



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

National Case Studies – Italy (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 Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini e Università Ca'Foscari Venezia teams



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Name of the case	CASE 6
Country	Italy
Disciplinary sector	Architecture - Urban Planning and Policy Design
Case written by	Thais Fagundes

Executive summary

The case describes the online internship offered to the MSc student in Urban Planning and Policy Design of the HEI in Milano that took place at the X Impresa.

The case highlights how the company's top management's close monitoring of the trainee and his involvement in transversal activities helped a better corporate culture transmission and facilitated the understanding of the company's management dynamics, an extremely relevant issue considering interns' first professional experience.

Although the company was at a more advanced stage of digitalisation, facing fewer impacts when migrated online, the case points to some constraints related to information security and students' economic connectivity that may be relevant to the remote training ideal implementation.

Another crucial point in the case discussed was the difference between curricular and extra-curricular internships in Italy and how the internship credits validation restrictions may hinder students from continuing to gain professional experience during their studies.

Finally, the case shows diverse perceptions about the eWBL experience validity. The company does not consider eWBL a recommended experience because it diminishes students' socialisation and the corporate culture transmission and demands more manager's time in supervising the remote teams. However, they recognise that the traineeship helped the student boost his autonomy and resilience.

Finally, the student noted that the eWBL brought gains in their autonomy, resilience, and problem-solving skills development, although they also understood the in-presence WBL could have accelerated this process.

Section	Answer
1) Organisation's background	<p>X Impresa offers integrated property management services in the context of urban regeneration interventions for public, private, and third sector clients. The company operates in Milan, helping with administrative activities such as property management, community management, housing policy advice, asset management, building administration, and tenant relations management to technical activities such as building maintenance and facility management. Currently, it is responsible for the management of more than 1 000 properties with more than 900 residents.</p> <p>The HEI is an Italian university institute of a scientific and technological nature. The fields of study and research include 03 macro-areas engineering, architecture, and industrial design, and 12 departments</p>

	<p>including Architecture and Urban Studies, Design, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, Engineering, and Aerospace Science and Technology, among others. The institute has seven sites spread throughout Italy and one in Shanghai, China. In 2021 it had 47,179 students and 2,766 employees among teachers and administrative staff.</p> <p>The MSc in Urban Planning and Policy Design program offers a 2-year academic pathway, advanced in the design of spatial arrangements and urban policies, to transform and manage the city, the territory, and the environment. The course comprises knowledge development in the field of Urbanism, Urban planning and design, Urban policies, Energy and urban planning, Urban ethnography, Conflict management, Smart cities, and urban innovation.</p>
2) Design, delivery and management.	<p>The role of the HEI in the supervision and evaluation of students and internships was extremely marginal, supporting only bureaucratic and administrative activities. At the HEI, there are two different areas in the work placement process: the tutors (technical supervisors), usually the coordinator of the specific course the student is taking, and the career service, responsible for the general agreements' formalisation and bureaucratic processes. The objectives, content, roles, and activities to be developed were mainly agreed upon between the student and the company and then submitted for the HEIs tutor's approval.</p> <p>A final report was written at the end of the course completing the evaluation process. In the document, the student made a self-evaluation describing the main lessons learned, and the host company assessed whether the trainee achieved the goals defined at the beginning of the process. In the specific case of this student, he reports that the only two moments of interaction with the HEI were when the internship started and at the report delivery. He also mentions the final report still doesn't differentiate or assess specific questions regarding face-to-face or online placement, indicating the need for the update.</p> <p>Regarding the assessment dynamics, the student and its HEIs' tutor chose to use TEAMS for the tutoring and course evaluation as the HEI didn't establish a standard software to be used. The final report was submitted via a digital platform, in a process already systematised before COVID-19' occurred, not presenting substantial changes. There were also no digital training activities for students or the career service administrative staff due to the pandemic, unlike other areas such as DAD, laboratories, and teaching staff in general, which received more orientation.</p> <p>The student did 150 hours of curricular internship and an extracurricular part-time internship for one year. The 150 hours curricular internship started in October 2020 in-person and became hybrid around December due to the lockdown restrictions.</p> <p>Here it is worth explaining that the Italian educational system allows two internship modalities: curricular and extracurricular. The first modality</p>

	<p>comprises obligatory activities and recognises the training hours as CFU (formative university credits, ECTS), contributing to the degree acquisition. In the extracurricular modality, however, the activities and hours are not mandatory and therefore not graded and recognised for the diploma granting. An issue that can hinder students from continuing to gain professional experience during their studies, considering the effort to combine the hours of academic and professional activities.</p> <p>He reports that he found the opportunity through his connections and not the career service, proving the less prominent role of HEIs in the WBL dynamics. He relates that to the absence of compelling internship opportunities or a lack of more in-depth information regarding the companies' culture or job requirements provided by the career service, causing many students to look for vacancies in their external network of relationships. In the day-to-day activities, the intern developed activities close to the companies' partners, facilitating their supervision and feedback. He was involved both in the consulting and operational services areas, allowing him to gain a comprehensive understanding of the company's management dynamics, which is relevant considering his first professional experience.</p> <p>Regarding the traineeship's organization, X Impresa opted to give the intern more generic activities that wouldn't require an intensive face-to-face accompaniment and allowed it to be held online. In a second area, the intern could also participate in activities related to communication and the company's online platform development. The company's core activities, which included customer relations, were disregarded by back-office activities and operational support for social housing projects.</p> <p>In parallel to the daily activities and for better use of the student's remote time, the tutors provided him with reading materials and a reference bibliography, allowing the student to build a knowledge base about the company's area of activity. Regarding equipment, he used his computer.</p>
3) Difference and similarities	<p>As previously mentioned, the HEI's internship activation and evaluation processes were already digital, not presenting any substantial changes in its dynamics. However, the lack of specifics regarding online migration is an issue that requires a careful examination and update.</p> <p>In general, X Impresa did not face relevant adaptations in its management due to COVID-19, as they had implemented a year before a management by objectives model instead of by processes model with the strict control of hours.</p> <p>The same can be said regarding the IT tools, as the company was already at a more advanced level of digitalisation, with internal processes and online work tools already established. However, during the lockdown, they implemented the use of Dropbox to share bibliographies and reference materials with the trainees attempting to overcome physical barriers in corporate culture transmission. In addition, as already</p>

	<p>mentioned, with the pandemic, trainees were assigned to more generic functions in the company, which alleviated the need for intensive face-to-face monitoring by managers and thus enabled the online internship to continue. The student then became involved in meetings report activities, which allowed him to learn more about the company's corporate culture, organisational structure, and services.</p> <p>X Impresa agreed that smart working increased the meetings' efficiency while negatively impacted managers. They had to invest more hours monitoring their teams since the physical distance prevented informal socialisation moments where it was possible to build and evaluate the company's climate, such as coffee breaks, lunch, etc.</p> <p>Physical distance was also an obstacle for new trainees to build and maintain a strong relationship network. In the case of the student, the opportunity to do a few weeks of face-to-face work before going online greatly facilitated his transition and integration. Even with the decreasing interactions with colleagues during remote work, he could establish some informal relationships with direct peers via phone and WhatsApp. From a technical point of view, remote work required a little more computer literacy from all employees. Also, adaptations were necessary regarding access given to the trainees, data control, and information security.</p>
4) Learning outcomes	<p>Among the reported learning outcomes, the internship activities allowed students to understand the company's routines in depth. Also, the reference bibliography provided through Dropbox helped the interns develop specific technical knowledge and self-learning skills during the remote work.</p> <p>The involvement in activities transversal to all sectors allowed the intern to learn more about the corporate culture and develop communication and business etiquette skills. Both X Impresa and the student agreed that distancing contributed to problem-solving, resilience, autonomy, and self-management skills development but negatively impacted the growth of teamwork skills. The trainee also understands that the challenge of creating a digital CRM and communication platform, an activity he was performing for the first time, helped him to develop self-learning skills. Regarding the company's dynamics and specific activities understanding, the student sees that X Impresa partners' proximity and direct supervision substantially impacted his learning. On the other hand, the physical distance helped him to develop technical competencies, mainly because it allowed him to isolate himself while performing functions that required concentration a physical office environment does not often allow. The student understands that there were no substantial differences concerning external networking development as he was not involved in customer and supplier relationship activities.</p> <p>In a few words, the trainee sees his online training experience as positive, preparing him for future jobs. However, he admits that the in-person</p>

	internship would allow the development of competencies more intensely and immediately.
5) Pedagogical innovations	<p>Some pedagogical innovations developed on the company side consisted of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the redefinition of the trainee's scope of tasks, focusing more on generic activities that would demand less face-to-face supervision by tutors. - supply of reference bibliography to train students regarding specific technical knowledge and business culture, seeking to overcome the loss in this kind of knowledge transmission due to the physical distance - weekly coordination/status update meetings with each employee, including the student. Those events aimed to follow up on the needs and allow constant contact among collaborators contributed to a feeling of belonging, support during uncertain periods, and confidence for the trainee's autonomy skills development at a later stage. - the setting of team goals rather than individual goals to develop a greater team integration sense, even remotely. A common goal helped to enhance work synergies negatively impacted by the physical distance. - Annual evaluation interview, where employees received feedback and could reflect on evolving processes. <p>From the HEI's point of view, as already mentioned, there were no major pedagogical innovations due to the pandemic. In the student's case, tutoring continued online through TEAMS.</p>
6) Technological innovations	<p>X Impresa was already in an advanced stage of digitalisation, where internal processes and the use of several online tools were already established. The innovations are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dropbox's use to share bibliography and reference materials and Cloud Platforms for documents' creation. - Implementation of TEAMS and Zoom in the meetings, when they used features whiteboard, screen, and image sharing. - The company also unified the software and antivirus in all the employees' machines. And finally, co-workers informally used WhatsApp for conversations and relationship maintenance. - The trainee used his computer and had access to some folders and areas of the server were restricted due to information security issues. However, he reports that an external consulting firm helped X Impresa organise new processes and increase IT security after December 2021. With the improved processes and software updates, the access level is now only based on the employees' hierarchy and not on risks due to remote access. - Finally, X Impresa reserved a PC to be provided to the students at the beginning of each traineeship a few months after the lockdown started, allowing them to work remotely.

7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL	<p>Despite having found a way to enable online internships, X Impresa understands that face-to-face WBL is fundamental for students' competencies development because it allows networking and social integration with the company's team. Also, eWBL hinders the surge of informal circumstances that could facilitate agile problem resolution, such as a coffee break or happy hour.</p> <p>In addition, they understand that physical distance is a barrier to transmitting the corporate culture to new employees. Also, the higher supervision monitoring demand in students' first professional experiences could make remote internships unfeasible. The company's recommendation is not to consider eWBL an absolute and transversal possibility and analyse students' aptitudes and profiles, thus, evaluating who could be the more suitable person for online internships.</p> <p>Finally, eWBL sheds light on the information security issue, as often interns do not have their machines, and the possibility of external access to sensitive data that compromises the company or its customers' security are barriers and threats that should be addressed.</p> <p>The student understands a possible barrier to the eWBL full deployment is trainees' physical and economic accessibility to remote work since many live in shared residences with limited working space and connectivity (internet) restrictions.</p> <p>As a suggestion, he points out the need for the company to establish from the beginning a reference figure so that the trainee can clarify doubts and validate the activities and a constant agenda for pre-established monitoring meetings to provide security and develop the trainees' autonomy. The student also suggests setting a time limit for meetings, as excessive online presence can turn these events counterproductive.</p> <p>Considering the relationship between the trainee and the educational institution, there has been no major administrative changes. He believes that the HEIs could play a more active role, searching for more relevant offers and vacancies for the students and providing more clarity on the offered opportunities. The student also raises the need for flexible assessment mechanisms, allowing trainees to recognise the extracurricular internship hours and continue developing their professional skills without compromising their academic assessment and degree attainment. In his specific case, the company offered a permanent contract at the end of the extracurricular experience that he could not accept due to the impossibility of reconciling the professional activity with his academic demands. An example that proves how this evaluation system can configure an impediment to students' development and professional transition.</p>
8) Long-term impacts of eWBL	<p>Certainly, a long-term impact of eWBL is the autonomy skills development the work enabled. The need to establish new, more structured dynamics due to the loss of informality of the physical</p>

	<p>environments can also contribute in a permanent way to the creation of more efficient management processes. Moreover, cloud and file-sharing tools should remain a part of the company's daily routine.</p> <p>Despite the mentioned advances, it is important to point out that the company does not see benefits in eWBL for people at the beginning of their professional training and career.</p> <p>For the student, the remote experience certainly helped him to develop resilience, as well as improve his technical and operational skills. However, he stresses these gains would have been more immediate if he had held an in-person internship.</p>
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