there was a difference between working together in the same office and working apart remotely. It identified that there were more 'watercooler moments' when working in the office i.e. discussing work problems in the office. It introduced monthly meetups online to get work-life feedback from employees. The company also found that by working remotely there were fewer distractions from co-worker conversations. There was more flexibility for employees which allowed them to establish a better work-life balance. Remote working also allowed for good visibility in seeing what work had been done and had to be done. The company provided the student participant with constant feedback to help them learn through one-to-one meetings, daily team meetings, and their mentor.</p>
<p>4) Learning outcomes</p>	<p>During the online work placement, the student participant became much more conscious of their methods of communication online and how they can be interpreted and therefore developing their communication skills. The student participant was also able to conduct presentations during their work placement for their co-workers and this improved their intrapersonal skills and confidence. The student gained practical experience during their work placement by getting the opportunity to work on their own project within the company as well as working on existing products that are currently in use by the company and their clients. The student participant was able to develop their research skills during their placement in new aspects such as costs and pricing of products which they would not have learned through their education at the HEI. The</p>



	<p>student participant was able to broaden their professional network through meeting virtually with employees of the company and through limited contact with company clients. The student participant felt as though they embraced the company culture that was shown by the rest of the team.</p> <p>The HEI reported that tolerance had to be developed by companies over issues with internet connectivity with students doing work placements online that would limit the ability to communicate. Also, the HEI has found that background noise during online meetings has become more acceptable in areas of remote working due to the working situations that individuals are in. The HEI reported that students gained practical experience through teamwork within organizations during their work placements that would prepare them for the future. The HEI encouraged their students to not be afraid to ask questions while on their work placement but to take note of answers to prevent repetition in their questions and further their learning experience. The HEI found that after the completion of work placement students have increased confidence in their work and the ability to work independently online.</p> <p>The company believes that there is an onus on employees to problem solve on their own before turning to co-workers for help. This helps to develop independence within the company and the ability to ask for help when truly stuck. The company acknowledged that remote working hindered the ability to network as the student participant was unable to meet with individuals in the company face-to-face. It hopes that their company culture is absorbed completely by all those involved and that there is a top-down implementation of this company culture. It believes in the value of teamwork, competitiveness, and openness to feedback and that trust is valuable in ensuring company productivity.</p>
<p>5) Pedagogical innovations</p>	<p>Participants mentioned various pedagogical innovations introduced by the company and HEI. They include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Daily meetings:</i> Company employees would meet every day at 17:15 GMT to discuss what they had done during the day, what they plan to do next, and to ask for any assistance with problems. - <i>Mentoring and feedback:</i> The company offered their lead developer as a mentor to the student who gave the student advice and feedback on the work they had completed. - <i>Buddy system:</i> The student was offered support through a buddy system among various team members to give them a soft introduction to the company. - HEI staff made themselves constantly available online through email and MS Teams for students throughout their work placement to offer advice and resolve any issues surrounding the work placement. - <i>Space and Time to learn:</i> the student participant was allowed time and space to learn the new tools within the company with support from mentors if required.
<p>6) Technological innovations</p>	<p>The company introduced the online management tool 'Shortcut' as a means to distribute work between team members. It introduced the student participant to 'GitHub' software which housed the code for the company and allowed for collaboration between team members within the company. Communication between team members occurred through 'Slack' which was used to facilitate calls, messaging, and notifications.</p> <p>The HEI noted that some work placement companies offered students a laptop during the placement.</p>
<p>7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL</p>	<p>eWBL is driven by the flexibility that it offers to all those involved. The ability to work remotely reduces the limitations of geographic locations and time zones. Those involved can choose what working hours suit their lifestyle. The company also reported that there was an increase in productivity due to fewer</p>



	<p>workplace distractions from co-worker conversations.</p> <p>The student participant felt that the education that they had gained from the HEI was beneficial in preparing them for their online work placement. They said that the feedback they received from their company mentor was beneficial to them in helping them to improve their skills and professionalism.</p> <p>As the company, operated partially remotely before the pandemic they had already drawn up documentation for setting up new employees and students on placement and for completing day-to-day tasks. This made it easier for them to introduce the student participant to the work placement.</p> <p>The main barrier to eWBL is technological issues due to internet connectivity. This can limit the ability of individuals to communicate with one another due to being unable to join virtual meetings or send emails/messages online. This can also affect the productivity of the company due to work not being completed because of internet connectivity issues.</p> <p>Another barrier faced by eWBL is the isolation and mental health problems that may occur due to remote working and lack of face-to-face socialisation. This can be reduced through more general socialisation online within the company during the work placement such as during meetings and through messaging services. The HEI recognised that there needs to be an increase in socialisation support offered by HEI staff to students doing online work placements and those partner companies should also avail of the tools offered by the HEI to support the students.</p>
<p>8) Long-term impacts of eWBL</p>	<p>The student participant found the online work placement to be a valuable experience due to the future of work moving towards a more remote basis. The company sees a future of hybrid work with the majority of their processes occurring remotely with a few days of work in the office. This allows for there to be flexibility for employees and for the social aspect of employment to be met. Also, remote working gives companies the ability to hire globally, rent in cheaper areas, and establish flexible hours to suit employees in different time zones. The HEI notes that going forward there will be more opportunities for students due to remote working allowing companies to no longer be restricted by geographic locations and time zones. The HEI believes the majority of technological tasks that can be done online will remain virtual especially due to the ability to collaborate globally online. However, there will still be a need to meet face-to-face for negotiation and physical operations.</p>