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Learning from work experience

Gerry Jeffers

One of the least publicised but very significant changes in Irish workplaces over the past decade involves young people. Thousands of teenagers now spend one or two weeks on work experience placements *as part of their formal education*. In schools up and down the country, programme co-ordinators, teachers, principals, parents and students speak enthusiastically about placements as powerful occasions of learning. For some they are also major milestones on the road to career choice.

The work experience phenomenon has come about through schools and employers co-operating in practical ways at local level. Few, if any, banner headlines or loud pronouncements from educational, industrial or political leaders have heralded this development.

In many cases this major transformation was achieved by sometimes-gauche adolescents presenting themselves to workplaces with a line such as: *I'm doing a course where we have to find a week's work placement. Can you help?* By and large Irish employers - from large corporations to self-employed tradespeople - have responded most positively, as if they know instinctively how much educational, social and economic sense work experience makes.

New demands

A massive increase in demand for placements (*see panel*) arose from the 1994 restructuring of the senior cycle. The mainstreaming of Transition Year and the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme represented fresh thinking about teenagers and learning.

Within each programme, orienting young people to adult and working is a key goal. Connecting with the community, learning beyond the classroom, developing practical life skills are central strategies. There is a clear emphasis on active 'hands-on' learning and on the importance of 'learning by doing'.

Enrichment

Work experience and work shadowing add new dimensions to schooling. Effective schools have learned that preparation is vital, monitoring is important and de-briefing is essential if young people are to learn well from placements. Interaction with other people provides major learning opportunities in all placements whether fish factories or financial services, craft workshops or county councils. Learning to relate to others in an adult environment can confirm and enhance social skills. For some, spurts of growth in self-confidence can be tracked directly to a particular work experience placement. For others, the shock of workplace realities can even give fresh motivation for schoolwork!

Employer co-operation

Schools report that while employers willingly offer young people placements, they don't always follow through with meaningful tasks. The caricature of work experience as a week or fortnight spent making coffee (for others) and photocopying may have grains of truth. Some companies have devised imaginative, structured programmes that allow young people sample a variety of tasks and investigate different careers. Others might learn from them.

Structuring placements

So, what specifically can employers do to make work experience placements even better for young people?

Firstly, some kind of orientation or introduction to the particular workplace gives the young learner a context and sense of what's important. Remember that for some, a Transition Year placement may be their first real taste of an adult working environment.

Secondly, appointing a named individual with specific responsibility for the young person - a mentor of sorts - makes a lot of sense. They can answer basic questions and offer clarifications that reduce awkwardness and embarrassment all round.

Thirdly, young people themselves prefer to engage in varied, meaningful activities. A little advance planning and imagination can go a long way.

Fourthly, bringing closure to the placement by oral or written feedback to the young person and to the school is both important and effective.

Bigger issues

Other, larger issues relating to work experience hover in the background. Methods of allocating placements, especially within large companies, raise numerous questions. Sadly, some employers, in practice, don't take teenagers from particular communities. Schools designated 'disadvantaged' rarely have extensive networks of past students or connections to the rich and powerful and so may experience difficulty in accessing particular types of workplaces for their students. Yet we know that work experience placements offer young people in marginalised communities excellent opportunities to engage meaningfully with those outside their usual circles.

Money

Employers' perspectives on payment for 'work experience' differ greatly. A central tenet of work experience placements in school programmes is that they are *educational* activities. Inspired no doubt by goodwill and appreciation of young people's contributions, some employers bring closure to a placement by effectively paying the students, sometimes describing this as covering expenses or as a way of saying thanks. One unfortunate consequence is that, back in school, the student grapevine stratifies workplaces. Those that pay well become particularly popular while there can be a shying away from 'non-payers'. Consequently potentially worthwhile placements, especially in the voluntary and community sector, are sometimes shunned.

Part-time jobs

A superficial resemblance between work experience placements and part-time work can contribute to confusion. In reality these are radically different in focus: work experience is essentially an educational activity; part-time work is an economic one. More needs to be done to clarify these differences.

Greater dialogue between educators and employers about placements could be beneficial for all concerned.

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POSSIBLE CHART FOR INCLUSION

Schools offering and numbers of students following particular senior cycle programmes 2002-03 (Source: Department of Education and Science)

Program	No of Schools	No of Pupils
TYP	499	23,299
LCA 1	248	4,616
LCA 2	223	3,361
LCVP 1	474	17,325
LCVP 2	480	15,550