IMPLEMENTING AN APPLICATION-BASED PRACTICUM

Within a learning environment characterized by the use of current industry techniques and instructional methods; practical applications; active participation; and a commitment to continuous learning, a field-based practicum is recognized as the capstone of our Human Resources program and consistently receives high commendation and strong evaluations from learners and participating companies. Its learning outcomes include:

- to provide a forum to apply best practices introduced in the curriculum,
- to participate in and possibly lead a project team in the completion of an assigned task,
- to learn that which is not easily teachable through the curriculum, such as taking initiative, acclimatizing to office dynamics, and responding to the cultural nuances of an organizational setting,
- to manage challenges that arise by relying on one's personal resources,
- to discern suitability for a career in Human Resources and ascertain how one's skill set fits the competency requirements of the profession,
- to self-assess one's employability skills and develop a profile of personal strengths and limitations, and
- to strike an action plan for career success.

Typical practicum projects include design of computerized tracking systems for grievances and resumés; statistical analysis of health and safety accidents with recommendations for change; assessment of staff turnover with identification of root cause and proposal of solution strategies; development of attendance management systems; and design and facilitation of orientation and training programs.

In the final stages, learners attend classes from Monday to Wednesday and work in placement assignments for the remainder of the week. The structure balances theory and application; learners master program specific content, test its real-life application in the workplace, and bring their workplace challenges and concerns back to the classroom for diagnosis and dialogue.

Information packages are mass-mailed to organizations in the community and include: practicum criteria; position descriptions for supervisors and learners; program mission statement and curriculum summary; program accolades; testimonials from former supervisors and learners; and a sample of assignments to inspire new supervisors with project ideas. The mailings yield ample placements for the cohort with 20 companies on the annual waiting list. Learners have the option of selecting companies from the list or self-selecting companies of interest—conditional upon meeting practicum eligibility requirements.

Pre-Practicum Preparation

A series of semi-structured workshops are conducted prior to starting placement to familiarize learners with practicum objectives, format, and expectations; and to address questions and concerns. Learners reflect on the process, integrate new information, and begin the transition from academia to the organizational setting.

In focus-group format, learners discuss their expectations of the practicum supervisors, faculty, their classroom colleagues, and themselves—revisited during weekly debriefing meetings to monitor placement satisfaction continuously and to respond with early interventions in the event that problems arise. These expectations are integrated into the design of the end of practicum evaluation, and feedback is communicated to practicum supervisors, core program faculty, and the next year's cohort for reflection and program revisions.

Practicum supervisors and program graduates are invited to scheduled workshops to dialogue with learners about lived experiences; recommended best practices for placement success; challenges that may surface and how they can be managed; and advice on how to leverage academic and workplace demands.

Students create a dossier showcasing academic, business, and personal achievements. They include a portfolio-style resumé portraying achievements and contributions; certificates of achievement; reference letters; recognition for community involvement; and sample scholarly assignments. Subsequently, learners critique their dossiers, noting competences they would like to

refine. These insights are the ingredients for a goal-setting activity in which learners articulate three goals and map supporting action plans. Goals are shared with practicum supervisors who offer counsel, direction, and mentorship. Success in goal attainment is assessed at the end of the practicum.

At the first workshop, the list of companies interested in participating in placement and corresponding descriptions of projects are distributed, and learners are given one week to decide which companies they would like to pursue. Once companies are selected, learners prepare for practicum interviews, conduct company research, and compose a statement of intent detailing how they plan to contribute to the organization. Once companies are selected learners prepare for practicum interviews. The interview is not only a formal process to ascertain the degree to which the placement is a good fit for both parties, but an opportunity for learners to investigate the project requirements more thoroughly. Learners then draft a proposal, outlining the approach to be taken in project completion. The proposal is presented to practicum supervisors for discussion, and a contract is drawn which commits both parties to the project mandate.

Practicum in Progress

Learners meet for weekly debriefing sessions. In self-selected teams that remain together for the duration of placement, learners share experiences and insights; seek input on how to manage surfacing issues; and offer peer support. As learners capitalize on their own resources for problem solving, they formulate a repertoire of best practices in performance management and test their effectiveness in practice.

To accentuate the link between classroom and practicum, curriculum in the third year of the program is grounded in workplace experiences. Self-directed and team-oriented activities help learners reflect on how course content is expressed and experienced in their placements. For example, when recently covering diversity management in the curriculum, learners were asked to critique diversity management initiatives in their placement companies and propose recommendations for enhancement. Some learners, impressed with their revelations, presented their recommendations to practicum supervisors resulting in implementation of their proposals. Such initiative is noted frequently by supervisors on performance evaluations and cited as a key reason for offering employment upon graduation.

Post-Practicum Assessment

A multi-tiered evaluation system implements an application-based portfolio and provides feedback about the practicum in general. Using a goal-based evaluation matrix following a management-by-objectives format, practicum supervisors assess learners on the degree to which they successfully achieved objectives as originally stated in the draft proposal. A supplemental report details project management strategies, evidence of change resulting from the initiatives, approaches used to measure attainment of project goals, and long-term implications of project completion.

A performance evaluation, using a behaviorally anchored rating format to assess learners' employability skills, complements the goal-based assessment. Learners also complete this evaluation and join supervisors in a discussion regarding on-the-job performance. Subsequent to the evaluation, learners submit a one-page summary of a career-enhancing goal that they will target and the specific action plan to be executed in order to reach the stated objective. The summary is filed and emailed to the learners six months after graduation, inquiring about progress in achieving the goal.

Conclusion: Sustaining Practicum Partnerships

Practicum success and viability are contingent upon building sound partnerships with key stakeholders—learners, practicum supervisors, and core program faculty. Partnerships give voices to stakeholders' views and insights—powerful catalysts for ensuring that the practicum delivers premier work experience to help move learners from the academic landscape into the work world and the community as responsible professionals and citizens. By remaining connected to key stakeholders, the academic institution can design and deliver programs that provide an unparalleled training ground for professional practice.

Carolin Rekar Munro, *Coordinator and Professor, Human Resources, School of Business*

For further information, contact the author at Durham College, 2000 Simcoe Street North, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada LIH 7L7.
email: carolin.rekar-munro@durhamc.on.ca