

## Developing Work-Based Learning Internships

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High-Quality Work-Based Learning (WBL) experiences are integral to career development and planning. WBL experiences relate to career interests, are informed by instructional preparation, and collaborate with community businesses and organizations. These experiences promote career awareness, exploration, and preparation. Virginia identified twelve different types of WBL experiences. One of the twelve types of experiences is a WBL internship which typically occurs in grades 11 and 12.

A WBL internship is an experience that is school-coordinated. Schools collaborate with local businesses to identify, evaluate, and establish student internship sites. Internships allow for hands-on work experiences and skill development while translating classroom learning into practice. Securing a strong internship takes planning. The following five steps guide the first phase of creating WBL internships.

### Step 1: Know Your Students

The first step of creating a WBL internship is to get to know your students. A good internship aligns with a student's strengths, interests, preferences, and needs in school, home, and community. You probably know your student well from day-to-day interactions, observations, and previous planning. Even so, reviewing transition assessment data, postsecondary goals, and other reports that identify career-related skills and behavior is important. Consider what 21st-century workplace readiness skills your student demonstrates. What motivates your student? What kind of learner are they? Does your student thrive in a quiet, predictable setting? What are their transportation needs and options?

Thinking about strengths, abilities, and conditions will help guide internship development. It allows you to focus on the types of businesses and duties to target so that the internship is a good match.

## Step 2: Identify Employers

You have assessed and reviewed student information. Now it is time to make a plan for internship development. Start by comparing what you know about a student with the needs of employers in the community. Brainstorm ideas for people and places to contact, beginning with already-built relationships. If you are struggling to identify employers, try resource mapping your area. Start with your school's physical location. Type the address into a map app to see what businesses are nearby. Develop a list of businesses that might fit your student's needs.

From your list, decide which businesses to target first, then research the companies. Before contacting the business, take the time to learn about the business. Go to their website to research their mission statement, vision, and initiatives. Being prepared shows that you care about the needs of the business.

## Step 3: Contact Employers

Next, plan and deliver your pitch either through email or a phone call. When you talk to an employer, share how an internship is a mutually beneficial experience. For example, the student gets the opportunity to build knowledge and skills. The employer gains access to a pool of candidates, increases their ability to hire and retain a diverse workforce, and gets an intern to help meet their needs. To promote your students, share relevant coursework and previous completed WBL experiences. Don't forget to get permission from students first before sharing information! If you craft your pitch right, it will lead to a meeting with the employer.

## Step 4: Meet the Employer

When you meet with an employer for the first time, you have three objectives:

- 1) Build rapport with the employer and staff.
- 2) Describe the benefits of partnering with your school and what you are looking for.
- 3) Learn more about the business and its needs.

### Describe the Partnership

When describing a potential partnership, make sure to include the following:

- The support your school or program will provide
- The many benefits of hiring students with disabilities
- The criteria and expectations of the internship experience

## Ask about Company Needs

After describing your program and what an internship might look like, ask the employer about their company and current needs. It is your turn to interview them! Here are some questions you can use to gather information about a business:

- Tell me about your business.
- What experiences best prepare employees for jobs with your company?
- If you already have an internship program, what does it look like?
- Please tell me about some entry-level positions.
- What are the greatest areas for growth within your business?
- I have a student with interests in \_\_\_\_. Where do you see that fitting within your company?

## Build a Relationship

It is important to listen carefully to what the employer is saying. The interview is essential to building a relationship with the business and learning about its needs. Relationship building is the greatest tool you have in your toolbox. Form a connection and get the employer to want to work with you. Relationship building takes time, but it is worth it.

## Take a Tour

During the meeting, ask to learn more about the jobs and environment by taking a tour. Pay attention to the physical environment, tasks completed by staff, conditions that may impact student success, and work culture. After you've completed the meeting, analyze the information, and develop a potential internship description.

## Step 5: Develop an Internship Description

At this point, you have gathered information on your student and the targeted businesses. It is now time to create an internship description. This description includes the following:

- A general description of the internship criteria and expectations (how many hours, days per week, start and end dates, etc.)
- A description of the internship position
- A detailed outline of the internship tasks and responsibilities
- A summary of the alignment of classroom instruction with the workplace training

Keep in mind that this internship description is the start to negotiating tasks and duties. Have the employer review and provide feedback on what works and what does not. Once you have an agreed-upon description, begin the HR process, such as completing an application and interviewing. Don't forget to follow the required guidelines and policies established by the Department of Education, the school division, and your school.

Building relationships and developing a new internship site takes time. It does not usually happen after one meeting. Securing WBL internships may occur over several meetings and email follow-ups. So, keep pursuing the opportunity!

## Conclusion

When you develop a WBL internship, make sure the internship matches your students' career interests, is based on instruction and preparation, and is a collaborative arrangement with the business. When you follow the internship development steps, you connect your students to meaningful opportunities in the community that promote career awareness, exploration, and preparation.