

17 Mar 2021

Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guide to providing virtual work experience placements

Plan your online work experience programme to support young people with their school-to-work transition through the pandemic

We are facing uncertain times, but especially for young people looking to the future. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment for young people has increased by 13% (66,000 young people) according to the UK Government's youth unemployment statistics. Before the pandemic, youth unemployment was at an all-time low. Now, the number of young people uncertain of their next steps after leaving education is increasing, and an estimated 11.2% of young people aged 16–24 were NEET (not in education, employment or training after leaving school) in early 2021.

Within this turbulent context, employability skills have overtaken academic achievements as the most important way to improve young people's prospects of securing a good job. Key to the acquisition of those skills is practical insight into the world of work that can be accessed through work experience. Time spent with employers broadens young people's knowledge of industries, helping to shape their career decisions and offering them ways to explore the workplace.

Encouragingly, employers have continued to engage young people during COVID-19, transitioning from face-to-face encounters to virtual activities. In doing so, employers are playing an essential role in helping young people learn about work, gain skills that are valued and take on real-life tasks.

What is virtual work experience?

Virtual work experience, also referred to as online, remote, or digital work experience, provides the opportunity to gain knowledge of the world of work from home, in most cases using a computer. This includes:

- real-life examples of work from organisations
- tasks that reflect the day-to-day duties of interns and graduates
- resources that help young people complete tasks
- opportunities to build confidence, learn new skills and improve their CV.

Benefits of virtual work experience

- Online experiences teach digital skills, teamworking and communication, as well as understanding of how the employment system works.
- Young people can try hands-on workplace tasks.
- Time and cost-saving benefits compared with face-to-face work experience.
- Removes health and safety concerns and geographical barriers, meaning employers are able to access a wider range of talent and benefit from the unique insights that young people bring.
- Provides engagement with the local community.

Creating impactful work experience

Content

- Provide an induction: introduce the student to the organisation virtually, clearly outline what they will be doing and help them plan and schedule their activities.
- Don't just rely on pre-recorded footage. Make sure that students and employees can interact with each other regularly.
- Offer a wide range of activities, ensuring that students perform a specific task or produce a piece of work relevant to the workplace, as well as bite-sized tasks.
- Build opportunities that allow young people to develop the essential skills you need in your workplace.

Technology

- The platforms you use should be inclusive. If young people don't have access to a laptop, they should be able to join in via video calls and collaborative apps using a mobile phone.

- Include virtual collaboration tools and technology that replicate the workplace, such as Microsoft Teams. Make effective use of digital technology, such as virtual learning environments and video conferencing.

Practicalities

- Record activities to show how the students actively participated and share these with schools.
- Consider the duration of the programme: a working week is short enough to commit to and maintain engagement, but long enough that it provides a meaningful experience.
- During the placement, provide feedback to the student and check in on their progress. Afterwards, ask what they thought of the experience and build on these learnings to refine the programme.
- Consider young people's needs: factor in regular breaks, decide what time of day is best to set tasks and think about how to keep them engaged.

Insight

- Always keep the students and school in mind – what do you want them to learn, achieve and take away from your organisation?
- Share your knowledge by highlighting the diverse pathways into your company, as well as offering insights into the local labour market and how the world of work is changing.
- Engage your interns and apprentices with your work experience subjects by setting up a buddy system or mentoring scheme.
- Offer the chance for teachers to learn about the opportunities and recruitment practices in your organisation so that they can share this with students.

For more information, see the Careers and Enterprise Company's guidance on [making encounters meaningful](#).

Engaging young people with work experience activities

- Be proactive and reach out to education providers directly to share opportunities.
- Ensure that your [Local Enterprise Partnership](#) team knows about the opportunities available in your workplace. Share information about your virtual work experience programme, recruitment processes and progression routes.

- Create videos and webinars that talk about the entry-level opportunities in your organisation that can be shared by schools.
- Set up early-careers pages on your website with information about placements, work-shadowing opportunities and apprenticeships.
- Use YouTube and other social media to promote opportunities and to encourage young people to ask questions.
- Don't just recruit 'who you know' as young people outside of these networks will miss out.
- Be flexible when considering qualifying criteria including educational attainment and pre-existing experience.

Safeguarding

Virtual delivery requires additional planning to ensure both young people and delivery partners are safeguarded. Ultimately, the safeguarding responsibility lies with the school, but it is important to be aware of the basics:

- review policies and ensure they are responsive to different working practices where appropriate
- make a safeguarding statement available to schools, students and parents/guardians
- depending on the nature of the work, an enhanced DBS check might be required for some employees who supervise a child under the age of 18 on a placement
- keep up to date with guidelines issued by the [Department of Education](#).

Watch the CIPD's [webinar on providing virtual work experience](#) to hear more about the benefits to students and organisations, as well as tips on how to set up your own programme.

Virtual work experience case studies

A large employer and an SME explain their approaches to virtual work experience and how it can benefit both students and staff

Case study 1: Jacobs

Removing geographical barriers and allowing access to more diverse candidates

Jacobs is one of the world's largest companies providing technical solutions to make the world smarter, more connected and more sustainable. The company does everything from helping to create a cleaner, healthier River Thames, to making our transport systems more inclusive, and all the way to working with NASA to get the first woman to the Moon by 2024.

In response to the first lockdown, Jason Andrews, Head of Sales Data Science at Jacobs' European Sales Division, based in London, was responsible for the co-creation of a virtual work experience programme. The programme took Year 10–12 students through the design of a Coronavirus Vaccine Research Centre. The programme aimed to introduce students to the diverse range of careers within STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths) fields and to inspire them to 'challenge today and reinvent tomorrow'. Work experience students have remained engaged and connected with Jacobs after completing the programme, which continues in 2021 and hopefully beyond.

Designing the programme

- Specialists from across Jacobs, including health and safety, project management, architects and interior designers and talent acquisition, along with apprentices and graduates, helped to design the programme.
- The programme was piloted with students and children of employees interested in STEAM, providing a safe test group to address any challenges before engaging external students.
- Initial challenges included concerns over sufficient uptake from students and ensuring staff and students felt comfortable with the virtual format. However, with infrastructure in place, such as Microsoft Teams, Jacobs was able to create a private area to upload and engage with content and decide what can realistically be achieved virtually.

Reaching students

- Jacobs reached out to students through the [Enterprise Adviser volunteer network](#), the [Careers and Enterprise Company](#), charities supporting careers activities like [Speakers for Schools](#), and industry-specific charities that could promote the programme and enable students to apply online.
- Different routes and portals allow specific student audiences to be reached, such as those receiving free school meals or living in certain areas.
- The work experience was open to students from UK schools and between 250–300 students have completed the programme.

Challenges and opportunities

- By taking work experience onto a virtual platform, geographical barriers were removed and students who lived hours from a Jacobs office could still take part.
- The company also saw improved diversity, with an increase in female and BAME applicants.
- Jacobs didn't ask students to turn on their cameras during the programme. This benefited neurodiverse students who could have found the programme challenging otherwise.
- Jacobs will continue a hybrid approach going forward, understanding that students can still be engaged even if their cameras are off.

Tips from Jacobs

- Test the offering in a safe environment to enable learning, adaptation of activities and resources and gather feedback to ensure the programme is always improving.
- Expect that the final version of the work experience offering will be very different to the first iteration – employers, schools and students are still learning how to get the most out of a virtual placement.
- Work experience doesn't have to be perfect for students to get a lot out of it – try not to overcomplicate it so much that your organisation doesn't want to take the first step.
- Young people's mental health has been hugely impacted by the pandemic. Anything that employers can do to support students will benefit them.

Case study 2: ANT Telecom

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Offering skills opportunities for both students and staff

Klaus Allion is owner and managing director at ANT Telecom – Automated communication specialists, a bespoke telecommunications provider based in High Wycombe. He considers improving skills as a priority, especially when it comes to enabling young people to have a successful start in the business world. He also volunteers as an Enterprise Adviser, assisting schools to improve their students' career opportunities and development.

The idea of offering virtual work experience was raised at ANT Telecom in recognition that

young people were finding it harder to enter the workplace. It believes employers have a responsibility to offer students work placement opportunities to help them to develop vital soft skills required in the workplace.

Students were given the opportunity to apply for work experience, reflecting a general recruitment process, and then getting involved with a project: taking a product, learning about it, developing a strategy and delivering a pitch. This helped to teach them valuable marketing, sales and strategy skills as well as soft skills required for a job in marketing and sales. Students could then include these work placements on their CVs or on their social media profile (for example on LinkedIn) to provide evidence of their extracurricular achievements.

Staff at the beginning of their careers were brought on board to develop their own skills, bring their knowledge to the programme and provide relatable contacts for the students.

Challenges and opportunities

- Running virtual work experience requires students to have access to resources, including good WiFi, and computer equipment that allows students to engage.
- It is easier for schools and younger years to engage virtually on a large scale compared to physical placements. Companies can accommodate many more students virtually than physically.
- Content can be recorded and reused, so if students miss any part of the placement, they can still take part in learning.

Longevity

- Many organisations are physically reopening their doors, and face-to-face work placements will likely be on offer again. However, the world of work is now likely to be a hybrid between remote working and working in the office; work experience will therefore need a virtual element to reflect this change.
- There are opportunities to now take a blended approach, for example, setting up projects virtually and providing videos for students to watch at school, and then finalising the work placement by inviting students into the office to present their industry project.

Tips from ANT Telecom

- Virtual work experience allows employers to reach a broader range of students,

improving access to people from diverse backgrounds or based in rural areas for whom travelling to physical placements could be challenging.

- Online experience can be more cost effective than physical placements and offers existing staff the opportunity to get involved and develop their skills.
- Real-world experience brings relevance to academic subjects, helping students and guardians to understand where learning can lead.
- Helping young students to find the right job for them, and discovering what they enjoy, will lead them to excel in the workplace, this will have positive impacts on employers and more broadly on the economy.
- Virtual work experience allows employers to engage with young people who might want to work for them and provides a future talent pipeline.

Volunteer with a school

The CIPD is seeking volunteers to partner with a local secondary school or college as [Enterprise Advisers](#). Use your skills, business experience and networks to help develop a strong careers programme and rewrite the story for the next generation.

We're proud to be partnering with the Careers and Enterprise Company to recruit Enterprise Advisers, providing an opportunity to use your unique expertise to bring work to life and shape the workplace of the future.

The Careers and Enterprise Company has also produced extensive guidance for employers including a [Can Do Guide](#) and a new guide on virtual and blended workplace experiences, due to be published at the end of March. This will be made available on its [Resources Directory](#).