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Mentorship Strategies in WIL Guide



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CREATING QUALITY WIL ACROSS CANADA

Mentorship Strategies in WIL Guide

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Eight Frequently Asked Questions About Mentorship

WHAT IS MENTORSHIP?

- Mentorship is complex, difficult to define, and can mean different things to different people. Broadly, it's about helping another person through a transition (like a new job) by providing support, guidance, and knowledge based on experience. Where supervision and coaching tend to be focused on performance, mentorship focuses more on the personal and professional development of the mentee.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF MENTORSHIP?

- There are many benefits for the mentee, the mentor, and for organizations that encourage mentorship.
- For the mentee, mentorship helps instill confidence as they develop new skills and gain experience, while growing their network and gaining institutional knowledge.
- Mentors use and develop new skills as they demonstrate leadership, while growing their own networks. Mentors often report finding their jobs more fulfilling or satisfying as they contribute to the professional growth of new colleagues.
- For organizations, mentorship helps develop leaders, by providing opportunities for employees to become mentors while transferring and maintaining institutional knowledge to new employees. Mentorship can also contribute to inclusive, diverse, and collaborative environments.

WHAT DOES MENTORSHIP MEAN IN THE CONTEXT OF WIL?

- Approaches to mentorship may vary depending on the work-integrated learning (WIL) platform. The role of a mentor, within the limitations of the WIL format, may focus on helping the student adapt to the culture

of the workplace, understand professional etiquette, or ensure that their experience is informative and enjoyable.

- Mentorship might include activities such as job-shadowing, one-on-one chats (or check-ins), or encouraging the mentee to attend meetings and participate in networking events.
- Safety is rightfully top of mind for employers and educators, meaning that in-person WIL (and mentorship) is not always possible. For organizations where in-person WIL was not feasible during the COVID-19 pandemic, many supervisors reported having more frequent check-in meetings, and scheduling time for unstructured, open dialogue to help build trust and relationships.

WHAT SKILLS DO GOOD MENTORS NEED?

- Employers seeking to encourage mentorship must recognize that just because someone is an effective supervisor does not mean they have the skills needed for mentorship.
- Mentors need a blend of technical skills and human skills, with emphasis on the latter. In particular, mentors need strong communication skills, empathy, and organizational abilities—among other skills and competencies.

IS MENTORSHIP DIFFERENT FOR VULNERABLE POPULATIONS?

- Approaches to mentorship will vary based on the needs of the mentee. Being open and transparent about responsibilities and expectations can empower students to succeed.
- A willingness to listen, learn, and be flexible will help mentors connect with students and provide inclusive WIL environments.
- Employers must prioritize diversity and inclusion training among their staff and develop strategies for ensuring that workplaces are safe and inclusive.



AS A MENTOR, HOW DO I ESTABLISH TRUST AND MUTUAL RESPECT WITH A MENTEE?

- Relationships take time to develop. Scheduling check-ins and providing time for unstructured conversation can help. This might include conversations about how the student is feeling.
- Draw on “human skills” and competencies like active listening, communication, and empathy to help the student articulate their feelings and concerns.
- Mentors should also ask for feedback throughout the duration of the WIL experience (i.e. not just at the end). Is the student enjoying the experience? Are there activities they’d like to be included in? Would they prefer more or less frequent check-ins? What could the mentor do differently? Questions like these remind the student that the mentor is also learning from the experience and help contribute to an environment where both parties feel comfortable openly communicating and providing feedback to one another.

HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS ENCOURAGE MENTORSHIP IN WIL PLACEMENTS?

- Poor mentorship is worse than no mentorship. Not everyone is cut out to be a mentor. Identify those who have strong human skills (i.e. social and emotional skills), and provide them with the resources they need to be effective.
- Recognize the success of mentors and reward it accordingly.

HOW CAN YOU MANAGE EXPECTATIONS IN THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP?

- The managing of expectations goes two ways: both the mentor and the mentee should know what to expect from the experience, and from each other.
- This includes clarity around desired objectives, and the establishment of a plan to meet those objectives, including how progress will be tracked and success will be evaluated.
- Expectations on the part of the academic and workplace supervisors should also be clarified before the student arrives. Who is responsible for what and when?
- The sooner these discussions take place, the better. In other words, these conversations should happen at the beginning of a WIL experience.

Mentorship Practices in WIL

Workplace mentors play a crucial, if underappreciated, role in providing quality WIL experiences. Their roles are multidimensional, drawing on a range of skills and engaging in a variety of activities beyond simply assigning tasks and monitoring progress.¹ While there is a sizeable body of research on workplace mentorship, less attention has been given to the role of mentorship within different forms of WIL.

In the summer and fall of 2020, BHER spoke with workplace supervisors, business and community leaders, academic professionals, and other skills and training stakeholders with experience participating in different forms of WIL. In addition to gaining insight on the challenges and best practices for ensuring high-quality WIL experiences, we explored the skills that supervisors need to be effective mentors, the role that mentorship plays in quality WIL, and the ways that supervisors have adapted in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

What we heard clearly was that high-quality WIL requires supervisors who are also effective mentors. It includes the establishment of authentic relationships and trust between the student and the mentor. It requires an ability to listen and communicate effectively, while having empathy and providing support. High-quality WIL also embraces processes – formal and informal – to ensure that both the student and supervisor benefit from the experience.

Drawing on what we heard from stakeholders, as well as the findings from existing research on mentorship and WIL, this guide seeks to identify best practices for ensuring positive mentorship relationships.

1 Andrew J. Martin et al., “Work Integrated Learning Gone Full Circle: How Prior Work Placement Experiences Influenced Workplace Supervisors,” *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* 20, no. 3 (2019): 229–42.



KEY CONCEPTS: WHAT IS MENTORSHIP?

The word mentor calls to mind terms like wisdom, experience, counselling, guidance, and advising. Mentorship goes beyond basic notions of supervision, “checking-in” on someone or overseeing their work. It can involve psychological support, protection, sponsorship, skill development, and involvement in professional organizations.

It is complex, difficult to define, and can mean different things to different people. Broadly defined, a mentor is someone “who helps another person through an important transition such as coping with a new situation like a new job or a major change in personal circumstances or in career development or growth.”²

MENTORSHIP AND COACHING: TWO DIFFERENT THINGS?

There is some debate over whether mentorship and coaching are fundamentally distinct approaches. Some argue the terms are synonymous, or at least, their meaning is context specific.³ Generally, coaching is performance driven, helping an individual achieve specific goals or objectives. The principal benefactor is the individual being coached. Mentorship, by contrast, takes a more holistic approach to support an individual’s development.⁴ Mentorship also tends to imply a two-way relationship between the mentor and mentee. As one manager we spoke with explained, “High quality mentorship happens when it is a two-way exchange, and a learning experience for both.”

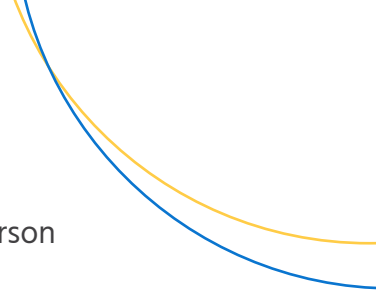
Mentoring can be both formal and informal.

2 Judy McKimm, Carol Jollie, and Mark Hatter, “Mentoring: Theory and Practice.” *London NHSE* 2007., 24.

3 Robert Garvey, Paul Strokes, and David Megginson, “Coaching and Mentoring: Theory and Practice,” *NHRD Network Journal* 3, no. 2 (April 1, 2010): 79–81.

4 “Know the Difference Between Coaching and Mentoring,” Kent State University, accessed November 13, 2020, <https://www.kent.edu/yourtrainingpartner/know-difference-between-coaching-and-mentoring>.

Mentorship goes beyond basic notions of supervision, “checking-in” on someone or overseeing their work. High quality mentorship is a two-way exchange, and a learning experience for both.



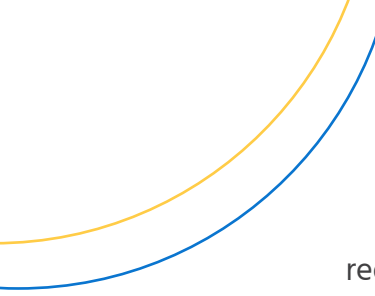
Informal mentoring happens organically in relationships where one person provides support and shares knowledge or wisdom with another. The mentor may be a family member, a teacher, or a professional colleague. Informal mentoring is unstructured, and not connected to programs or timelines. Research suggests informal mentoring is more impactful than formal mentoring.⁵

Formal mentoring tends to take place within a program, follows a pre-defined process, and there is usually a timeline associated with the program. Often, large companies will establish formal mentor programs to support entry-level staff or interns and enhance their experience with the organization.

Depending on the WIL format, components of formal mentoring might include:

- **Job-shadowing:** The mentee spends time with employees across different areas in the organization to gain a broad understanding of the day-to-day operations of the employer
- **One-on-one chats:** The student is connected with individuals across the organization to ask questions about their jobs and careers, while learning more about different roles in the organization
- **Check-ins:** The student and the mentor meet on a regular basis (daily, weekly, or monthly) to discuss any challenges the mentee has encountered, provide updates, and provide the student with opportunities to ask questions
- **Meetings:** The student may be encouraged to attend meetings (with or without their mentor) to learn more about the day-to-day operations of the organization, while networking with colleagues and getting immersed in the organizational culture
- **Networking events:** Part of the student's experience might include participation in formal networking events like professional conferences, industry events, or workplace presentations
- **Training activities:** Many organizations provide access to online courses and in-house training activities, and may encourage or even

⁵ Belle Rose Ragins, John L. Cotton, and Janice S. Miller, "Marginal Mentoring: The Effects Of Type Of Mentor, Quality Of Relationship, And Program Design On Work And Career Attitudes," *Academy of Management Journal* 43, no. 6 (December 1, 2000): 1177–94.



require mentees to commit a portion of their time to engaging in them. Mentors and mentees may choose to engage in training activities together

- **Debriefing:** Following these or other activities, the mentor and mentee discuss lessons learned, observations, and identify next steps

In some cases, a mentoring relationship established through a formal approach may continue beyond the timelines of a program, with both parties establishing an authentic friendship and adopting an informal approach to mentorship.

It's important to recognize that as a professional activity, mentorship is an evolving concept with a diverse range of approaches. Although we tend to imagine mentorship as a relationship between an older mentor and a younger mentee, reverse mentoring flips this arrangement, where youth provide training and support to older workers.

For example, the Youth Empowering Parents program in Toronto embraces this approach, where young people act as tutors, helping adults and seniors develop their language and computer skills, while the young people develop confidence and leadership experience.⁶ Reverse mentoring sometimes happens in apprenticeships and may play a role in other forms of WIL where young people may have digital skills that older, more experienced workers lack.

In the context of WIL, most mentorship will take place in a formal context, where a student and mentor are assigned to each other and there is structure and timelines connected to the WIL experience. Usually, the WIL supervisor will be best positioned to act as a mentor. In some placements, however, the supervisor's role will focus more on coaching the student and overseeing their activities, while another individual mentors them.

6 "How It Works," Youth Empowering Parents 2020, <https://yepeducation.com/>.

EXPANSIVE VS. RESTRICTIVE SUPERVISION

In organizations that offer expansive learning environments, supervisors are encouraged to act as mentors who introduce students to a variety of tasks and parts of an organization. Mentorship may take a formalized approach with scheduled check-ins and meetings, providing formative feedback to support students' development of both technical skills and social and emotional skills.

In contrast, supervisors in restrictive learning environments tend to play a more limited role, assigning a more limited scope of work to students, and with less emphasis on providing feedback on their skills development. The extent to which mentors are able to provide quality mentorship (as opposed to marginal mentorship) may be impeded by restrictive environments. Mentors need to be empowered to invest time and energy into the relationship.

Mentorship is only one factor in shaping whether a workplace learning environment is expansive or restrictive, and must be understood in relation to broader factors, including the organization's commitment to training, and whether supervisors themselves have benefited from mentorship experiences.

THE BENEFITS OF MENTORSHIP

The benefits of mentorship are well documented. Mentees are able to gain practical knowledge and insight from mentors with professional experience and networks. A toolkit from The University of California, Davis,⁷ provides a list of benefits to mentees, including:

- Guidance and support
- Professional development opportunities
- Greater confidence

⁷ Liz Corkery, "The Benefits of Mentoring," *Human Resources*, January 11, 2018, <https://hr.ucdavis.edu/departments/learning-dev/toolkits/mentoring/benefits>.

- The growth of a professional network and expanded institutional knowledge of a business or organization
- The presence of a confidential sounding board to discuss ideas and challenges

Skills development is also associated with mentorship, as mentees gain practical experience and get feedback to strengthen both technical and non-technical skills and competencies, including communication, interpersonal, and organizational abilities.⁸ Mentees also develop professional knowledge, autonomy and independence, and the ability to accept criticism.⁹

Longer term benefits have been shown to include strengthened employability, future earnings, and overall job satisfaction.¹⁰

There are benefits for supervisors who act as mentors. Mentors use and develop new skills as they demonstrate leadership, grow their own networks, and may find their jobs more fulfilling or satisfying as they contribute to the professional growth of colleagues.¹¹

Organizations that encourage and enable supervisors to be strong mentors also benefit in several ways:¹²

- Mentorship facilitates the growth and development of leaders, by providing opportunities for employees to become mentors
- Mentorship demonstrates an organizational commitment to staff development and continuous learning
- Mentorship transfers and maintains institutional knowledge
- Mentorship fosters an inclusive, diverse, and collaborative environment

More broadly, the benefits of mentorship can extend to entire

8 "Benefits of Mentoring," *Aston University*, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://www2.aston.ac.uk/current-students/get-involved/mentoring-at-aston-university/peer-mentoring/benefits-of-mentoring/index.aspx>.

9 McKimm, Jollie, and Hatter, "Mentoring: Theory and Practice."

10 Tammy Allen et al., "Career Benefits Associated with Mentoring for Proteges: A Meta-Analysis," *The Journal of Applied Psychology* 89 (March 1, 2004): 127–36.

11 Corkery, "The Benefits of Mentoring."

12 Ibid.

communities. In industries or sectors where some population groups face barriers or are underrepresented, connecting students with individuals who have similar backgrounds can create more inclusive and accommodating workplaces.

HOW TO INCENTIVIZE MENTORSHIP?

Mentorship takes time and energy. If not provided with sufficient resources, feedback on performance, and rewards for their effort, mentors may not be incentivized to invest themselves in a mentoring relationship. This can lead to poor quality “marginal mentorship,”¹³ where the mentor invests minimal energy into the relationship.

Poor quality mentorship can undermine the purpose of providing formal mentorship at an organization and may be worse than providing no mentorship program at all.¹⁴

For organizations thinking about incorporating formal mentorship into their programs, leaders are advised to consider how they will evaluate and reward the performance of mentors and recognize the impact that mentorship will have on the mentor’s schedule.

In addition, some individuals we consulted who had experience with mentorship expressed frustration that where their efforts had reduced costs for their organization (by helping to train new staff, strengthening organizational capacity, etc.), the mentor was not compensated for the savings. As one person told us, “I’ve had very open communication with all my teammates and they have often said, “We bring on X number of students. We get free work done, the company saves money, but that adds more work to us. Wouldn’t it be fair to have part of that savings passed on to the ones who are mentoring?”¹⁵

The quote illustrates the need for leaders to consider how their mentors will be recognized and rewarded for their efforts.

13 Ragins, Cotton, and Miller, “Marginal Mentoring.”

14 Terri A. Scandura, “Dysfunctional Mentoring Relationships and Outcomes,” *Journal of Management* 24, no. 3 (June 1, 1998): 449–67.

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MENTORSHIP IN WIL

In the context of WIL experiences, approaches to mentorship may vary depending on the WIL type. Placement-based WIL (apprenticeship, co-op, internships) tend to be longer term, allowing more time for supervisors to build trust, provide feedback and support, and become effective mentors.

In apprenticeships, there is a growing trend towards integrating formal mentorship training into on-the-job training requirements. Skillplan, for example, is a BC-based not-for-profit that provides consulting and skills training services in the construction and mining industries. They recognize mentorship as a critical element in workforce development in the skilled trades and provide workshops for both mentors and mentees.¹⁶

In placement-based WIL, students have more time to undertake challenging tasks and learn from the experiences, with mentors providing feedback and support to help mentees learn from mistakes.¹⁷ Over the course of weeks, months, or even years (in the case of apprenticeships), the mentor and mentee have time to build trust and establish a relationship.

Non-placement forms of WIL (entrepreneurship activities, online projects, competitions, etc.) are shorter-term, and require a more strategic approach to goal setting while sticking to time commitments. Sometimes called “micro-mentorship,” short-term, time-limited mentorship relationships can last from a few hours to a few weeks.

Micro-mentorship is similar to coaching. The difference is that where coaching emphasizes goal setting, targets, and assessment, micro-mentorship emphasizes expansive learning where mentees make decisions for themselves and the mentor acts in an advisory role.

16 “Mentorship Program,” Skill Plan, *About Us*, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://www.skillplan.ca/construction/mentorship-program/>.

17 Theresa Smith-Ruig, “Exploring the Links Between Mentorship and Work Integrated Learning,” *Higher Education Research & Development* 33, no. 4 (2014): 769–82.



A simple truth is that mentorship does not, and should not, look the same across all regions and population groups. Distinct populations face unique challenges and barriers in accessing education and employment opportunities.

CASE STUDY: MENTORING FOR WOMEN IN ENGINEERING AT BOMBARDIER INC.

The University of Concordia’s Women in Engineering – Career Launch Experience (WIE-CLE) provides four-month internship opportunities for female students in the Gina Cody School of Engineering and Computer Science with industry leaders. The program gives students real-world work experience relevant to their field of study, while providing them with mentorship and professional development opportunities.¹⁸

Bombardier, which provided more than 1,200 paid internship positions for the 2019-2020 academic year,¹⁹ recognizes the WIE-CLE program as a means of strengthening diversity in the aerospace and transportation industry. In a press release, Éric Martel, Bombardier’s President and Chief Executive Officer explained, “women are vastly underrepresented in engineering positions across the aerospace industry. The WIE-CLE program is designed to help address this issue by providing mentorship opportunities for female engineering students to develop their skills and accelerate their careers.”²⁰

Participating students are matched with a mentor at Bombardier, given access to customized training resources, and provided with opportunities to meet with and learn from women with experience navigating careers in engineering.

With shorter-term, non-placement-based WIL, the line between mentorship and coaching often becomes blurred. A supervisor might provide guidance, support and counselling like a mentor, while also coaching the mentee (or group of mentees) to set goals or targets and monitor their performance. At the University of Waterloo’s Velocity program, for example, this dual role is

18 “Women in Engineering – Career Launch Experience (WIE-CLE),” accessed December 4, 2020, <https://www.concordia.ca/content/concordia/en/academics/co-op/programs/women-in-engineering-career-launch-experience.html>.

19 “Bombardier Targets 1,000 Paid Internships for the 2020-21 Academic Year - Bombardier,” accessed December 4, 2020, <https://www.bombardier.com/en/media/newsList/details.binc-20201015-bombardier-targets-1-000-paid-internships-for-the-bombardiercom.html?>

20 Ibid.

written into the description of business advisors, who “act as consultants, mentors, and coaches, with the aim of guiding you to success...They hold you to account and connect you to investors.”²¹

In non-placement forms of WIL, a mentor may provide support and knowledge to more than one individual at a time. For example, a hackathon event might provide a team — or several teams — of students with experienced entrepreneurs to offer advice and encouragement. In this role, the entrepreneur would act as a mentor to a group, over a short period of time. Similarly, students who participate in business incubator programs are often matched with one or more “entrepreneurs-in-residence” or business advisors who have relevant experience and connections in the community.

Some placement-based WIL may also include participation in shorter-term WIL experiences. A student-intern at a technology company might be encouraged to participate in a two-day hackathon, for example. Over the course of a WIL experience, the student may be mentored by multiple individuals at different times and for different intervals of time.

Regardless of the size and scope of a WIL experience, students are usually at early stages of their careers, with limited professional experience and networks. The role of a mentor, within the limitations of the WIL format, may focus largely on helping the student adapt to the culture of the workplace, understand professional etiquette, and ensure their experience is informative and enjoyable. Several supervisors we spoke with for this research emphasized that mentors introduce the student to a community of practice.

MENTORSHIP FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS

More work needs to be done before we can provide recommendations on best practices for mentorship across distinct and diverse populations. A simple truth is that mentorship does not, and should not, look the same across all regions and population groups. Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) represent distinct populations, just as women, or Canadians with disabilities face unique challenges and barriers in accessing education and employment opportunities.

21 “Program Experience”, Velocity, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://velocityincubator.com/program-structure-experience/>

We know in industries where women are underrepresented, mentorship can help instill a stronger sense of belonging and confidence among mentees, while improving retention rates.²²

Research on mentorship for first-year female students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines suggests that providing women in STEM with female (as opposed to male) mentors strengthens these outcomes.²³

Similarly, connecting Indigenous students with Indigenous mentors and role models is also ideal. A recent mentorship program at a major Canadian bank provided Indigenous employees with support and guidance from a mentor who was also Indigenous and was shown to be beneficial to participants.²⁴ A challenge is that many organizations lack Indigenous employees at senior-level positions, and non-Indigenous people may not be suitable as mentors due to different value systems and ways of knowing.²⁵

Canadians with disabilities represent another diverse group who are significantly underrepresented in the workforce,²⁶ and students with disabilities often face unique challenges in accessing conventional WIL.²⁷

22 Tara C. Dennehy and Nilanjana Dasgupta, “Female Peer Mentors Early in College Increase Women’s Positive Academic Experiences and Retention in Engineering,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 23 (June 6, 2017): 5964–69.

23 Ibid.

24 Deborah McPhee et al., “Smudging, Connecting, and Dual Identities: Case Study of an Aboriginal ERG,” *Personnel Review* 46, no. 6 (January 1, 2017): 1104–19.

25 Danika Overmars, “Wellbeing in the Workplace among Indigenous People : An Enhanced Critical Incident Study”, University of British Columbia, 2019.

26 Stuart Morris et al., “A Demographic, Employment and Income Profile of Canadians with Disabilities Aged 15 Years and over, 2017,” Canadian Survey on Disability Reports Statistics Canada, November 28, 2018, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2018002-eng.htm>.

27 Theresa A. Severance and Pamela J. Starr, “Beyond the Classroom: Internships and Students with Special Needs,” *Teaching Sociology* 39, no. 2 (April 1, 2011): 200–207.

It's important to recognize that disability is a catch-all term that may imply physical, sensory or cognitive impairments, or some combination thereof. The needs of students with disabilities can vary drastically, as can the range of accommodations they may require. We heard, for example, from one supervisor in the skilled trades who explained that where students with physical disabilities face barriers in accessing some work sites, effort is made to provide technological solutions (i.e. streaming or virtual visits) when the physical barriers cannot be easily or safely resolved.²⁸

As we heard repeatedly from supervisors, empathy is essential to mentorship for vulnerable groups. Cultural competence is also important where the supervisor is working with students from non-western backgrounds (i.e. international students), who may face linguistic and cultural barriers.

Rarely is it possible to design and deliver WIL opportunities that meet the needs of all learners, and similarly, approaches to mentorship will vary based on the needs of the mentee.

In a recent report on accessibility in Canadian higher education, the authors suggest that openness and transparency around responsibilities and expectations can help empower students to succeed.²⁹

A willingness to listen, learn, and be flexible will help mentors connect with students and provide inclusive WIL environments. Multiple individuals we spoke with for this guide also recognized the need for employers to prioritize diversity and inclusion training among their staff and develop strategies for ensuring that workplaces are safe and inclusive.

28 Theresa Winchester-Seeto, Anna Rowe, and Jacqueline MacKaway, "Sharing the Load: Understanding the Roles of Academics and Host Supervisors in Work-Integrated Learning Environments," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education* 17, no. 2 (2016): 101-18.

29 "Improving the Accessibility of Remote Higher Education: Lessons from the Pandemic and Recommendations", Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, accessed December 6, 2020, <https://heqco.ca/pub/improving-the-accessibility-of-remote-higher-education-lessons-from-the-pandemic-and-recommendations/>.

WHAT SKILLS AND QUALITIES DO GOOD MENTORS NEED?

Research on mentoring skills identifies a range of skills needed on the part of the mentor, and mentee, for an effective mentoring relationship. They align well with what we heard from stakeholders when we asked which skills supervisors most need to be effective mentors. What we heard was mentors need a blend of technical skills and human skills, with more emphasis on the latter.

Human skills, also called social and emotional skills (SES), describe a range of skills, abilities, characteristics, and behaviours including leadership, cultural competence, problem-solving, resiliency, empathy, collaboration, and communication.³⁰

We heard, for example, about the need for supervisors to practice active listening when engaging in conversations with interns. This is the process of listening attentively, and then paraphrasing and repeating back to the speaker what one has just heard. Related to active listening is the ability to communicate effectively and ensure that the mentee understands what's expected from them.

Empathy is another human skill supervisors need to be good mentors. The ability to understand and share the feelings of a student, intern, or new colleague allows their supervisor to anticipate challenges and work with them to develop solutions. Having empathy for others also allows mentors to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the mentee and create opportunities to help them improve.

Some mentors felt that helping mentees develop human skills was part of their role as mentors: "One of the things I think we're able to do well at our organization is push them into situations where they're forced to develop some of those soft social, emotional skills that maybe they don't get in the classroom. So, we have a lot of networking events, and I find it's really beneficial when I take a student there and help them understand what would be expected of them, maybe giving them some tips to start conversations."³¹

30 Maria Giammarco, Stephen Higham, and Matthew McKean. *The Future Is Social and Emotional: Evolving Skills Needs in the 21st Century*. The Conference Board of Canada, 2020.

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This is not to overlook the importance of technical skills. Depending on the workplace and the type of WIL, the relative importance of technical versus non-technical skills may vary. Ensuring that students have time and support to learn practical, on the job skills, and helping them when they struggle, is also an important part of the role.

Creating meaningful opportunities for the mentee to develop their skills, in addition to coordinating activities like goal setting, monitoring progress, and scheduling check-ins requires supervisors who engage in mentorship have strong organizational skills. Mentorship requires time and energy, and without effective organizational abilities and a commitment to the role, a mentor can easily find themselves struggling to balance their regular workplace responsibilities with the needs of the mentee.

What's clear from our discussions with supervisors is that not everyone is cut out to be a mentor. We heard good mentors are those who understand and believe in the value of mentorship. As one student supervisor explained, "it's better to have someone who's a good fit for a mentorship role, because they have to really be someone who has a little bit of altruism in them, and really believes in doing things for the greater good."

VIRTUAL MENTORING

The COVID-19 outbreak has required many organizations to either scale back their WIL activities, or pivot towards remote, or virtual WIL.

For some, the impact of the pandemic on WIL activities has been minor. This was particularly the case in the skilled trades, where hands-on learning continues to be necessary and possible, with appropriate safety measures in place (i.e. social distancing, mask wearing). We spoke with an electrician, for example, who found it difficult to imagine how one could effectively provide an apprentice with instruction and supervision in a remote setting. In their case, they continued providing on-site supervision while adhering to public health recommendations regarding social distancing and mask wearing.

Safety is rightfully top of mind for employers and educators, meaning that in-person WIL (and mentorship) is not always possible. For organizations where in-person WIL was not feasible during the pandemic, we asked supervisors how they had adapted to the shift towards remote WIL, and whether they encountered challenges.

We heard that the process of establishing the mentor-mentee relationship is more difficult in remote-situations than in-person, with some highlighting the loss of casual and spontaneous conversations that ordinarily take place in office environments.

To compensate for this, supervisors we spoke with emphasized the importance of regular (online) check-ins with students. While part of these meetings may be structured (i.e. monitoring progress, assigning tasks), unstructured conversation can also help build trust and strengthen the relationship. This might include conversations about how the student, or mentee is feeling.

As one academic partner explained: “We have tips on what to do and how to support if your student gets sick with COVID. And then as coordinators, we’re doing a little more proactive outreach to the students too, to make sure they’re not feeling sad and isolated as some of them are, as some of all of us are, because that, of course, is going to affect their work.”³²

Generally, it was felt that younger people who had suitable access to internet were well-positioned to adapt to remote WIL. One supervisor explained that they tend to be comfortable operating in digital environments, and the transition towards remote WIL may in fact be more difficult for mentors than for mentees:

“Our initial concern about moving to remote WIL was having summer students work from home and we’d never see them. But young people are more comfortable with video conferencing and older workers are becoming more comfortable with it these days as well. So we’re going with the flow.”³³

32 Manufacturing Meeting 2

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An added challenge for supervisors is ensuring the tasks they assign are engaging and provide opportunities for meaningful learning. Remote supervision can make it difficult to gauge how long an individual will take to complete a given task, to determine the quality of their work, and to identify suitable assignments. This underscores the importance of check-ins and relationship building, while also the setting of goals and expectations combined with the monitoring of progress.

Despite the challenges, there may be certain advantages to remote WIL. Geography is no longer a barrier, allowing businesses and organizations to draw from a much larger pool of applicants. This also means that mentors can be matched with mentees regardless of whether they reside in the same region or work at the same office or jobsite.

Best Practices – Five Tips for Ensuring Positive Mentorship Relationships

1. CHECK-IN OFTEN AND MONITOR PROGRESS

Mentoring relationships require that the mentor and mentee establish trust and mutual respect. Doing so takes time, communication, and empathy from both parties. Every mentoring relationship is different. “Some people need a lot more time to chat and work through things together, and other people don't want to talk to you until something is done. So, part of the job of the mentor is just trying to figure out what their style is and adapting to the style that makes them comfortable.”³⁴

Check-ins can provide time for setting goals, clarifying expectations, and identifying challenges and potential solutions. They also allow the mentor and mentee time to develop trust and understanding. One mentor told us that for them, daily check-ins were an effective way to stay connected with the student and track their progress, explaining, “For me, I personally like to literally, every morning, have the conversation of, ‘OK, what’s on your plate? What do you want to get done today?’ And then the next morning, check, ‘OK, how much of it were you able to achieve? What were the barriers? What support do you feel like you need?’”³⁵

Others indicated that while they scheduled check-ins less frequently, they ensured that the student understood they were available if needed. Where in-person meetings are possible, many supervisors explained check-ins often take place informally, between meetings or during breaks, for example. Where WIL takes place remotely (in response to the 2020 pandemic, for example), some compensated by scheduling time for informal, unstructured dialogue, simply to catch-up and maintain a familiar relationship.

The frequency and formality of check-ins will vary depending on the relationship. We were cautioned that “you have to strike a balance between checking-in and micromanaging the student. That’s why it’s so

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important to have the student feel comfortable reaching out and asking their supervisor questions.”³⁶

Debrief meetings can also take place after the student has participated in a new activity, experienced a challenge, or completed a goal. Debriefs can discuss what was learned, what was observed, and whether the student has any questions related to the experience. Doing so will reinforce trust between both parties, and help the mentor monitor the student’s progress.

Whether the mentor is also a supervisor (overseeing work activities) or focused specifically on mentorship (providing psychological support, introducing the student to a community of practice, etc.), consistent check-ins, debriefs, or informal chats can help the mentor understand how the mentee is feeling about their experience, and then steer mentees towards supports and resources that might be helpful.

Another important relationship is between a post-secondary institution and an employer. Both sides have an interest in ensuring that students will be matched with quality WIL and mentoring experiences. A challenge, however, is that academic and host supervisors may have mismatched expectations around their respective roles, creating confusion around who is responsible for what, and negatively impacting the student’s learning experience.³⁷

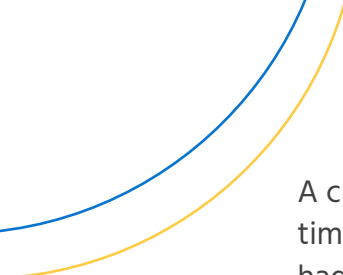
Both academic and host supervisors must identify the complementary aspects of their roles and be clear about expectations and responsibilities from the onset. The academic and host supervisor may choose to schedule their own check-in calls to discuss the student’s progress and address any challenges.

2. INVEST IN PEOPLE

Training is an important component of formal mentorship programs, and mentors draw on a diverse set of skills (see Figure 1). Employers seeking to encourage mentorship must recognize just because someone is an effective supervisor does not mean they have the skills needed for mentorship. Training opportunities can help supervisors develop new skills and better understand what quality mentorship consists of. As a student supervisor explained: “People have an idea about what mentorship is, but they generally don’t have a structured background in it.”

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37 Winchester-Seeto, Rowe, and MacKaway, “Sharing the Load.”



A challenge for many businesses and organizations is that training takes time and resources. We heard from many WIL supervisors that they already had limited time to engage in training or professional development prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, and this challenge has since been exacerbated.

Some felt a partial solution was to look for flexible, short-term training opportunities and embed them within regular workplace schedules: “I don’t think it needs to be a huge portion of time... it may seem overwhelming if you’re sitting there for three hours, but if there are opportunities where you can break things up and integrate it into your day, that might make it easier.”³⁸

In addition to time constraints, access to online training or professional courses cost money, creating a financial barrier that affects small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in particular. Individuals we spoke with highlighted training subsidies and tax credits that can help offset some of the costs of providing staff with professional development opportunities. Many felt that tools and resources to provide affordable and relevant training to supervisors would be helpful in developing mentors.

We also heard that in addition to training for mentors, mentees benefit from access to training resources. While on-the-job training is integral to most WIL experiences, many organizations also expect interns, co-op students or other WIL participants to attend training sessions, complete online courses or training modules, and demonstrate progress.

Encouraging mentees to attend meetings with their mentor, engage in job-shadowing, and attend work-related events (professional conferences, industry events, presentations) also provides valuable learning and networking opportunities for the student.

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3. MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

Expectation management goes two ways: both the mentor and the mentee should know what to expect from the experience, and from each other.

This includes clarity around desired objectives (learning, productivity, team collaboration, communication, etc.), and the establishment of a plan to meet those objectives, including the process by which progress will be tracked and outcomes will be assessed.

The sooner these discussions take place, the better.

This process begins at the screening stage: “During our screening process we find out what the goals of the student are and we hire students based on their field of study and how well it aligns with the projects we have for the WIL placement. We make sure goals are set at the beginning and that timelines to achieve the goals are set so we can measure progress.”³⁹

Of course, mentorship goes beyond overseeing the student’s progress, and early conversations can clarify the desired frequency of check-ins and the expectations of what both parties seek to gain from the relationship and the experience. Conversations might also include questions about:

- Who does the student hope to meet?
- What do they hope to accomplish?
- What do they plan to do after the WIL experience?

The answers can help both parties develop a plan to provide the student with a positive experience. They may also reveal if the student has ambitious, but unrealistic ideas and expectations for the WIL placement.

A supervisor in the public sector, for example, explained that it’s important to be realistic with students about what to expect: “Public service work is not very sexy. I think sometimes people come in feeling quite idealistic about what they’ll achieve and how quickly that might happen... and in my experience it’s a bit more of a slow burn, and it’s quite indirect a lot of the time. Sometimes the people who are most interested in public service can become a little... not disillusioned but find that it’s just kind of a grind.”

39 Online Community 2 - Owners CEO

Early conversations between mentor and mentee can provide the student with insight into what their day-to-day activities may look like and help them understand what to expect.

These conversations will also help the mentor assess a student's level of knowledge and abilities, allowing them to adjust their approach accordingly. "Sometimes the less someone knows the more you might be able to show them or share with them, but the less likely they might be able to absorb that too," suggested a student supervisor. "And being able to gauge where a particular learner is at and what their experience is and how much they will be able to absorb can be tricky."⁴⁰

The mentor should also understand what the student expects from them. How often do they want to schedule check-ins? What sorts of activities do they want to participate in? Asking these sorts of questions can help ensure that the mentor knows what their responsibilities are. Doing so will also assure the student that it's ok to articulate concerns or constructive criticism about their experiences. As a student supervisor explained: "I think it's a fine balance between hovering, and micromanaging, and checking in. So, if you can actually clarify from the beginning, 'I'm checking in with you, but you need to be comfortable to come speak to me whenever,' that helps a lot, I find."

4. GET FEEDBACK

Exit surveys provide valuable feedback about a student's overall experience. Doing so is undoubtedly a best practice and helps post-secondary institutions and host organizations continually improve their WIL programs for future students. Responsibility for providing an exit survey is something that should be clarified between the academic and workplace supervisors at the onset of the relationship.

The mentors we spoke with felt, however, that waiting until the end of the experience to get feedback overlooks opportunities to adjust a program or make improvements throughout the experience. This includes feedback about the mentorship component of the WIL experience.

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By soliciting regular feedback from the student, mentors adjust their approach and adapt to challenges. Is the student enjoying the experience? What activities would they like to be more included in? Would they prefer more, or less frequent check-ins? What could the mentor do differently?

Questions like these remind the student that the mentor is also learning from the experience and contribute to an environment where both parties feel comfortable openly communicating with one another.

5. LEARN FROM OTHERS

Mentorship is an evolving practice, and many different approaches and activities are underway across regions and sectors in Canada. To identify best practices, mentors are encouraged to draw on their networks, communicate with their professional or industry associations, and pay attention to programs and initiatives at other organizations and companies.

This also includes consultation with post-secondary institutions to identify best practices in mentorship, improve existing programs, or collaborate on developing new ones.

Conclusion

There is no single model for mentorship that can be uniformly deployed across different WIL types. There are, however, best practices and general principles that can help ensure that mentorship enhances the experience, and the related benefits, for all parties. This guide summarizes some of these key practices and principles, as identified by people with experience as supervisors and mentors.

For further information, consult the Business + Higher Education Roundtable (BHER)'s WIL Hub at bher.ca/wil-hub.

Methodology

We facilitated eight 90-minute live online focus groups with workplace supervisors including four from SMEs (<200) and four from 200+ organizations. Virtual focus groups integrated live polling and discussion with a small group of managers at host organizations. Discussions addressed supervisor experiences of mentoring and assessment, as well as broader topics related to barriers and enablers of employer participation in WIL. We also engaged workplace supervisors in four 10-day asynchronous online communities.

This effort was part of a larger consultation project. In the larger project, we conducted 44 group consultations and 23 individual consultations on WIL. The individual consultations included key informant interviews with industry leaders about mentorship and on-the-job training. In total, we engaged a total of 620 individual participants in this consultation project.

Alongside the consultations, we conducted a literature review looking at peer reviewed articles and sector resources related to mentorship in WIL.



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