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Kristin Cahill, principal of HERO High School, the Bronx, New York

The Newly Virtual Workplace: Employers and Trainers Adapt

July 2020 [Hannah Dalporto](#), Will Swarts



Work-based learning includes opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, career mentoring, and other hands-on job training that build specific skills and provide students real-world professional experience and networking opportunities. The abrupt shift to virtual educational interactions precipitated by the global COVID-19 pandemic hit work-based learning opportunities that are often central to career and technical education programs especially hard.

At the same time, the importance of maintaining work-based learning experiences for students remains pertinent as the economic fallout resulting from the public health crisis increases the chance that high school and community college students could graduate during a recession. Maximizing work-based learning opportunities while students are in high school and community college — and keeping students connected to the labor market — may be an important way to mitigate these problems.

MDRC’s recent (virtual) discussion with representatives from 13 schools, districts, and program intermediaries that provide work-based learning found each of them seizing unexpected opportunities amid considerable challenges caused by the pandemic.

The changes needed to keep students learning (and, if applicable, being paid) require creative and rapid adjustments that allow programs to continue pursuing their work-based learning objectives. These adjustments might include solutions such as experimenting with shifts to shorter-term consultancies and short duration “micro-internships” to help strengthen the skills participants acquire in their training and education programs.

For example, [YouthForce NOLA](#) Internships, a New Orleans program that typically coordinates work-readiness training with 90-hour internships for high school students, surveyed employer partners to identify immediate needs that students could help meet. They found demand for skills in social media, consulting, digital media, and coding — spurring the creation of abbreviated 40-hour consultancies for their interns and employer partners. If these shorter-term approaches prove successful, the program may be able to expand them and enlist more students in the future.

Benefits: Expanded career networks, reduced barriers

Another benefit of the switch to remote work-based learning is that providers and their students can reach a wider range of employers when working virtually. No longer constrained by geographic reach for in-person placements, California-based [EXP](#), which provides internships to high school students, is expanding its network of employers to include companies outside the state that can support remote work-based learning. The emphasis on telework also means employers are not limited by the number of physical desks that could be allocated to interns or apprentices.

“We’re imagining a world where we can unlock learning opportunities for many more students than we would have been able to fit into brick-and-mortar workplaces,” says Bill Taylor, vice president of outreach and partnership development at [NAF](#), a national network of schools that provide Career Academy-based education (a model in which students engage in small learning communities within high schools).

Although remote work-based learning may open some doors for its participants, organizations and employers must ensure equitable access to technology and avoid exacerbating existing gaps. [Here to Here](#), a Bronx, New York-based intermediary that facilitates career pathways for young people, was able to respond rapidly by providing laptops and hotspots to students through the Bronx Community Relief Effort to ensure students could continue their school and work experiences virtually. One NAF corporate partner, the global management consulting firm KPMG, worked with interns’ school districts to distribute secure laptops, since the pandemic forced the closure of its offices and made in-person pickups impossible.

Career training and education providers also struggled with the additional challenges remote programming creates for employers, including access to technology and assuming oversight of online interactions between young people and organization and employer staff members.

As providers tackle technology-related challenges, remote work may solve one common problem in work-based learning: transportation. Amid the very real, taxing challenges imposed by the pandemic, stay-at-home mandates ease the burden on students for whom transportation tends to be a costly and time-intensive barrier. This is particularly true for students in rural and low-income communities, who often lack reliable or affordable transportation options. Instead, students engage remotely with far-away employers without worrying about how they will physically arrive to their worksites.

Opportunities: Focusing on virtual workplace skill-building

Many programs are adapting to the pandemic by focusing on professional and technical training that can be delivered remotely. At [Urban Alliance](#), a youth workforce development program for underresourced high schoolers, students who are unable to participate in remote internships remain engaged through revamped professional skills training focused on preparing them for jobs done in virtual workplaces. In several schools that the [College and Career Academy Support Network](#) works with, students co-develop their work-based learning opportunities. Students help arrange speakers for online forums, develop micro-internship placements, plan and deliver workshops, and organize academy events.

Employer partners and programs are also seeking ways to provide students the opportunity to learn technical skills and earn credentials while they are unable to do on-site internships, particularly for experiences that rely on physical presence. For example, providers at New York's [Urban Assembly](#) schools, a network of career-themed public schools, are exploring virtual internships that can count toward industry certifications.

Schools and programs that relied heavily on field trips and career exposure activities before the pandemic are now turning their attention to project-based learning, with an eye toward real-world needs. As Kristin Cahill, principal of HERO High School in the Bronx, explained: "Since we focus on careers in health care, our partners do not have a lot of bandwidth to support students. We are finding ways to address the pandemic in regular classes, supporting students as they complete self-paced online portfolios and career plans, and looking for funding for remote internships that support contact tracing."

Reflections: Open questions and unexpected opportunities

The devastating economic effects of the pandemic will likely include continued challenges for these programs, particularly when looking for ways to pay students for their work. Budget cuts to youth employment programs and businesses struggling to pay existing full-time staff will make it difficult to continue paying student workers.

Lindsey Dixon, senior director of postsecondary readiness at Urban Assembly, says her program's 800 guaranteed internships represent \$2 million in intern wages. If publicly funded programs or employers cut back, "that's money that's not circulating in [the interns'] communities."

Some students become formal employees as part of their internship or apprenticeship placement, which may provide a measure of stability for the experience and demonstrate the students' value to the employer. At [CareerWise Colorado](#), a youth apprenticeship program, several apprentices employed in health care settings, including both Certified Nursing Assistant and Licensed Practical Nurse apprentices, were still working (once they and their parents agreed it was safe), because they were deemed a part of essential businesses.

As work-based learning programs of all types adjust to this new context, they are taking important steps toward discovering what's possible, and what supports are needed for students and employers alike. They are also evaluating whether some changes are worth carrying forward. A strong upside of work-based learning is the potential for increasing access to a wide array of employers that might otherwise be out of reach for students. Of course, it remains to be seen how remote work will impact the professional networking and relationship building aspects of work-based learning experiences — often a primary objective of many programs. Still, in the uncertainty of this moment, providers are innovating and adapting in ways that may well have lasting impacts on the way they offer work-based learning experiences.