DIY Work Experience

In this age of Do It Yourself projects, don’t wait for opportunities to come to you – create one for yourself.

This guide has been developed to assist students seeking non-compulsory and non-course required industry placements at:

- For Profit organisations – maximum 10 days or
- Government or Not For Profit institutions – maximum 140 hours

Students seeking specific advice about practicums, internships and course based industry placements are advised to consult with their school.

Part 1 – Creating the placement or industry experience

Realistic Expectations

- Decide – what you want to learn, experience, observe, explore
- Identify – the organisations that can provide these opportunities
- Telephone – to find contacts in these organisations
- Send – your resume and covering letter
- Finalise – the details and visit prior to commencement

Part 2 – Making the most of the experience

- Plan processes and activities that will ensure success
- Be professional in your approach
- Evaluate and reflect to ensure your learning
- Consider alternatives to augment your placement

Part 3 – Resources

- Sample cover letter
- Work experience learning objectives
- Insurance

NB. Western Sydney University can only offer insurance cover to currently enrolled students. Enrolment ceases once final exams of the final semester of your degree have been completed.

Disclaimer: A signed Letter of Indemnity signifies that there is insurance currency. It does not mean that the university in any way guarantees or endorses the relevance or safety of the particular workplace, or the content of the work experience. Students are encouraged to conduct their own inquiries as to the nature of the workplaces in which they will undertake their work experience.
Part 1 – Creating the placement or industry experience

Realistic expectations
It is important to have a realistic expectation of what unpaid work experience can achieve for you.

Work experience is foremost a search for information, an opportunity to explore career and employment options.

Whilst it does not usually satisfy the “experience” requirements of job advertisements, work experience should provide you with ideas about the skills needed in your industry and whether or not you meet the skill requirements. It will also help you to know whether or not you are suited to this type of position. It should help you identify your next career decision steps.

The demands of employers
As graduate employment opportunities become increasingly competitive it seems a degree is not the sole requirement. Students who have had exposure to real workplace situations are highly regarded by prospective employers and positions are often won specifically because of previous work experience. Consider this type of experience as an essential element of your career planning.

Establishing valuable leads
Working in an unpaid capacity is worthwhile because the training and experience is costing you nothing more than your time. The chance to develop links with industry and the community and to interact with professionals who can assist you to make decisions about your future career direction is invaluable. Furthermore, the chance to display skills and abilities or to participate in a new environment sometimes leads to important contacts or even paid work.

Whilst work experience may not get you a job, it may help you to identify your next career decision steps.

Putting theory into practice
Work experience provides an opportunity for you to:
- experience the routines and procedures found in the workplace
- apply and test curriculum concepts and theory in a real life situation
- clarify and evaluate abilities and interests in relation to career choice
- gain an understanding of the nature of enterprise activities
- apply business and industry concepts to curriculum and class-based activities
- tap into the skills, knowledge and resources available in industry
- develop workplace, social and communication skills
- observe a variety of employment practices
- increase networks and job contacts
- explore a range of occupations and industries
- find a referee
- gain hands-on experience and practice skills
- increase confidence.

What to look for
The most effective work experience programs ensure appropriate supervision by an experienced professional and allow the student to undertake or observe meaningful work within their own professional area. You should attempt to meet with your employer prior to your commencement so that you can discuss a work program, learning opportunities, goals and objectives – both theirs and yours.
**When to look**
Undertaking professional work experience in the first year of a degree can help determine a career direction and ensure that studies are directed toward an area that will provide career satisfaction. Alternately, some students find they prefer to wait until second year when they have more of an idea about the particular field they are interested in and a broader skill and knowledge base to offer a work experience employer. By third year you should be aiming to add paid professional part-time work to your resume.

Most importantly, you should undertake work experience **before** leaving university.

**How long should it be?**
Your work experience should be for a short period, negotiated with your employer prior to starting. The length of this may vary depending on the employer and your study obligations.

If your placement is at a For-Profit organisation Western Sydney University insurance will only cover you for 10 days maximum. This will provide adequate time for you to appreciate the work routine and establish some networks. It also allows time for the organisation to get to know you, and for you to demonstrate your skills and level of commitment. During this time you may even identify other projects that you could continue to work on 1-2 days a week during the semester. If so, please contact Western Sydney University Careers to see if a paid internship could be organised (see page 12). Any ongoing arrangements should be negotiated towards the end of your work experience in consultation with your employer and Careers.

Longer placements of up to 140 hours can be sought at Government organisations and Not-For-Profits and can be covered by Western Sydney University insurance.

**Value this stepping stone to your future**
Be aware that finding your first paid professional work can be difficult. However, students may find that securing a short term, unpaid placement can lead to a further placement or paid position after they have had a chance to demonstrate their enthusiasm and ability. Therefore, it is imperative that you treat this opportunity with as much dedication and commitment as you would demonstrate in a permanent, paid position.

Use this experience as a strategic stepping stone to your future career.

**Exploring the workforce**
Regardless of whether you have a definite career goal or are just exploring the field you would like to pursue, work experience is an opportunity for every student to be part of the workforce. The knowledge you gain about the workforce will significantly increase your chances of employment and put you ahead in a competitive job market.

**A note for international students**
For many international students, unpaid work experience is the chance to work in a professional capacity and in the field of choice. This experience helps to sharpen communication skills, reduce cultural barriers and start to build networks, thus increasing the chance of finding paid work.
Decide what you want to learn

What do you want to learn, experience, observe, explore? Have a clear idea of what you hope to gain from work experience in order to help you identify the most suitable placements.

Decide the sort of person you are

You need to understand yourself – both your strengths and your skill gaps. Recognising these will help you identify both the skills you want to develop, and the skills you can offer to a work experience employer. To clarify this, try to answer the following questions:

- What are the areas in which you achieve well?
- What skills do you wish to practise?
- What skills and knowledge do you bring from your degree or other life experience?
- What motivates you?

Decide the sort of work you would like to do

Work experience is a chance to experience a variety of career options. Even though you are studying for a degree in a particular discipline, your studies may open up a diverse range of employment fields. At this point you need to analyse and decide which area(s) you would like to explore. Don’t be concerned if you are not certain whether the job you seek to experience will suit you. Remember, work experience is about exploring options, so that you can make informed decisions about your future.

The following question may prompt you to think about the sort of work to pursue.

Will you:
- enjoy working independently or with people eg clients?
- prefer to work in close contact with clients/customers/patients/etc?
- like to work in the private or public sector?
- be willing to work the hours necessary for the job you are considering?
- be prepared to travel?

Make a contract with yourself

Determine to make the most of this experience by making a contract with yourself. Learning objectives constitute the beginning of a learning contract with yourself. By structuring your learning you are taking an active part in the process. This is sometimes called self directed learning, an important tool to develop in the quest to manage your lifelong learning. Refer to page 14 for an example of how to document your objectives.

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Identify those organisations who offer this work. Start by identifying at least 20 organisations that would be of interest to you.

Utilise the following to find the information you require:

- the internet
- professional associations (eg the Institute of Engineers for engineering students or the Public Relations Institute of Australia for public relations students)
- professional journals or newsletters
- annual reports
- the Yellow Pages
- the employment section of the newspaper – identify companies who employ people in your field
- friends or relatives with contacts in your chosen field
- Western Sydney University library reference section
- database of newspapers – search for recent articles under the names of organisations you wish to investigate
- directory of Government departments
- organisation’s websites and directories
- Careers website

Research

Taking the time to research at this stage will help you identify work experience opportunities that will most benefit you.

Find as much of the following information as possible:

- name of the organisation
- location and telephone number
- main area of business/areas of specialisation
- structure – number of employees and history
- peak work periods
- anticipate the type of work you could assist with – be realistic about what you could achieve with your existing skills in the time available.
**Telephone**

The next step is to make telephone contact with the 20 organisations you have researched. Your aim is to find at least 5 companies who will consider your request for work experience, ones to whom you can post further details and a resume.

Make it clear in your initial contact that you are researching a career path and **not** asking for a job. Be prepared for it to take at least 6–8 weeks from the point of first contact until you start your work experience.

**Telephone techniques**

To assist you with the challenges of telephone communication you should:

- speak clearly and concisely
- know what you want to say (See Phrases to use)
- be patient and friendly – do not demand
- keep accurate and precise records of the organisations and people with whom you speak
- be prepared to call back a number of times in order to speak with the appropriate person.

**Phrases to use**

**To the receptionist**

The receptionist can be a vital link for you. One of the following phrases may be useful:

- “Hello, I am a university student interested in finding out if your organisation offers work experience to university students in the area of ... (mention your study area). Can you suggest the appropriate person to speak with?”

- “Good morning, I am currently studying ... (mention your study area) at Western Sydney University, and am inquiring about the possibility of finding work experience in ... (mention your field of interest). Could you please put me through to the person who deals with this?”

**To the appropriate person**

- “Hello my name is ...”
- “I am a ... (second year arts student) at Western Sydney University”
- “I am keen to gain some work experience with your organisation”
- “I am interested in working in this area because ...”
- “I am looking for voluntary work experience to gain exposure to the (state industry, eg graphic design industry). This experience would help me ... (mention what you need to learn) and perhaps there may be an opportunity for me to assist with ... (give suggestions of how you could assist)”
- “May I send my resume for you to consider? To whom should I address it?”
Send

Now that you have made contact with the right people in the organisations you are interested in working with, you should send both your resume and covering letter to each organisation.

The organisation can then consider whether they will offer you work experience.

Resume

Careers can offer you a number of services to assist you with your resume preparation:

- Resume writing articles available on CareerHub (under “resources” accessible via the Careers website)
- Resume Builder on CareerHub
- Resume module on vUWS
- Resume Writing workshops (details are on CareerHub).

Covering Letter

The covering letter accompanies your resume and is critical to your success in gaining work experience. It re-introduces you and briefly explains why you are applying for work experience with that particular organisation. Remember this is not a job application, so use wording that clearly indicates what it is that you are seeking. A sample is included on page 13.

A covering letter should be:

- personal – address it to the specific person with whom you made contact, not “Dear Sir or Madam”. Double check that you have spelt their name correctly and use their correct title. Check with the receptionist if necessary
- tailored to the needs of the particular organisation
- following the standard business letter format
- kept to one page
- checked and rechecked for spelling or grammatical errors
- Proofread by someone else – always!


Take time and care preparing your covering letter and resume. A prospective work experience employer will make a judgement about your professionalism based on how carefully you prepare this document.
Finalise

Negotiate your work experience

If you have been offered a work experience placement, try to meet with the employer to negotiate the terms and start to build an employer/employee relationship. Taking the time to do this will help to ensure that this experience meets both parties’ expectations by providing an opportunity to discuss:

- start and finish dates and times – as well as a date to re-evaluate, get feedback and negotiate any continued experience or employment (possibly part-time work)
- your schedule and tasks
- your hopes and aims for this experience – discuss your learning objectives
- any specific outcomes the employer may require – ask about their needs
- the person to whom you should report.

Complete the Request for Work Experience Insurance Cover Form

Once you have finalised the details, complete the on-line Request for Insurance Cover Form explained on page 15. A Careers Education Consultant will confirm the details and arrange for the insurance letter to be forwarded to you. Please allow at least 5 working days for this.

Send a confirmation note

Reconfirming the details in writing with your employer adds a professional touch. So prior to commencing, once you receive the letter of insurance, send them a note confirming your start dates and again restating your hopes and expectations and how you are looking forward to the experience. Include the insurance letter that you receive from Careers.
Part 2 – Making the most of the experience

Plan processes and activities that will ensure success

What you get from your work experience will depend on you and what you arrange. Don’t rely on others to arrange this important experience for you.

Before

Revisit page 5 of this guide and the reasons for choosing to do work experience with this particular employer. Use the Work Experience Learning Objectives sheet on page 14 to help you plan what you want to learn and how to achieve it.

Begin by listing the learning objectives – be specific about questions you want answered, skills, knowledge, processes, feelings that you wish to explore or develop.

Once you have written your goals and objectives, identify the tasks you could possibly do to achieve these learning outcomes.

Also plan what you believe you can achieve for the employer. Be realistic. Use this plan as a discussion tool when you meet with the employer at the negotiating stage prior to commencement.

Finally, consider developing some of these objectives into a feedback or evaluation sheet for your supervisor to complete. This sheet can provide valuable feedback and is an effective prompt for discussion when you have completed your experience.

During

Observe and analyse what is happening around you in the workplace. Look beyond the obvious. Keep a diary or journal.

After

- Refer again to your Work Experience Learning Objectives sheet to evaluate and reflect upon your learning.
- Write a formal letter of appreciation to the management of the organisation and to any individual staff with whom you worked.
- Maintain contact where appropriate to build on your networks.
- Follow up on any leads you became aware of during your placement.
- Update your resume with the new skills and experiences you have gained.
Be professional in your approach

- Treat this experience as you would a paid position and the employer will treat you accordingly.
- Create a professional image by dressing appropriately. Be clean, neat and not too over-the-top.
- Speak clearly and audibly, eliminating as much slang as possible.
- Adopt a “can do” attitude.
- Perform each task to your best ability – even the mundane ones.
- Where possible be prepared for any meetings. Research and ask questions prior to the meeting so that you can have some informed input if asked.
- Join in at morning tea, lunch, drinks if invited – these are excellent times to network and build rapport with the team.

Workplace etiquette and ethics

- Be punctual and reliable. Make sure you forward a message ASAP if detained.
- Ask before using the phone.
- Confine all personal calls to lunchtime and keep them brief. Avoid taking mobile calls during the day, unless urgent.
- Ask for clarification if unsure of anything.
- Seek help immediately if you make a mistake.
- Adopt impeccable manners with all staff.

Troubleshooting

There are many resources on the web that can assist you with workplace issues. The Western Sydney University Social Justice Unit’s home page (accessible through the Student link) has a wide range of links to assist you with troubleshooting any difficulties you may have.
Evaluate and reflect to ensure your learning

Taking the time to evaluate is an important part of the learning to be gained through work experience. Use your Work Experience Learning Objectives sheet to evaluate your work experience. Did you achieve what you wanted? What things remain unfinished? Can you accomplish these things in another way?

A Feedback sheet

One of the most important things to be gained from work experience is the feedback your supervisor can give you. Develop a Feedback sheet so that your supervisor can comment on particular aspects of your work. This is a great opportunity to find out how you compare with other workers, how much you have been able to apply theory to practice, how well you fit into the workplace etc. Asking specific questions can help you identify your strengths and weaknesses.

Request a mid term feedback session to check how you are going. This allows time to improve in areas identified as needing attention, and if necessary provides you with an opportunity to redefine the direction of the type of work you are doing. Using a written feedback sheet can make this process more concrete.

Self evaluation – reflection

In addition to producing evidence of your learning, you should build in time to reflect upon your learning. It is during this period of reflection that you will most make meaning from your experiences and identify the transferable skills and knowledge that you can most readily utilise. Keeping a journal of your experiences and feelings during your experience can provide excellent material upon which to reflect – especially if you can compare this with your supervisor’s comments.
Consider alternatives to augment your placement

Unpaid work experience is just the first step in developing your skills and experience. You should also aim to broaden your experience by taking part in one or more of the following.

**Casual and part-time employment**
Even though casual and part-time employment may not be in your professional field it can provide opportunities to keep your computing, communication and team skills up to date. Employers regularly confirm the importance of these skills in a workplace context. Check CareerHub and Jobs on Campus for job advertisements specifically for students.

**Internships**
When you have little experience you need to take whatever degree related work that you can in order to get started. Careers offers degree related experience throughout the year through our online job portal - CareerHub. Register using your WSU student details. You will find a variety of part time and full time degree related positions. Start by looking under “Type of Work” - Internship/Cadetship/Vacation, then broaden your search to include other categories.

**Job shadowing**
Job shadowing is where an employer agrees to let you shadow them in their normal working environment. This is usually unsalaried. Your aim is to gain an insight into particular occupations and industries by observing and asking questions. Shadowing is usually short, typically 1-3 days. Even a few hours of shadowing can give you an idea of what a particular job and working environment might be like.

**Informational interviews**
If you have an interest in a job and you want to find out more about what’s involved, you may try arranging a short informational interview. This can be done over the phone, or by a visit to the workplace. You may find more employers agree to an interview if you set a time limit of 30 minutes or less.

**Summer jobs**
Summer jobs are usually not the obvious career-specific kind, but work that helps pay the bills. Many students do relatively unskilled work such as fruit picking or stacking shelves in supermarkets. Even these opportunities may provide you with some skills and experience which can be transferred to a graduate situation, as well as providing you with extra cash, referees and possible contacts. Graduate employers will be interested in the insights you have gained about your experiences.

**Volunteer work- in designated Volunteer Positions**
Volunteering differs from work experience in that it is part of a formal volunteering program within not-for-profit organisations and may or may not be specifically relate to your field. There are many benefits to be gained by volunteering which can improve your chances of employment in the future. In addition to providing you with networking opportunities, it exhibits your motivation, your willingness to work as part of a team and your community spirit. Volunteering can also be a way of identifying new interests and abilities and can provide you with work experience and referees which will enhance your resume when applying for a job, especially if you have no previous work experience.

**Overseas employment**
Summer vacation work overseas can not only provide experience, but an adventure as well. Keep a look out for the Summer Vacation Expos advertised each year towards spring. Typical opportunities abroad include summer vacation camps in Europe and America, teaching English as a second language and au pair work. Some other professional work is also possible.
Part 3 – Resources

Sample cover letter

Samantha Dunn  
312 Northwest Avenue  
PARRAMATTA NSW 2150  
Ph: 0409 666 777

20 April 2007

Attn: Matthew Bueuller  
Haverhill Promotions  
PO Box 99  
FERRISVILLE 2789

Dear Mr Bueuller

Further to our conversation on Wednesday 19 April, I am writing to inquire about the possibility of obtaining unpaid work experience with your organisation.

I am currently in my second year of a Business Marketing degree. I have maintained a credit average in my studies and I believe work experience with an organisation such as yours will provide me with an insight into the varying directions available in this field, as well as provide you with an enthusiastic short term resource.

I am conscientious and hard working and can offer you my research skills, organisational abilities and my knowledge and interest in the field of marketing.

Ideally I would like to organise work experience between 2 and 16 July during my university vacation, however I would be pleased to speak with you regarding a time most convenient for your organisation.

Western Sydney University will cover Personal Accident and Public Liability insurance during my work experience placement with you.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this request. I can be contacted on the above mobile number and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Samantha Dunn

Samantha Dunn
## Work Experience Learning Objectives

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<th>Objectives/Goals</th>
<th>Tasks &amp; Strategies</th>
<th>Evidence of Learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What knowledge and skills do I want to learn?</td>
<td>How am I going to learn these?</td>
<td>How will I show this learning?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>eg Discover typical graduate entry paths into Fujitsu</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ask recent graduates about how they started at Fujitsu. Ask HR about entry level positions.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Write an article for unit website outlining opportunities. Be able to relate entry level positions at Fujitsu.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>eg Achieve greater proficiency with MS Project as a planning tool</strong></td>
<td><strong>Work with Council Planner to develop “Storm Water in the community” project using MS Project.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Project plan developed in MS Project.</strong></td>
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<th>Company</th>
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Insurance

The University’s insurances (other than travel insurance) indemnify enrolled students engaged in approved course related activities such as work experience, field and clinical placements, practicums and internships including activities that are not compulsory requirements of the student’s course/unit. This type of work experience may be approved by the school or by a Careers Education Consultant from Careers.

Students requiring confirmation of insurance

As students are often required to provide evidence of insurance cover, a letter of indemnity has been drafted. Designated officers within your school or Careers can sign the confirmation letter without alteration.

In case of accident

The cover provides for medical and hospital expenses not recoverable through Medicare and/or participants’ own health insurance funds. Damage to clothing is also covered if the participant is injured at the same time. Private hospital expenses are not usually covered.

Actions to follow:

1. Seek medical help immediately.
2. Take patient to a medical practitioner and follow treatment advice (preferably under Medicare coverage).
3. Ask the doctor for a medical certificate.
4. Notify Careers staff and next of kin as soon as possible.
5. Complete a written report of the accident and forward to Careers.

Employers will want to know if you have insurance cover. Make sure you complete your work experience prior to your final exam of your final semester of your degree. The university insurance covers both Personal Accident and Public Liability only until you complete your studies.

Please complete the online form after you have organised the details of your work experience.

This form is for enrolled Western Sydney University students seeking insurance cover for non-compulsory work experience (Insurance indemnity letters for compulsory practicum, internships and course related work experience should be sought from your school).

A Careers staff member will contact you to confirm the information you have provided and arrange for the insurance letter to be forwarded to you.

If you have any questions regarding the completion of this form please contact:

Adam Clayton, Careers Liaison Officer, Careers
Phone Number: 02 4736 0361
Email: careers@westernsydney.edu.au

Disclaimer: Careers can assist students with information about how to find work experience. It is the student’s responsibility however, to assess the quality or suitability of this work experience.