

Making the most of Work Experience & Placements

Careers & Employability Service

www.mmu.ac.uk/careers



**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**

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MAKING THE MOST OF WORK EXPERIENCE AND PLACEMENTS

Work experience can help demonstrate to employers that a graduate is ready for the world of work, and that they have developed transferable skills which are relevant to any position.

Why do work experience or a placement?

- Try out a career to check its fit with your own interests and personality.
- Meet new people and expand your network of contacts
- Gain new skills to enhance your employability
- Apply theoretical knowledge to the real world
- Practise the recruitment process
- Gain experience to enhance your CV
- Gain an insight to the world of work
- Gain a competitive advantage over others without work experience
- Make the transition to work after university easier
- Money!

How to find work experience

- For longer placements use your Placement Unit, who will help you with all aspects of finding a placement.
- The Careers Service can help with sources of vacancy information, advice, and preparation for the recruitment process e.g. psychometric tests and interviews.
- Use specialist web-sites for both vacancy listings and advice on making the most of your placement - see the back of this handout.
- Find your own placement. This demands time and effort, but can be the most worthwhile approach if you want something specialist, overseas, or have specific requirements, such as location.

What counts as work experience?

- Sandwich placements that last up to a year, as part of your course.
- Summer vacation work. Some larger organisations offer structured work experience which is usually advertised from Christmas, or even earlier.
- Part time or casual work
- Voluntary work
- Work-based learning, such as projects undertaken with local businesses as part of your course.

Where and when to start looking for work experience or a placement.

Finding work experience of any length can be challenging so start your search as early as possible. Research the job roles that interest you, and the organisations that are offering suitable opportunities. Use corporate websites and company

literature, and learn about the wider context they operate in by reading newspaper and journal reports.

Prepare for interviews well. If you think this all sounds like too much effort, read Laura's account of her experiences finding a placement at the back of this handout. (An MMU business studies student).

Before you start.... Set some clear objectives.

Decide what you want to achieve from your work experience/placement and discuss your expectations with your employer before you start, or early in your placement. The best way to avoid confusion or misunderstanding about your role is to ensure you and your employer both understand what you mutually want to get out of the placement. This way your employer will be able to plan appropriate work for you, and you will understand why you are being asked to do tasks that at times might seem trivial.

Show what you are capable of doing

- Always keep in mind the objectives you set yourself, and seize every opportunity to gain experience, stretch your abilities and take on responsibility.
- Always show your enthusiasm and reliability by paying attention to detail and delivering on your promises.
- Ask if you can attend staff meetings, conferences, and training events.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions and make suggestions. Equally, don't be openly critical of your boss or colleagues.
- Be diplomatic - if you are not getting the opportunities you had hoped for, ask for a meeting with your manager to discuss the matter.

Keep a diary or learning log

It is very important to record your experiences – the work you have done and the challenges you encountered. Reflecting on what you have done, and the skills and attributes you have developed, will be extremely useful for future job applications.

Build a network

- Identify colleagues whose work interests you and actively ask for their advice. It may be possible to organise some work shadowing or do a short project for them – ask.
- If you are impressed by someone's management skills, ask them if they will act as your mentor – a source of confidential advice when faced with a tricky situation.
- Record who you meet. Use the back of business cards to note down where/how you met someone and the key points about them.

Before you leave...

- Be sure you know who will give you a reference.
- Have the contact details of colleagues who may act as mentors, sources of advice, or help in finding employment in the future.

- Ask for feedback on your performance. Make sure you are completely clear about what you have gained from the placement in terms of skills, experience and personal development. Get your manager's perspective on what you need to do to further develop your employability in order to be successful in this work.

Good luck finding your work experience. Make sure you make the most of it!

LAURA'S ACCOUNT OF FINDING A PLACEMENT

The first year of University everybody knows – as it is repeated a lot throughout term by many students – is driven by: “you only need 40% to pass the first year”. This I must admit did cross my lips one or two times. So when I was sitting in the placement lecture at the end of the first year being told to “start looking for possible placements now” and “start preparing your CV now” I was not worrying too much about finding a job because basically I did not think that it would be that hard. Little did I know ... I do not mean to scare you first years but it was such a hard and stressful experience and the further in the year you haven't got a placement the harder it gets. That's why if I did have some advice for you it would be to start early. OK, we all know that there are a lot of lazy students out there that do leave things last minute and still get excellent marks, but honestly even they found this hard, I had major respect for any student who was balancing exams, coursework and interviews. I do not think I could have done that but then again I wouldn't want to.

At the start of my second year at Uni I was quietly confident that I already had my placement in the bag. My brother had lined up an interview for me with Fujitsu Siemens Computers, as his friend worked there, so I was quite lucky in that respect because I had already sorted out a good CV in the summer. The interview was actually around the beginning of this year. It was an all-day thing and I didn't really know what to expect. I would say this one was my worst. For a full day (9-5) you were being constantly assessed from the moment you walked into that door, right up to when you left at five o'clock. So basically you have to keep up a pretence of not showing your nerves and being a confident team member throughout the day. I know you laid back first years will be thinking you can rely on your witty and charming personality to get through and to be honest for a short while maybe I did too, but then when you get into the working world you realise that no matter how confident you are about yourself, if you are going for interviews with big companies there's going to be some stiff competition.

Since that first interview went not so well, I thought I would discuss what was entailed and how after this interview I made big improvements to make sure I never came out of an interview feeling like that again.

1. **Psychometric Testing** – These tests were really tough and my best advice I can give on these is practice makes perfect!! The library has tons of these books. I know I found these really difficult, so this made me practise. I often found that a couple of the questions I practised came up on the actual test, so you never know!
2. **Group Work** – The basis of this is covered in personal development tutorials. Honestly take heed – it came in so useful during my interviews. Most employers are looking at the quality of your group work; they want to be able to see that you're going to fit into their team. As you will learn from your personal development lectures and tutorials on Group Dynamics and Leadership, the best role to adopt is to not always try to take control of the situation. You have got to be able to influence others from a back seat approach. It is essential not to come across too loud or too quiet and to always try to bring in people who are too quiet. That is always guaranteed brownie points! Not only will your group work skills have to come into play here, this is an all day assessment centre: remember the managers and

directors are watching you constantly. Your group skills start from the moment you interact with the other students. I found that trying to make a friend there really helped; after you have talked to them you do actually realise they feel exactly the same as you.

- 3. Interview** – One thing that really impresses the interviewer is if you are interested in their company and have a passion for that particular role. I also had an interview at Hewlett Packard for a sales representative, never in a million years would I have wanted to work in sales but it was working for Hewlett Packard I was interested in. So therefore even if you do not have a passion for that particular role do your research. Remember you have got to tell the interviewer what they want to hear!

So this is a pretty standard layout to assessment centres, but after that one didn't go too well I knew I would be preparing for another one soon. Anyway to my shock horror, some companies required an even more painful process!!

These include my experiences with BT and Hewlett Packard. These were held during Easter break which was lucky for me (I didn't think so at the time) because there was so much preparation. Hewlett Packard was my first professional presentation they required one twenty minute presentation and one fifteen minute presentation.

The first twenty minute presentation was on an Excel spreadsheet. I had to interpret some data out of HP's sales funnel. This was data I didn't even understand and I'd never seen before in my life! So after the initial panic had settled I got to work. I knew I needed help to make a good job of this, so I asked around and prepared an excellent presentation. But remember: constructing a good presentation isn't the only thing they will be assessing you on. Your presentation skills must go hand in hand with this. Personally I am not a massive fan of presentations as it is, but believe you me I found it all a lot harder delivering a presentation to a board of directors than a class full of my mates. This is why I would again suggest taking heed in your personal development lectures and tutorials as all the practice given here will contribute extensively, if you are given a task such as this regarding your placement. Remember eye contact, I also found it useful to learn my presentations as a script and again the key to this being perfect is practice.

As I mentioned earlier this was only one of the two I was given at Hewlett Packard, the other was a personal presentation, "a presentation of your choice, on something you are passionate about". After I read this I was thinking what on earth I could do. My best suggestions here would be to present on something you know a lot about and also a topic that you are quite confident on, an extra-curricular activity perhaps. This way when they try to catch you out (and believe me they will) then they can't.

At first when I knew BT also required a presentation I thought maybe I would be lucky and I might be able to use the same presentation that was used for my personal presentation at Hewlett Packard. No such luck I'm afraid! This time I had to create a fifteen minute presentation on "how HR in BT had changed over the last five years". Again this was another presentation where I thought, "I don't know anything about this". So again after initial panic had set in, I started to prepare. The key to any successful presentation is to *prepare*.

After a mass of rejections through the email from over 100 companies I applied for, and rejections from the interviews I had attended, as you can imagine I was starting to wonder what's wrong with me. But as I mentioned before, you are up against stiff competition from all over the country, it could be that you are of the same calibre as the other students in the interview, but you haven't a lot of experience which was often my case.

When I attended the IBM assessment day I was quite chilled out (for me!). I knew what to expect this time and I knew the type of routine that went on at assessment centres. I felt this was a huge advantage because by this time I felt a bit of a pro in comparison to the interview virgins that were sitting at the back biting their nails as I once was. Because of the practice and experience from the other interviews I didn't at all walk out feeling I could have done better: in fact for a change I was quite proud of myself! This interview was in early April, so as you can see I started what I thought was early (the beginning of term September) and it took me eight months to finally find a placement.

Finding a job is a very long process. You cannot expect it to be over and done with in a month, and honestly if you haven't got a placement or even worse haven't started looking by April/May even the coolest of cool students are worrying. All in all I attended five interviews for the following companies:

1. Fujitsu Siemens
2. Hewlett Packard
3. Corpex
4. BT
5. IBM

Some of these have been horrible experiences, however they do get better and you will start to notice improvements. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of starting early even if this just means producing an excellent CV before you go into your second year. Do not expect to be able to just walk in to these big companies. Remember, they are investing in their future; they all want the best of the best and with the right practice and the right skills it is possible to achieve this.

Good luck in your search!

(Laura was a BA Business Studies student)