

# THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCES

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

This study identifies the “building blocks” of relevant work-integrated learning (WIL)<sup>1</sup> work experiences. Relevant work is important to student success in WIL programs. There are two areas of relevance—relevance to the student’s academics and relevance to the student’s career goals. Researchers identified four building blocks of relevance for student work experiences: social integration, appropriate level of challenge, alignment with students’ field of work, and whether the student learned new knowledge and skills.

## WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This study aims to identify the building blocks of relevant WIL work experiences. Previous research has defined relevance in WIL work experiences as how much a work experience is connected to what students learn in school. Another area of relevance is how much the work experience is connected to a student’s career goals. The context of a work experience, which could be the physical environment, the nature of relationships with others at work, conflict, resources, and a supportive learning environment may influence a student’s perspective on the relevance of their work term. Emerging evidence shows this work context may influence the relevance of the work term. The researchers wanted to expand on these definitions and identify what elements make a work term a valuable experience that positively contributes to a students’ WIL outcomes. There is some existing evidence to show that the more relevant a work term or work experience, the greater the positive outcomes of that experience for the student.

## WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers interviewed 17 co-operative education students at a Canadian university. The participants were students from a range of academic programs who completed at least one work term. The researchers conducted interviews and analyzed the answers to identify themes.

## WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

The researchers found that the interview answers were consistent with two areas of relevance—the connection to academics and the connection to career goals. The interview answers suggested that having at least one of these areas of connection would make a work term relevant.

Students felt their work term experience was relevant if they had social interactions at work that would educate them on things like future career steps. For example, a student may ask questions of a full-time colleague about how they obtained their role or entered the field. Greater social interaction was associated with greater relevance.

Students who felt they were challenged enough in their work term, what the researchers refer to as “optimal challenge”, described it as a relevant experience. Students who were not challenged in their work term (e.g., only completing basic tasks) felt it was not relevant.

<sup>1</sup> **Work-integrated learning (WIL):** an education model that combines academic studies with a workplace or practice setting. Work-integrated learning includes a partnership of an academic institution, a host organization, and a student.

Researchers also found that a relevant work experience had a connection between the work and the student's "field of work" to which they aspired to work (fields like engineering, business, health, etc.) For example, a participant who was a health student working in accounting didn't feel the work term was relevant as they were not pursuing a career in that field.

A relevant work experience also includes gaining new knowledge and skills. When the participants said a work term was highly relevant, they reported gaining new knowledge and skills. If the student was working in a field unrelated to their academics or career goals, but gained new knowledge or skills, they still felt the work experience was relevant.

Lastly, participants felt that a work experience was relevant if they learned new knowledge about a type of job or field in which they *did not want to do* at work.

## HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Students, educators, and employers can use this research to create relevant work experiences for students, contributing to the overall success of WIL programs.

- Educators (WIL program administrators, staff) can highlight the importance of socialization to students and employers. For example, encouraging students to ask questions and get to know colleagues during their work term
- Consult employers on the onboarding process and provide suggestions such as implementing a mentorship program
- Ensure work tasks are appropriately challenging for students
- Provide guidance to students to seek out relevant jobs in their field of interest

## KEYWORDS

Integration, relevance, co-operative education, interviews, thematic analysis

## CITATION

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## ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

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*The Work-Learn Institute at the University of Waterloo is the only institute in the world dedicated to research on co-operative education and other forms of work-integrated learning.*



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