



Innovative WIL:

A Case Study of Student Talent for Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises

AT A GLANCE

PARTNERS: Chamber of Commerce for Greater Moncton

REGION: Atlantic Canada

INDUSTRIES: Multiple

WIL TYPES: Internship, Case Competition

TYPE OF LEARNING: Curricular & Co-curricular

THEMES: SME talent needs; Innovative WIL, Consultancy-based WIL

SUMMARY: This case study describes a work-integrated learning model used by a Chamber of Commerce to benefit their members by providing free access to student talent for small and medium-sized businesses in their region. The consultancy-based model was developed by the Chamber of Commerce for Greater Moncton, in collaboration with 4 public post-secondaries, and supports regional talent retention.

Context

Small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) owners wear many hats, including marketing, HR, supply chain management, accounting and more. Hiring full-time staff to take on these functions isn't always feasible. Additionally, both SMEs and local post-secondary institutions, particularly in Canada's Atlantic and Western provinces, face the risk of talent drain, with graduates leaving to seek greater economic opportunities elsewhere.

Work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities can be a low-barrier way for businesses to leverage the skills, experiences, and expertise of the local student population. The right WIL opportunities help smaller businesses grow and establish a talent pipeline right in their local communities.

Blueprint

Blueprint ADE is BHER's trusted evidence generation partner and undertook the research for this report.



Future Link is an innovative WIL program established by the Chamber of Commerce for Greater Moncton (CCGM) in 2020 to support local economic recovery throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The program produced such successful partnerships between local businesses and students that it has continued and expanded since.

Through Future Link, students from all four publicly funded universities in New Brunswick are hired by a local host Chamber of Commerce and paired up with chamber members across the province. Students are employed as Business Support Interns, working in teams of up to three to tackle a specific project for the business where they are placed. Each team of interns work together for two to three weeks to complete their project.

Future Link runs fall, winter, and summer cycles, giving students the opportunity to work with four to eight businesses throughout the year. Throughout their experience, each student is also provided with mentorship and guidance by the Future Link Program Coordinator and the Host Chamber.

Building off the success of Future Link, the CCGM launched the Clan d'affaires in 2022. The Future Link: Clan d'affaires program is a condensed two-day case competition conducted in partnership with the Collège Communautaire du Nouveau Brunswick. It brings together students from various academic

streams to tackle real-world challenges presented by local businesses. This model offers a quick, impactful collaboration burst, providing solutions to immediate business needs.

VALUE OF THE MODEL

1 THE FUTURE LINK AND CLAN D'AFFAIRES PROGRAMS SERVE AS A STRATEGIC INVESTMENT FOR EMPLOYERS, PROVIDING EXPOSURE TO A DYNAMIC TALENT POOL AND ANCHORING YOUNG TALENT IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY.

Through the programs, students—particularly international students—get exposure to local businesses and employment opportunities that they may not have otherwise explored.

Of the programs' participants, 78% of those surveyed were international students, and 62% were newcomers. These connections can lead to eventual full-time employment, facilitating a mechanism to ensure that local talent, including international students, remains in the Atlantic region. A program coordinator confirms,

“Some students [are] hired right after participating either in Clan d'affaires or Future Link. They keep close contact with businesses that they really connected with, so that gives them the opportunity to stay in the region and maybe work for that business.”

2 | THE FUTURE LINK AND CLAN D'AFFAIRES PROGRAMS GIVE EMPLOYERS A LOW BARRIER OPPORTUNITY TO ACCESS LOCAL STUDENT TALENT.

By being problem-based, solutions-oriented, and time-bound, Future Link and Clan d'affaires offer a consultative WIL model that goes beyond what traditional internships can accomplish. Within a period of a few days or a few weeks, a participating business can have a plan meticulously crafted for them through a series of consultations based on their specific needs.

The programs also act as a continuous talent pipeline, enabling employers to identify and connect with potential future hires. This reduces the burdens associated with traditional recruitment methods, such as advertising roles, finding and screening candidates, and training and onboarding new staff.

In a survey of participating employers, 82% reported that participating students were somewhat or very successful in meeting their organizational needs. They also responded either “somewhat” or “a lot” to the following metrics for success:

- 79% gained valuable skills, ideas, and knowledge from students
- 75% reported a noticeable increase in organizational innovation
- 71% experienced improved productivity through Future Link interns

One former Future Link intern, who went on to become a Future Link employer, shared that, “Future Link is the kind of program that needs to be Canada-wide, completely changing the industry for small business owners.”

This sentiment is echoed by the program coordinator, who highlighted how the consultancy-based model allows businesses to receive valuable support without a significant time commitment.

3 | STUDENTS BRING A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE THAT CAN HELP BUSINESSES GROW, WHILE ALSO FURTHERING THEIR OWN SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT.

Data from a survey of participating students indicates that, across all skill areas, a high proportion reported an increase in their social and emotional skills (e.g. emotional self-awareness, achievement orientation, positive outlook, adaptability, empathy, and teamwork).

Post-program surveys indicate students improved these skills in several key areas:

- 82% reported that the opportunity helped them understand employer expectations
- 79% reported improved interpersonal skills such as responsibility and dependability
- 84% reported improved problem-solving skills such as researching and decision-making
- 81% reported improved critical thinking skills such as analysis, interference, and open-mindedness
- 84% reported improved adaptability skills such as flexibility in handling change and juggling multiple demands or tasks

In testimonials, students described the experience of working on a diverse array of projects for multiple small businesses as transformative. The ability to navigate varied tasks equipped them with a more versatile skillset, while also enabling them to support a wide range of business needs.

**4 PARTICIPATION IN THE PROGRAM FACILITATES
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CHAMBER
MEMBERSHIP GROWTH.**

For local Chambers of Commerce, hosting programs such as Future Link and Clan d'affaires is not just about individual businesses: it is a community-wide initiative.

The success of the program indicates a strong potential to attract new members and increase revenue, strengthening the economic health of the region.



**A CASE FROM THE CAP-ACADIE
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**

After COVID, the Cap-Acadie Chamber of Commerce was looking for ways to bring new members into the Chamber, boost membership revenues, and strengthen the local business community.

Through the Future Link program, two students from the Université de Moncton were matched with the Chamber. The students took on this challenge by completing a scan of the membership fee structures for similar organizations in the region and throughout the country. Their work resulted in the creation of a key report that proved to be a cornerstone resource for the Chamber going forward.

“It was a good opportunity to visit the university, present our problem [to the students] and find solutions to the problem. That’s when I realized we really needed to continue working together [with the students]. I’ve done two business groups, this year and last, with excellent results.”¹

— CEO OF THE CAP-ACADIE CHAMBER
OF COMMERCE

1 Translated from French: «C’était une bonne occasion d’aller dans l’institution post secondaire, présenter ma problématique et que la on arrive avec des solutions à ma problématique. Et c’est à ce moment-là que je faire d’accord il faut vraiment que on continuer travailler ensemble [avec les étudiantes]. J’ai fait deux Clan d’affaires cette année et l’année passe puis toujours avec des excellents résultats.»

Key Takeaways

FOR EMPLOYERS

- Employers should view programs like Future Link and Clan d'affaires as low-risk, low-cost investment in talent, providing exposure to a dynamic pool of students (especially international talent).
- Embracing the consultancy-based WIL model enables employers to address specific business challenges and access tailored support on short-term projects with long-term organizational benefits. That said, employers should maintain flexibility and manage expectations regarding student outputs, recognizing that additional work may be necessary to align deliverables with organizational needs.
- Participation in these programs goes beyond individual business needs—establishing valuable relationships with local post-secondary institutions, combating regional talent drain, and contributing to the economic health of the region are additional benefits.



FOR CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

- Chambers of Commerce should perceive consultative WIL programs as a community-wide initiative; hosting these programs can help attract new members to the Chamber. Increased Chamber membership not only enhances revenue, but also creates a mutually beneficial relationship between the Chamber, local businesses, and post-secondary institutions in the region. Chambers can leverage WIL opportunities like the Future Link and Clan d'affaires programs to address specific Chamber goals and challenges, particularly those tied to growth and strategic objectives.

FOR EDUCATORS

- Programs like Future Link and Clan d'affaires offer a low-barrier entry WIL opportunity for academic institutions that value hands-on learning and want to support students in developing wide ranging, industry-relevant skillsets, with strong returns on social and emotional skills development.
- The short duration and low-barrier entry nature of these programs make them particularly attractive to international students, who for a variety of reasons may be less likely to participate in traditional WIL opportunities.
- The programs offer students diverse real-world experiences within the local community, helping prepare them for future employment and encouraging students to live and work in the region after graduation.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Interested in learning how your business or post-secondary institution can set up an innovative work-integrated learning program like Future Link or Clan d'affaires? Connect with us at wilpartnerships@bher.ca

Check out more resources at <https://bher.ca/publications/case-studies>