

Contributions of work-integrated learning programs to organizational talent pipelines: Insights from talent managers

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Understanding and addressing employers' needs is an essential step toward developing a work-integrated learning (WIL) program. The key concern for employers is the development of a talent pipeline: a system through which organizations identify, attract, develop, and retain talented people. This study examined organizational perspectives on the contribution of work-integrated learning (WIL) to their talent pipelines. Semi-structured interviews with talent managers ($N = 18$) were used to identify what forms of talent employers sought from WIL and the mechanisms within WIL that support the development of organizations' talent pipelines. Findings highlight the desirability of a lifelong learning mindset, which includes an aptitude for learning, fluid intelligence, and adaptability. Findings also highlight contributions of WIL to talent pipelines in terms of preparing students for success, reducing hiring risks, developing long-term relationships, and mobilizing staff to support recruitment processes. The study suggests how WIL administrators might organize resources to deliver value for employers.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, co-operative education, talent pipeline, lifelong learning mindset

Work-integrated learning (WIL) programs are used for several reasons, including to enhance student development and employability (Jackson & Collings, 2018). Additionally, WIL programs can connect students and institutions with employers and, in doing so, can contribute value for those employers (Van Rooijen, 2011). For those who manage WIL programs, addressing employers' concerns is of interest because employers are crucial partners in WIL (Fleming, McLachlan, & Pretti, 2018). This study focuses on a key concern for employers, that of developing a talent pipeline.

A talent pipeline is a system through which organizations identify, attract, develop, and retain talented people (Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015). It is well-documented that employers participate in WIL to attract talented students (Braunstein, Takei, Wang, & Loken, 2011; Chapman, 1999; Hurst, Good, & Gardner, 2012). Whether they are successful in doing so is likely associated with their commitment to the WIL program (DeClou, Sattler, & Peters, 2013). For this reason, understanding the contributions of WIL to employers' talent pipelines is important. However, to our knowledge, previous research has not explored this topic.

The purpose of this study was to examine organizational perspectives on the contribution of WIL to their talent pipelines. The study addressed two questions. First, what form(s) of "talent" do employers seek from WIL? Talent is a complex concept (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Gonzalez-Cruz, 2013). Clarifying what talent looks like to employers will inform how WIL programs prepare students to enter organizations. This is particularly important because employers' perspectives on talent are often unclear to institutions (Coll & Zegwaard, 2006; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). Second, what mechanisms within WIL support the development of organizations' talent pipelines? That is, this study examined how WIL programs might be structured to support the talent pipeline. These questions were addressed using semi-structured interviews with organizational members responsible for managing talent pipelines.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Talent and the Talent Pipeline

There is ongoing debate as to what talent means and which aspects of talent are of greatest concern to employers (Dries, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). This study adopts a human capital perspective on talent (see Dries, 2013). From this perspective, talent refers to the skills, competencies, and characteristics people possess or demonstrate and that organizations can leverage for organizational success. Talent can be demonstrated through behaviors, can be seen in an individual's knowledge, and can even emerge as "potential" such as in individuals' capacity to learn (Dries, Cotton, Bagdadli, & de Oliveira, 2014).

There is limited understanding regarding which talents are most desirable by WIL employers. The common narrative in the literature is that employers place a great degree of importance on so-called "soft skills" such as interpersonal communication (Coll & Zegwaard, 2006; Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, & Zehner, 2013). These skills have been identified as important means by which WIL students can address employers' key challenges (Jackson, 2015b; McRae et al., 2019). Ongoing participation in WIL may depend on employers' access to those aspects of talent that address key concerns. Additional research is required to identify which talents employers aim to bring into their talent pipelines.

All organizations have a common challenge: to identify, attract, develop, and retain talented people (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015). Thus, they must develop a system to address these challenges. Such a system has been labeled a *talent pipeline* (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015). Drawing from a pipeline analogy, this system "extracts" talent from outside of the organization and moves it to within the organization. The talent pipeline ensures that the organization has the right people in the right positions to execute strategically important tasks. This study examines the ways in which WIL bolsters talent pipelines, an area not yet addressed in the WIL literature.

Participation in Work-Integrated Learning

WIL is a model of experiential education that brings together students, institutions, and employers for the co-creation of mutual value (Peters, Sattler, & Kelland, 2014; Sattler & Peters, 2012). It facilitates opportunities for students to work in organizations and for organizations to leverage students' talents for organizational success. The majority of WIL literature focuses on the contributions of WIL to students' competency development, skill acquisition, and employability (Jackson, 2015a, 2015b; Reddan, 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Smith & Worsfold, 2015). It suggests that WIL enhances students' talents. However, previous research has not yet discerned which forms of talent are of interest to employers. While all talents may be desirable, it is assumed that employers are interested in WIL for access to specific forms of talent. This study identified such talents.

The WIL literature also suggests that participation in WIL enhances talent pipelines through relationship building and conversion. Hurst et al., (2012) suggest the WIL programs can be used to "convert" students into full-time employees. Indeed, evidence suggests that bonds between students and organizations can enhance students' plans to become a permanent member of the organization (Drewery, Church, Pretti, & Nevison, 2019). What this research suggests is that WIL programs may support talent pipelines in multiple ways, in addition to providing access to talented students. The objective of this study was to better understand how WIL programs can be arranged to address employers' salient talent-related challenges.

METHODOLOGY

Study Context

Data were collected from “talent managers” who worked in organizations that recently hired a co-operative education (co-op) student from a Canadian university. Talent managers are those personnel who are involved in the recruitment, management, and retention of talented students. Employers participated in a co-op program, which is one form of WIL. In this co-op program, students alternate academic terms with paid co-op work terms. Students compete for co-op work terms just like they would in the “real world.” They access job advertisements through an online system, apply for jobs, and participate in interviews. This recruitment process allows students to select workplaces of interest and allows employers to recruit students whom they find talented.

Participant Recruitment

Talent managers were recruited as organizational representatives who were knowledgeable about various aspects of the talent pipeline, including strategy, recruitment, and supervision (Cappelli & Keller, 2014). A purposive sample of talent managers was accessed through a university-provided list. Invitations to participate were sent via email. Eighteen talent managers agreed to participate. With one exception, all participants represented different organizations (participants 4 and 5 were a recruiter and senior executive, respectively, in the same organization). Most interviews were conducted over the phone, but some were conducted in-person. Table 1 provides an overview of participants’ roles, industries, and organization sizes.

TABLE 1: Description of participants’ roles and organizations

Demographic Categories	Number of Participants (%)
<i>Roles</i>	
Recruiter	5 (28%)
Human Resources Manager	4 (22%)
Senior Position	3 (17%)
Director or Executive	6 (33%)
<i>Industries</i>	
Consultancy (Engineering)	1 (6%)
Education	1 (6%)
Finance	2 (11%)
Government	2 (11%)
Hospitality and Travel	2 (11%)
Manufacturing	2 (11%)
Non-profit	2 (11%)
Software and Technology	6 (33%)

Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 45-minutes long. The interviews were oriented around two main questions. First, talent managers were asked to describe what a talented person in their organization would “look like”. This was designed to understand what aspects of talent employers found most desirable. Participants’ responses were probed for additional information about their previous experience with talented people, especially students, and to get them to provide

descriptive terms that came to mind. The second question of interest was: what role does work-integrated learning (WIL) play in this picture? Participants were invited to share their experiences of managing talent, including key challenges, and then to articulate how WIL contributed to the talent pipeline. Participants were made aware that the goal of the interview was to understand in general how WIL programs could support organizational efforts concerning the talent pipeline.

Data Treatment

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. The audio recording yielded over 200 pages of data. Transcripts were analyzed in the tradition of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The researchers first read the transcripts and made initial notes regarding potential themes. Then, each transcript was analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. Initial labels were placed on small pieces of text for each transcript (open coding), and then researchers related labels using both inductive and deductive thinking (axial coding). Core overarching categories were then selected (selective coding) to represent key ideas. This coding procedure occurred concurrently throughout the collection of interview data to ensure a constant comparison between emerging themes and data collection. The goal of the analysis was not to uncover any causal relationships, but rather to identify core characteristics or essential features of key phenomena (Charmaz, 2006). The objective was to better understand the features of talent and how WIL programs contributed to participants' talent pipelines.

FINDINGS

It was apparent that talent was an important topic of discussion for participants. They conveyed that developing a talent pipeline was their key concern. A senior executive in the financial industry captured this sentiment in the following way:

The reality is, a bank is a bank is a bank is a bank, the same kind of products and services. The only thing that differentiates the organization is the quality of people and so you know everything we are focused on the talent agenda, so getting the best people you know for the role, so either the right person for an existing vacancy or job, building pipelines for the future.
(P17)

The data suggested what sort of talent it is that employers seek and how their participation in WIL assists in the transition of that talent from higher education institutions to organizations. Specifically, the study reveals two main insights. First, employers' descriptions of talent are consistent with the literature's description of a lifelong learning mindset. That is, employers were searching for lifelong learners. Second, employers found that participation in WIL assisted in the development of a talent pipeline in four ways, which are described below.

Talent as a Lifelong Learning Mindset

Our first goal was to understand what aspects of talent WIL employers sought. While there were nuanced differences across interviews, the unifying theme was that employers sought a lifelong learning mindset. This label is borrowed from the WIL literature, which describes a lifelong learning mindset as "a collection of beliefs and attitudes that amount to a self-directed, persistent, and intrinsically motivated drive for new knowledge" (Sproule, Drewery, & Pretti, 2019, p. 95). Consistent with the literature on lifelong learning, participants desired three aspects of talent: (1) an aptitude for

learning, (2) abilities related to critical thinking, which participants called “fluid intelligence,” and (3) capacity for change, called “adaptability”.

Participants’ descriptions of talented people often referenced an aptitude for learning. Participants were quick to associate talent with phrases such as “thirst for knowledge” (P15) and “aptitude for learning” (P3). Others described this form of talent as “that initiative and that personal motivation to be better” (P6), again referring to an aptitude to learn and to develop. What was desirable to these participants was that students were motivated and ready to learn.

Participants’ descriptions of talent also included a focus on critical thinking, reflection, and problem solving. The transcripts suggest that these ideas were related under a broader label of “fluid intelligence”. This label exists in the data and in the literature, both of which describe fluid intelligence as a process of reflecting on one’s ongoing mental processes to solve complex problems (Sternberg, 1985).

One executive who was keen to hire “critical thinkers” stated that they looked for “people who are excellent problem solvers that are you know, smart, can learn quickly, that are critical in terms of their thinking” (P11). When probed about this topic, this participant described such talented people as having “fluid intelligence” and stated that this was desirable because “we need people that can sort of jump into the role and figure it out”. Similarly, another participant, a campus recruiter, associated this label with notions of critical thinking and problem solving:

[We] hire people that have a high degree of problem solving, meaning fluid intelligence, and one of the reasons we do that is because I would say a lot of organizations probably think the same thing, but you want somebody that can always think outside of the box, and that can really change our organization for the better. (P2)

The third aspect of talent that was particularly desirable to participants was that of adaptability. Participants described that talent as an ability to successfully navigate through change. The perspective shared by a director of campus recruitment for one company captured others’ sentiments in the following way:

Key words for me are flexibility and resiliency to change. So, when we think about talent, well, in the past, you could have, in long term in the past, you could have had a role where you essentially did one role for all of your career. And we look back at that somewhat nostalgically, nowadays, even me. We look at talent as being what core competencies—not individual technical skills, but competencies, individual core competences—does one have that allow them to not only provide value to the, not only to the organization today, but to be able to evolve to the change, flex, whatever words you want to use, to the needs to the organization in the future. (P10)

It is perhaps unsurprising that this was mentioned given that participants often referred to managing change as a challenge in their work. What seemed desirable to participants was the ability of new employees to adapt to changes in the way that work was carried out in the organization. Indeed, there was a real sense among participants that the dynamics of how work was done and carried out were evolving, and that talented people were those with the mindset to adapt to these changes.

Relative Importance of the Lifelong Learning Mindset

Given that participants described talent in terms of “soft skills” (such as aptitude for learning), it was important to determine whether the lifelong learning mindset was a comprehensive representation of employers’ desired talents. The data suggest that the lifelong learning mindset is largely desirable, but that employers also value students’ “hard skills” and experience. One participant mentioned:

It’s not just you know in theory what you’re learning, you actually have some experience behind it whether it’s some kind of co-op placement or some kind of like actual on hand experience, that’s something that definitely helps us a lot. (P16)

This perspective seemed to be prominent among smaller organizations, especially those in the “start-up” community.

Although hard skills and tangible experience were of interest, aspects of the lifelong learning mindset appeared to be the key concern for these talent managers. One participant captured this sentiment in the following way:

Obviously there’s technical competencies and there’s certifications that you need to do specific jobs because you can’t do them if you don’t that particularly in this environment where potentially you need to have a certain qualification to be able to apply for a grant or whatever so we’ve got to be very mindful of that. That said, having a... being able to like collaborate and being able to be civil to your colleagues and all of that stuff is so important because you can’t be successful without that and it is hard for you to be able to assess that. (P12)

Interest in the lifelong learning mindset seemed to be guided by two underlying expectations. The first was that employers felt prepared to train talented students to become technically sound but did not feel confident in training for aspects of the lifelong learning mindset. One talent manager told us that “the technical training is easier to do, like we can give people technical training you know fundamentally your wiring is what your wiring is so it’s hard to train on the softer skills” (P17). For this individual, students were recruited for their mindset and then were trained in technical areas. In a similar fashion, a campus recruiter told us that “the hard skills, those could always be taught and be learned” (P2). A third participant shared the following:

We try to focus on is what are the parts that we won’t be able to train that person on. So, if we need someone who has a really outgoing personality or is really going to fit in with the [...] culture, those are things that we can’t necessarily train [...]. (P16)

These perspectives suggest that talent managers expected that a lifelong learning mindset is difficult to train, and so students who already possessed such a mindset were highly desirable to employers.

The second underlying expectation was that the right technical skills were unavailable. Participants stated that WIL students did not possess the right set of skills to succeed immediately on the job. Rather, the expectation for these participants was that many WIL students had a lifelong learning mindset, which could be leveraged through training to promote success. The strategy of one organization was described in the following way: “we expect to find people with the right mindset, the right enthusiasm, the right skills and a lot of potential and then we invest in those people to show them how to do the job” (P5). Similarly, another participant mentioned:

I think our expectation is that people come in with a really positive attitude and a willingness to learn, and we pair people up with a mentor and that it's going to take them a while to get acclimated, but yeah certainly some of our best engineers here have come in and within the first several weeks are already building a huge piece of our product, and are hitting the ground running. (P1)

A third participant who was looking to recruit sales staff agreed. While students may not have had previous sales training, they could learn to succeed if they had a lifelong learning mindset. That participant told us the following:

I don't expect the university to train a candidate on software as a service sales like, outbound cold calling, I don't think that's a function of university. I think those programs should be available and maybe they are done through colleges or they're done through community groups, like there are other avenues to that. [...] I'm looking at more of the whole person and how you're helping that individual work through problems that they encounter, um, like, can they think critically, um, do they have a high level of empathy so as to understand customer needs, can they learn and adapt quickly, right, like those are the things that I'm most interested in. (P11)

Contributions of WIL to the Talent Pipeline

The second goal for the study was to identify features of WIL programs that support employers' talent pipelines. It was clear that participants felt WIL made an important contribution to their talent pipeline. One participant mentioned that their entire hiring strategy "is based on postsecondary education" and that access to WIL students was a "huge deal" (P13), and another mentioned that participating in WIL has "always been a great resource for us" (P16). These talent managers identified four related themes regarding why that may be the case: (1) WIL prepared students for success, (2) WIL reduces hiring risks, (3) WIL contributes to long-term relationships, and (4) WIL services make hiring easier. Each is described below.

WIL prepares students for success

Participants suggested that the integration of academic and workplace experiences prepared students for success in the workplace. They mentioned that success depended on "relevant coursework and then just offering projects that are relevant to the real world" (P3). The connection between academic studies and work experiences seemed to play a vital role in positioning students as attractive to these employers. One participant stated as much in the following way:

We've just had so much great success with having both the coursework to complement the co-op and vice versa, but if you were to remove that piece I definitely think that there would need to be a lot more hands on, more of a hands on approach in the classroom for students to really, better enhance their skills so that they are ready for the real working world once they graduate. (P2)

WIL reduces hiring risks

There was pressure on these talent managers to hire the right people. WIL was identified as a mechanism for addressing this pressure because it reduced the risk of hiring new employees. It did so because WIL work terms were short in duration and the financial costs of hiring students were lower,

relative to other employee groups. Thus, the consequences of poor performance were minimized. One participant said:

If they [don't work out] it's no risk, I'm not hiring them, they're not, they're only here a couple days a week but they're learning, I'm learning, and sometimes I get a future staff member so it's like a trial run for staff. (P18)

This idea of the "trial run" was common across interviews. WIL provided the opportunity to identify candidates for permanent hires. One participant said that the key was in how WIL allowed for an ability to "see how somebody can integrate into the environment" (P4). Another participant, a human resources manager working in the financial sector, described this idea in the following way:

You get a chance to see people in action so it's like a long, not probationary period, but a bit of a long romance and you really get to see somebody over in a number of different sessions and say "hey, is this somebody that we really want to hire at the end of you know when they're finished all of their work terms?" (P17)

When dynamics between employer and student were unfavorable, students could exit the organization with minimal consequence for the employer.

WIL contributes to long-term relationships

A key focus for these talent managers was on how WIL could bolster the long-term success of their talent pipeline. Of course, as was mentioned earlier, some employers looked for students who could apply technical expertise for short-term gain. However, there was a real sense in the interviews that deeper value was created when students could be socialized more permanently into the organization. In this way, talent managers were leveraging their participation in WIL to create value over the long-term. For one member of a small tech company, this sentiment was particularly clear:

There is a job to get done, so it may be they're working on coding for a particular stream of software, so there's a functional element to it [...] but then there's really establishing the talent pipeline and I think that's really the reason to do co-op. [...] We're now building a talent pipeline whereby, yeah we're gonna' spend eight months or hopefully multiple co-op terms with this individual with the hope that we found a great person that will eventually join our company when they're done, so to me it's really a talent pipeline. (P11)

When we asked participants whether they currently engaged with WIL to build long-term (compared to short-term only) relationships, we got the sense that many were. They were happy to report on the number of students who had started in WIL and were now permanent members of the organization. For instance, a participant from an engineering consulting firm talked about a student who had "done two work terms with us in two different offices and we've actually hired them upon their graduation" (P6). Another participant also said that their organization had students who:

come back for the eight-month placement and they're walking out with a year's [human resources management] experience so we've got entry-level positions or contracts, we're bringing those people back to work with us so that if there's a full-time opportunity (P12).

The prevailing feeling was that employers' ongoing participation in WIL depended in part on whether they could successfully convert students into permanent members of the organization.

WIL services make hiring easier

The themes identified to this point suggest that talent managers found WIL students to be talented, that WIL contributed to those talents, and that WIL reduced risks associated with getting recruitment wrong. Talent managers shared additional insight regarding how WIL programs contribute to the development of their talent pipelines. Interviews suggested that the service delivery system associated with WIL was an important part of this contribution.

Part of this service delivery involved preparing students for success during the recruitment stage. At this University, students are trained on résumé and cover letter writing and interview performance. Endorsement for these services was strong among our participants. One participant shared the following:

I wish all students regardless of whether they were co-op students or not got sort of the co-op drill [...] you know interviewing, job, transitioning into the workplace, how to do good résumés, cover letters, how to work within you know the workplace, you know what do you do if you think that such and such is happening or harassment or that sort of thing. (P18)

These services were endorsed because they simplified the challenge of selecting the right student. Participants felt that “right now you know with someone coming right out of university [...] everyone is looking much the same.” (P11). Because students learned about their own talents, they could better communicate those talents to employers. A director of campus recruitment for a large financial firm shared the following:

I was at [a university] three weeks ago at their political science department and they’re struggling because they don’t have a co-op program so the reality is students coming out of some disciplines going “I have no skills” and I think as soon as you say that there’s a problem and I think the educational institutions have a responsibility to help the students understand that they actually have skills they just don’t see them. (P10)

Participants also reported that the mobilization of staff resources within the WIL program was a program feature that helped transition talent into their organizations. Talent managers expressed that WIL staff were supportive throughout recruitment and into the WIL work term which made participation in WIL easy. For some participants, staff support was as simple as a reminder email. One participant who hired WIL students from multiple institutions enjoyed the communication offered by staff:

I think they already do a really good job so they have like with the placement offices and that sort of thing so I know [several universities] do it and I often get emails from them and I’m aware of sort of the cycles for hiring and having those opportunities so that’s a really positive thing that they can do. (P18)

In other instances, support from staff had a more human touch. Staff were present to solve issues, which provided value to employers’ talent pipelines. One talent manager in a small engineering consulting firm told us the following:

Anytime I’ve got an issue or question or I’m not sure I did something right, [the staff] replies to me so quickly, like the service that your University provided to ensure that bringing a co-op into our company is smooth and as effortless as possible”. (P6).

The support provided by staff allowed employers to better identify, recruit, onboard, and retain talented students.

DISCUSSION

As institutions venture to grow their WIL programs, they will need to consider the needs and challenges of employers (Fleming et al., 2018). Failure to understand why employers participate in WIL and what they need to be successful means that those employers may leave (DeClou et al., 2013). Drawing from the talent pipeline literature, this study identified aspects of talent desired by WIL employers and some features of WIL programs that help employers develop their talent pipelines. It thus informs strategies for WIL administrators to co-create value for employers.

Desired Aspects of Talent

The literature had suggested that talent was a complex concept (Dries, 2013) and that institutions frequently misunderstand what talent means to employers (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). It further suggested that some aspects of talent, often referred to as “soft skills” are particularly important to today’s employers (Finch et al., 2013) yet are undervalued in a traditional academic curriculum. Findings of this study echo the importance of multiple and complex talents to students’ employability and organizational success (McRae et al., 2019).

While experience and technical expertise were appreciated by participants, interviews reinforce the value of the lifelong learning mindset. Talent managers in this study privileged students’ ability to learn, critical thinking (or “fluid intelligence”), and ability to adjust to new demands (or “adaptability”). Concepts surrounding these three aspects of talent are not new. Several recent reports of employers’ needs (e.g., Foundation for Young Australians, 2017; Royal Bank of Canada, 2018; Vu, Lamb, & Willoughby, 2019) refer to these ideas in some way.

This study echoes these reports. Further, it provides an explanation for why a lifelong learning mindset is desirable. The explanation involves two parts. First, talent managers believe that they cannot teach students to develop a lifelong learning mindset but can teach other technical skills. Thus, they seek to recruit for a mindset and train the rest. Whether this perception is an accurate representation of actual organizational capacity is unclear. Future research may examine what efforts organizations are taking to encourage a lifelong learning mindset. Second, talent managers reported difficulty finding specific technical skills within the WIL applicant pool. Consequently, attention during recruitment was on a lifelong learning mindset that could be leveraged during training to ensure other skills would be developed.

It is perhaps no surprise that a lifelong learning mindset would be desirable to employers. Its aspects (aptitude for learning, critical/fluid thinking, adaptability) are frequently identified in the organizational literature as predictors of work performance and other desirable work outcomes (Camps, Oltra, Aldás-Manzano, Buenaventura-Vera, & Torres-Carballo, 2016; Cullen, Edwards, Casper, & Gue, 2014; Nusbaum & Silvia, 2011). However, what became clear in this study was that these forms of talent may be more central to employers’ recruitment efforts in WIL contexts than once thought. One of the goals of WIL is to enhance student employability (Jackson, 2015b). To achieve this goal, greater emphasis may be placed on developing students’ lifelong learning mindsets. This may mean that teaching students how to learn, think “fluidly,” and adapt to change is an essential feature of successful WIL programs.

Whether and how these forms of talent can be enhanced is the debate of some research in educational psychology and organizational studies. For instance, research on the “growth mindset” (a belief that one’s intelligence can change over time) suggests that even trait-like aspects of talent may be influenced by purposeful interventions. DeBacker et al. (2018) found that a single intervention had a modest influence on participants’ implicit beliefs about intelligence and goals associated with learning. Other research suggests that students can be taught to become more resilient to challenges through intentional practices such as mindfulness (McArthur et al., 2017). WIL practitioners may look to these areas of research for ways to enhance WIL students’ lifelong learning mindsets.

Contributions of WIL to the Talent Pipeline

The literature had made clear that employers may derive value from participating in WIL, and that this often involves dynamics related to talent management (Braunstein et al., 2011). Indeed, all organizations must find and recruit talented people in order to succeed (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). It makes sense that employers benefit when their participation in WIL provides access to talented students. A specific insight from the present research is that WIL does more than provide access to talent. WIL programs can be organized intentionally in ways that bolster employers’ talent pipelines.

First, WIL programs support talent pipelines by preparing students to identify and articulate their talents to employers. Because WIL students are trained to highlight skills (e.g., to self-reflect, to write excellent résumés), they make the job of finding the right person easier for recruiters. WIL programs that offer such training then indirectly, through students’ abilities to showcase their own value, provide value to employers. This is an important consideration for those who ask where resources should be allocated within WIL.

Another key contribution that WIL makes is the reduction of risk associated with talent management. Because WIL work terms are brief in nature, they provide employers the opportunity to assess students’ talents before making a significant offer of employment. In cases where the student-employer dynamic is not quite right, students can part ways while gaining experience and employers can avoid costs associated with hiring the ‘wrong’ person.

Conversely, when the relationship is right, employers can invest in WIL students as a way of developing a long-term talent pipeline. This has previously been identified as one reason for why employers are interested in WIL (Braunstein et al., 2011; Hurst et al., 2012). Indeed, employers may onboard students through WIL in order to avoid competition for talent with other organizations.

Finally, supportive staff can make hiring WIL students easier such as when they solve problems for employers. These mechanisms may offer new strategies for WIL programs to grow their offerings, to co-create value for employers, and ultimately to enhance the pedagogical experience and employment outcomes for students.

Directions for Research and Practice

This study informs both researchers and practitioners. With respect to research, there are several limitations of the study that should be addressed in subsequent work. It may not be possible to generalize the findings of this study beyond co-op to other forms of WIL. Although participants were from diverse roles and organizations, all participants worked in organizations that hired co-op students from one university. The extent to which they participated in other WIL programs is unclear. As such, additional research across the spectrum of WIL is warranted to better understand how all different

aspects of WIL contribute to employers' talent pipelines. As one direction, it could be interesting to compare those forms of WIL in which students typically are paid (e.g., co-op) to those in which they are not paid (e.g., internships). Perhaps the dynamics of remuneration play an important role in how organizations use WIL to construct a talent pipeline.

Additional research may also focus on different stages of talent management, or different functions of the talent pipeline. Though not necessarily intentional, interviews in this study focused mostly on talent recruitment. Perhaps by exploring the backgrounds of established and successful employees, research could determine whether WIL plays a role in predicting the long-term success (e.g., performance, tenure) of employees in organizations. While WIL does seem to contribute to competency development (Reddan, 2017) and to the bonds that students build with employers (Drewery et al., 2019), it is unclear how these outcomes unfold over the long-term.

This study also informs WIL practitioners who seek to grow their programs. To grow WIL programs, practitioners might consider employers' expectations for talent. This may begin with helping students to develop a lifelong learning mindset while offering exceptional technical skills training and exposing students to diverse experiences. While the talents that are desired vary between organizations, all employers are looking for people who can solve problems and adapt to new challenges. Practitioners could remind students that employers are looking for such abilities, beyond students' technical skills. Practitioners could then demonstrate how to provide evidence of those abilities to employers.

This finding is also relevant to academic programs. Academic programs aim to develop students' talents but may not be as explicit as they could be about the non-discipline specific outcomes they are targeting in their courses. One recommendation based on this insight is that WIL departments could track which academic courses students have completed and map the learning outcomes of those courses onto a record of skills and competencies. Students could then more easily communicate their talents to employers. This could help students to self-promote their value and could generate better matches between students and employers.

Practitioners should also recognize that there are specific mechanisms that could assist employers in accessing talented people. The service that they provide to employers seems central to WIL employers' ongoing participation in WIL. Delivering exceptional service is therefore of critical importance. WIL staff could leverage these insights in their service delivery by supporting employers in preparing job advertisements. The recruitment phase is an opportunity for employers to showcase what they are looking for and what they offer to students. Practitioners then could coach employers in how to highlight desired skills, details of the job, and organizational values and culture, while also communicating what they offer to talented students.

Service continues beyond the recruitment phase, too. Practitioners should consider the best ways to support students and employers during WIL work experiences to ensure optimal learning, engagement, and contribution. Our study indicates that employers rely on the support of the academic institution if issues arise. Thus, practitioners should communicate to employers the services they provide in this regard. As well, WIL programs should examine how they can provide support to students and employers in their pursuit of a longer-term relationships. For example, academic institutions, with the permission of students, could provide reports to employers about previously hired students who are approaching graduation.

This paper offers several examples of mechanisms that can be intentionally planned and managed for the benefit of WIL employers. The goal is to make participating in WIL easy for these employers, in a

way that highlights the value of that participation. If that can be done, WIL programs will no doubt continue to grow in ways that benefit students, institutions, and employers alike.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues dealing with Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE). Since then the readership and authorship has become more international and terminology usage in the literature has favored the broader term of WIL, in 2018 the journal name was changed to the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning.

In this Journal, WIL is defined as "*an educational approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum. Defining elements of this educational approach requires that students engage in authentic and meaningful work-related task, and must involve three stakeholders; the student, the university, and the workplace*". Examples of practice include off-campus, workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (Co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, etc. WIL is related to, but not the same as, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's main aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is ongoing financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ), www.nzace.ac.nz and the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and received periodic sponsorship from the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) and the World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE).

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily of two forms; 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider best practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Best practice and program description papers. On occasions, the Journal also seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of best practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.



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