Maximising the Benefit of Your Online Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Experience

A Guide for Students (with the acknowledgement of, and thanks to, the *University of Waterloo*, Ontario, Canada, for sharing their work with us. The original site can be accessed via the UW website: https://uwaterloo.ca/hire/employer-resources/supporting-co-op-students-remotely

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is the term universities use to describe any activity that lets students practice what they learn at university in a professional setting. It's different from work experience that you might organise yourself because it forms part of a purposefully designed curriculum to ensure the experience contributes to your learning and educational development. Put simply, it's the integration of work with learning whether it happens in a physical workplace or a virtual workspace.

This guide's focus is on WIL activities that are online, either through online placements where you work remotely or as projects with industry partners that are also online.

Many of you now need to complete your WIL activity (placement or project) remotely, online. While this is may be quite different to what you were expecting, there are many benefits to be gained once you have adjusted to this approach. By establishing some simple routines and work practices you should soon start to feel comfortable in this online environment and have an enjoyable and productive WIL experience.

Benefits of online WIL

Online WIL activities have the same benefits as the more traditional face-to-face models however, they also have added benefits for students that include:

- working with industry and community partners in a way that encourages getting to know each other and facilitates the development of authentic working relationships through an online environment;
- working with a team of students you may not otherwise interact with – from different disciplines, different universities, different cultures and even different countries;
- working with all the different stakeholders online on a project that everyone is passionate about and motivated to achieve together;
- challenging students to move out of their comfort zone, try something new, challenge themselves professionally and personally, and finish the experience with a real sense of accomplishment;
- gaining a competitive edge through evidence of up-to-date, real world capabilities relevant to industry and community partners.

Strategies for Success

It is important to get the most out of your online WIL experience. When asked how best to prepare for a WIL opportunity, industry and community partners, university staff and students who have successfully completed an online WIL experience made the following suggestions:

- **Managing your physical health and mental wellbeing:** It's important to look after yourself. Make sure you take appropriate physical and mental breaks away from the screen: take a

proper lunch break; talk with friends; stand up and stretch; do something positive that you enjoy. Plan times and ways to connect with your usual supports: supervisor; family; social clubs; community groups and so on. Don't hesitate to reach out to your industry workplace supervisor if you need any extra support. Be open and honest with them about how you're feeling. Contact your course co-ordinator if you have any questions about your WIL placement. Keep an eye on RMIT's Coronavirus (COVID19) student information pages as updates are posted here on an ongoing basis.

- **Setting up your space and time for online WIL:** you do not have to have a separate space to work but it is important to set up a space where you can work online comfortably in a productive way. Clean up your space so it is presentable in video calls, and negotiate with your house mates about sharing space, time, equipment and band width. Plan your day so you are organised and productive. Join online meetings a few minutes early to make sure you are connected in time. For IT support with online issues that are RMIT based: online access – troubleshooting and /or computer and network access help. Approach your industry supervisor for help with access to systems and software that are workplace based.
- **Appreciating your project context:** do your background research before you begin. Review the industry or community partners website, review individuals LinkedIn profiles, and read all relevant information provided to you regarding the WIL opportunity.
- **Value what others bring:** embrace the diverse perspectives that different stakeholders bring. Having diverse perspectives is important and will benefit the work. Remember diversity brings opportunity.
- **Be open to new opportunities and ways of working:** innovative models of WIL such as online WIL activities are designed to encourage students to experience new ways of working; embrace the learning opportunities and try something new.
- **Be clear about roles, responsibilities and expectations:** it's important to identify, before you commence your online WIL opportunity, who you are collaborating with and who are you reporting to. Who are the stakeholders and what they are hoping to achieve through the online WIL activity?
- *Some early questions to ask your supervisor might be:*
  - *what are my expected hours of work, is there flexibility?*
  - *am I expected to respond to emails that come in after hours?*
  - *when will you and I be checking in with each other each day?*
  - *do you prefer video meetings or phone calls?*
  - *how would you like me to track my work?*

- **Clarify purpose and scope:** once you have identified the expectations of all stakeholders, it's important to clarify the purpose, scope and deliverables of the online project you are working on. Referring to this throughout the WIL experience will make sure your team stays on track.
- **Listen and communicate regularly:** work with the different stakeholders to establish clear communication strategies, timelines and modes of communication (e.g. online conferencing, email, SMS). Negotiate these early and check these communication strategies are effective for each stakeholder group throughout the project.
- If you are on an online WIL Placement, regularly check in with your **industry workplace supervisor: i**t's important for your workplace supervisor to know that you're present and accounted for each day, especially because they can't always physically see you. Don't be the student who needs to be digitally tracked down every day. Be the one who can be counted on and reached easily.

Tips for you:

- Send short update emails to your industry workplace supervisor with details about work you've accomplished so they can check these tasks off *their* "things to do" list.
- Reply to all the emails you're sent, even if it's just to say, "I'm on it!" This lets your team know you've read the email or seen the request and that you are working on it. If you don't do this, they may start to feel frustrated and unsure of what you're doing.
- **Stay active** on your team's communication platform (like Skype, Teams or Slack). This will make you feel more connected to your team, allow you to play a role in team morale, and keeps everyone in the loop in terms of work progress.
- Let your workplace supervisor and team know when you'll be "offline" for an extended period of time (30 minutes of more) so they're not wondering why they can't reach you. Talk to them about how best to do this, e.g. do they want you to email or enter it into the team calendar?
- **Be proactive:** grab opportunities and take the initiative to collaboratively work through challenges.
- **Manage time, complexity and ambiguity:** innovative WIL activities often occur across short time frames so employ project management strategies and tools to help achieve the best outcomes: write 'to do' lists, use your calendar to timetable meetings and deadlines, set reminders and alerts on your phone, try planning your projects using spreadsheet or running lists, and so on. Don't be afraid to proactively seek advice and support from experts and stakeholders to manage changes in scope, timelines and deliverables. Time pressures are designed to be achievable but challenging, and often cause stresses. Be mindful of time constraints and work with these instead of against them.
- **Be ready to pivot:** be ready to adapt to unforeseen changes. It's all part of the process and managing change is a key skill to practice and demonstrate in today's world.
- **Evidencing your capabilities to others:** plan for how you are going to capture your emerging capabilities and reflect on any gaps.
- **Manage intellectual property and information of contributors and industry:** arrangements regarding intellectual property, use of non-disclosure agreements, and insurance will be arranged prior to commencement of the WIL activity by the university and industry and community partners. This information should be provided to you before the WIL begins. Make sure you read this information and agree with it prior to commencing any WIL opportunity.

Reflecting on your WIL experience

Reflect regularly throughout your online WIL experience, not just at the end. Being self-aware of your time management, task completion and professional standards will assist you in identifying any gaps in skills, knowledge and abilities. Consider writing your reflections down in an online journal, or perhaps capturing as a video diary. Some WIL courses may provide reflection prompts for you to respond, or even require you to do something similar as an assessment.

Can't find what you're looking for?

- Talk to RMITConnect
- For learning support, check out:
  - RMIT online study support and resources;
  - RMIT Learning Lab offers a wide range of online resources to help you improve your general academic study;
  - Ask the Library: Library online chat
- Go to your Course Coordinator.

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Check out these useful [Micro-credentials](#), and search for others:

- **WIL Ready**: Preparing for Work Integrated Learning – 4 hours
- **Agile ways of Working** – 2 hours
- **Collaborating Online** – 2 to 4 hours
- **Digital Health and Wellbeing** – 2 hours
- **Digital Tools for the Future** – 4 hours
- **Planning a Digital Communication Strategy**: Crafting an online presence – 5 hours
- **Lifelong Digital Learning**: Keeping your skills up to date – 1 hour
- **Resilience and Adaptability** – 2 to 4 hours
- **Working with Global Clients Online** – 8 hours