EXTENDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WORK EXPERIENCE QUALITY: THE LIRN MODEL

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Understanding the quality of students' work experiences is essential to developing exceptional work-integrated learning (WIL) programs. Using an analysis of students' descriptions of their best WIL work experience, this research validates three components of a quality work experience—learning, impact and relatedness. The research adds a fourth component, networking, to create a model of quality work experiences using the acronym LIRN.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about quality student work experiences in WIL programs. The researchers reviewed an earlier model of quality work experiences that includes three components: learning (developing skills and competencies), impact (what the student could contribute at work), and relatedness (how much the work experience is connected to the student's academic program and career goals). The researchers argue another component, social interactions at work, should be added to the model of quality work experiences. This component includes the extent to which social dynamics are positive and supportive during the work experience. The researchers label this fourth component as "networking". They propose the acronym model LIRN (learning, impact, relevance, and networking) as a model of quality work experiences.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers conducted a survey with 58 co-operative education (a type of work-integrated learning program where students alternate academic and work terms) students at the University of Waterloo. They asked the students to provide a brief description of their best co-op work experience. After sorting the written answers into categories, the researchers identified which components of the LIRN model were present in the descriptions.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

Consistent with previous work on quality work experiences, the researchers found that learning, impact and relatedness are essential features of high-quality work experiences. Further, over 30% of responses mentioned positive social interactions, mentors, and building relationships (grouped as "networking"). This suggests the LIRN model provides a better understanding of what makes up a quality work experience.

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGES OF PRESENCE OF LIRN MODEL IN DESCRIPTIONS OF BEST WORK EXPERIENCES (N = 58).
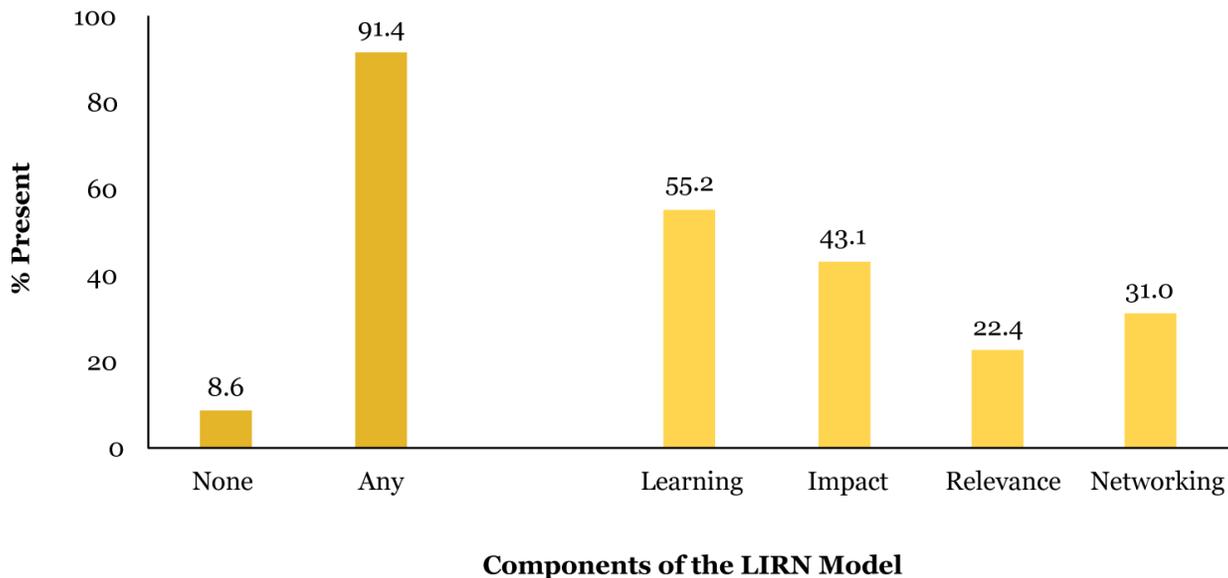
HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Educators and WIL practitioners can use this research to create quality work experiences for students. The LIRN model can be presented to employers to apply to their own practices within their WIL hiring. Awareness of what makes a quality work experience may increase organizational commitment and achievement of recruitment goals. Students can use this research to reflect on what aspects of a WIL term might make it a quality experience.

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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