eWBL – Making work-based learning work in an online environment
CASE STUDIES – GERMANY (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	Cosmetic company
Organisation(s)	University
Country(-ies)	Germany
Disciplinary sector	Business studies
Case written by	Alina Serafiniak

Executive summary (summarise the case in 200 words)
This case describes the online work placement offered for the Masters in Marketing at a University. Thereby, a working student position was fulfilled by the student at a cosmetic company, which mainly included work in business development and sales coordination. As a working student, the student worked next to her studies at the university for six months. More than 50% of the working student position was fulfilled online. The case demonstrates the different pedagogical tools and the student's participation in the online work placement, such as weekly meetings, mentoring, presentations, and feedback.   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.

Section	Answer
1) Organisation's background	The University is a public university. With more than 45,700 students, it is one of the largest universities in Germany. The student studied for a Master's in Business with a major in Marketing. The company is the leading cosmetic company in Germany, with over 40 brands in all cosmetic segments and distribution channels. Its German headquarter is in Düsseldorf. In total, about 2,500 people work at its locations in Germany. The student worked at the company for six months as a working student in sales coordination and business development, working for three different teams overall. The tasks during the internship included strategic tasks like analysing the competitive and digital environment to improve the company's business and cooperation with the customers. Accordingly, the student had different persons to report to but one main supervisor. The working student position was fulfilled online for the first 3.5 months and hybrid for the last 2.5 months.
2) Design, delivery, and management.	Due to the governmental regulations in Germany, companies and universities were forced to move work and lectures online within one week. These governmental regulations created the need for a fast switch from in-person to online in the workplace and the universities. Therefore, many students cancelled their plans of doing an internship as companies offered fewer internships. Despite this, the process of how the university was involved in

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	supporting and organising internships did not change due to Covid. The university uploaded all its seminars and workshops online, but there was no specific capacity for handling students who did an online internship. Still, the university offered a program to prepare, guide and evaluate students during their internships. Initially, these workshops, designed in cooperation with companies, were offered less often as everyone focused on handling the situation for themselves.

For the employees at the company, the change from on-site work to working from home required a lot of organisation and coordination, in the beginning, to figure out how to best convert the face-to-face onboarding and regular interaction with the students to the online environment. Thereby, it was most important that the students still felt well looked after.

The student worked in business development and sales coordination, as mentioned in section 1. At the company, Microsoft Teams was used for meetings and communication between colleagues. Thereby, video calls were mainly used. The communication at the university took place via Zoom. The onboarding process of the student included many video calls with the team and individual coffee dates to get to know their colleagues. In addition, there was a separate welcome and onboarding call for all the working students and interns from the different departments.

Later, the meetings between the student and the supervisor took place in fixed meetings once a week for feedback sessions, but there was almost daily communication between them. There were also weekly hello-weekend meetings, moving breaks, and virtual Christmas parties. The company encourages the students to initiate individual coffee dates with their colleagues to get to know each other. This is part of the company culture and not a new development due to eWBL. In summary, there was a lot of socialising and networking among the team, creating high integration of the student into the team. |
| **3) Difference and similarities** | Generally, the student and the company agree that everything possible in a face-to-face situation is possible online, too. In contrast, the university does not perceive the online internship as an internship. They interpret it as a means of communication based on information exchange, exchanging tasks and results, whereas a 'real' internship involves more informal communication, according to the university. They assume that an internship experience is not possible in an online internship and that it is a bit of an illusion for students to say that they had an internship in a certain country when they were sitting in their homes.

For the supervisors at the company, the amount of coordination and care for the students increased. Thereby, intensive communication and teaching of the students were identified to be more effective in the long run. Before, the company was more focused on on-the-job training, often leading to more questions and higher insecurity among the students.

Another difference identified by the student is the increasing self-organisation and independence when working from home compared to the on-site experience, as colleagues cannot be reached as easily.

The university identified shorter communication processes in an online environment compared to face-to-face interaction. Specifically, communication |

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	was more sequential, and the number of controversial discussions, eye contact during conversations, side talks, body language and interruptions decreased.
	The company strongly focuses on networking among its employees. With the introduction of working from home, the employees had to actively encourage the interns to contact colleagues and start their networking activities in the form of coffee dates. Throughout these coffee dates, the student talked to colleagues during the coffee dates that would sit on another floor or in another building at the office. Accordingly, the student got to know different people through working from home than on-site.
	All in all, the students worked faster and delivered their results online earlier than in the face-to-face environment.
4) Learning outcomes	The student did not identify a difference in problem-solving and leadership skills between working from home and at the office. The communication skills improved more than at the office as the student had to formulate the messages to colleagues properly and get out of their comfort zone when texting unknown colleagues for coffee dates or work. The online environment offers fewer opportunities to chat with colleagues or be distracted, but it also offers more time to rethink and learn from conversations with colleagues. Further, company meetings had to be prepared more carefully, and many students showed short project updates during the meetings via PowerPoint. Therefore, the online environment increased the student's preparation, communication, and technical skills on PowerPoint.
	According to the university, there has yet to be an answer on how soft skills development is influenced by online internships. Therefore, research and studies on this topic must be conducted to answer this question.
	Despite soft skills, the university's disciplinary knowledge helped the student fulfil the tasks during the working student position. However, the online and the on-site work experience remained the same.
	The student easily adapted to the company and workplace culture. There were no differences or challenges identified between working on-site and online. In contrast, the university identifies missing interactions and observations of the students in an online internship compared to a face-to-face internship, which does not support the identification of and with the company's culture.
	The university does not identify an impact of the online internship on the learning effects as there are missing goals for the student's internships. The assessment of the internships takes place via an internship report, but it does not involve any targets or goals for the internship. Students who did not have any other internship or work experience than an online internship or working from home may be more likely to promote online internships as it was an experience that did not harm them. They perceived it as a valuable experience. On the other hand, they did not experience an in-person internship or work experience and, thus, cannot compare or evaluate it.
5) Pedagogical innovations	The company introduced stronger communication between the supervisors and the students, which led to higher-quality results delivered in a shorter time. Also, the onboarding process is 100% online now, and online breakfasts for interns and working students were introduced.
	For the university, the online internship requires more explicit questions and communication among the employees to understand the workplace and

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	people, interact accordingly, and get the most out of the online internship experience.
	The university further promotes blended internships, which combine onsite and online periods, such as an online introduction and reading important company information. There could be online modules for reflection and reporting difficulties and online counselling and support from the university. Therefore, digital learning must be sensible and reflected to benefit the education and learning of the students.
6) Technological innovations	The company did not integrate any new technological innovations. They mainly used Microsoft teams for digital communications before Covid and intensified its usage during the pandemic.
7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL	The biggest driver to implementing eWBL was the governmental regulations, which required students and employees to study and work online. The team and the supervisor, and the students are working with, high motivation to drive their eWBL experience.
	As mentioned, the company identified faster results and better technical skills. In detail, different tasks are identified to be more suitable for an online or an offline environment. For example, individual project work is sometimes more productive from as work from home as there are fewer distractions.
	Better time management and higher responsibility for tasks are identified as drivers and benefits of working from home.
	Barriers to introducing eWBL include restricted communication and a higher effort to build new relationships and get to know another person's personality. According to the university, the informal exchange becomes more difficult, and the students cannot understand or identify the company culture.
8) Long-term impacts of eWBL	Covid has long-term impacts on eWBL and how companies design their recruitment, onboarding, and ongoing work processes. The recruitment at the company will take place entirely online.
	The student changed their expectations towards a future employer regarding options for working from home. Thus, 100% flexibility is demanded by the student. The company also encourages this, as they recommend getting familiar with the topic in the fight for talented employees. As the interns will become part of the talent pool, offering them a working from home option is crucial in keeping their interest in the company as a future employer.
	The technology and equipment must be up-to-date and reliable to ensure a productive remote workplace.
	For companies, proper onboarding with the team and all the colleagues is recommended despite the general company onboarding. There should be the option for a fully remote internship or working student position, so the student can decide whether they want to go to the office or not. In general, companies should be open to students and trust them with the work they are giving them. All in all, the company promotes the opportunity for students to choose

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whether they want to work at the office or from home to create the best workplace for every employee.

For universities, offering good contact to companies and promoting internships from remote companies is one of the future implications.

In contrast to the company and the student, the university does not promote or favour online internships. In-person interaction and internships are favoured long-term as online internships are massively restricted and have limited experience. This does not push the students to gain experience outside their comfort zone. Thus, strong reasons to opt for an online internship are demanded if it is different from the actual working environment of the company. In general, a realistic representation of the working field is crucial. Finally, the threat of excluding certain groups of people in an online environment must be considered. For example, people with disabilities or who cannot afford to live in an expensive city might be allowed to stay at home to make it easier for them to do the work, although they have these limitations. These people become less visible in the workplace and will be overlooked by society, creating and reinforcing different social classes. This can also be translated to the online lectures at universities as studies show that people with weaker social and economic backgrounds and first-generation academics have more negative consequences from studying online than people with other conditions. Although the university generally does not promote online internships, a blended learning experience is a favoured method. The student could work where it suits the situation and task best.

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