Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 18:	Being on a work placement or starting your first job during the pandemic
Speakers:	Dr Matthew Davis and Dr Helen Hughes

Matthew:	Hello, I'm Dr Matthew Davis, I'm an associate professor in organisational psychology here at Leeds University Business School.
Helen:	And I'm Helen Hughes. I'm also an associate professor here in Leeds University Business School, and I'm also an organisational psychologist.
Matthew:	And welcome to Leeds University Business School's Research and Innovation Podcast. Today, Helen and myself, we're going to be talking about all of the changes which are going on in the world of work at the moment: future offices, virtual working, and, in particular, thinking about the effect on younger workers and our own students who are going into work placements or their first jobs at the moment as well. Big topic, lots of disruption thanks to COVID-19 and we thought it would be useful just to set the scene a moment here.
	So, just thinking about what we have seen over the last year that we've had the pandemic, we've gone from a situation where about 12% of workers in the UK were working regularly from home to a point where, during the first lockdown in March, 44% of the working population were working from home the week the ONS were surveying. And we've seen over time that that proportion of people working consistently from home, remotely, virtually from their teams and their co-workers has been fairly static as well. So, this seems to be something that is holding up.
	Now, we know there are probably all sorts of implications of that, both in terms of how we communicate with colleagues, what it means to be line managed, thinking about that experience of being at work. But what does it really mean for people who are new to the workplace? Maybe who have never had a job before? Helen, I know this is a real area of interest for you. You lead on this within the Business School, do you want to tell us a bit more about that and your thoughts on this?

Helen: Yes, thanks Matt. So, as you say, I'm involved in the placement system that we have here in the university and in the Business School, and we have, every year, around 200 students from the Business School alone, plenty more across the university more widely, who go out into industry for a year. And for a great number of those, they have not held a long term position before, may have had some ad hoc work, but very often this is the first real exposure to a workplace. And they get an awful lot out of this experience, so, you know, they build work relationships, they get involved in a huge variety of different projects, and throughout their placement or internship, they develop across a wide range of competencies. And that obviously then stand them in great stead for a future graduate role, and so on.

So, we know that students generally who do an internship have improved graduate outcomes for all sorts of reasons related to what they get from their internship. So, we know that they are more likely to get a job more quickly, they are more likely to get a higher paying job, they are more likely to enjoy the job that they come to get as a graduate because they've got some experience of what they like and don't like and so on. But I think, as you say, what is so different and interesting at the moment with the situation with COVID-19 is that our students this year, for the first time, largely, are working predominantly from home. If they haven't done that throughout the placement, they have at least done it for a really good chunk of it, either starting the placement working from home or working remotely, or going in and out of lockdowns, as we've seen in the UK over the last, you know, eight, nine months.

So, I think all of that has huge implications for the way students experience a placement because, as you pointed out, you know, one of the first things is that… I mean we can all identify with the idea that it would be really difficult to start a new job, as so many people are, you know… having to do at the moment, it must be really, really difficult to start a new job in a pandemic where you're expected to work from home. But I think the issue with placements and internships is that this is particularly salient because it is magnified by the fact that students have often never worked before. So, all of the kind of things that you gradually learn about what is okay, what is not okay, how you work, how you navigate the workplace, you get a lot of cues from that kind of work environment, I think. You know, so you see what people wear, you see how they are dressed, you see how

they work with each other, you see how their enter meetings, how they prepare. And all of that is kind of lost, I think, if you're working from home, you don't see how people are preparing and what is involved in that.

Matthew: That's really interesting, Helen. Really, really interesting. So, I think if we think… so, as psychologists, I guess, we take it for granted about the role of that social learning and the observation, and particularly within organisations of understanding what the culture might be like, and getting a sense of that and that kind of informal key recognition, as you were saying. But I wonder, so… I guess for students who haven't experienced the world of work before, I guess this virtual working is essentially normal, isn't it? This is what work is to them, they don't have a reference point of, "I would normally have a desk and I would have the opportunity for a coffee break, or this is the way that things would work." So, I wonder how that feeds into it. Is this… maybe this is less disruptive if you don't have that prior experience, what do you think?

Helen: Yes. I mean I think you could be right. And I mean obviously this is stuff that we need to understand and learn. I mean, I have regular drop in clinics, virtually, at the moment, with our placement students and I'm hearing first hand from them about some of the challenges that they are facing at the moment, which I know, obviously, you and I are going to develop into more of a research project in itself. But I think the students, what they are telling me is difficult are some of the parameters around their work environment because, as you say, we would typically… you know, you enter a workplace for the first time, you do a lot of that learning in the workplace.

For a lot of our students, and perhaps for the first time, they haven't moved to a new city, for instance, to do their work. They are based in their original student accommodation with their housemates that they have lived with for however long. And so, they are telling me… or some of them are telling me that, you know, their social network, if you like, is still their university friends. And they just go to work, they just drop into these meetings and do the work they have been asked to do, a bit like they would a university project, in a sense. That is clearly not the case for everyone, and actually I think there are also some quite interesting ways that some organisations are dealing with this.

So, I heard, for instance, at least one quite major player in… has got some of their students to live together, so they had like a kind of… almost like a speed dating kind of Zoom call right at the start where all the interns met one another, and then they… met one another and then they were put into shared housing. So, they have moved cities and they are now living with people that work for the same organisation as them. And I think that potentially has… these kinds of strategies are probably really good ones in helping students to build a sense of community in the workplace that then transcends out into the home environment as well. So, I think there are these kinds of creative things you can do, and are doing.

Matthew:	That's interesting, isn't it, Helen, but I wonder how many people would welcome that level of control or intrusion, maybe, into their domestic lives. I guess if you're moving and so on and you're freshers maybe there is more of an opportunity for this than… I think my wife would have a thing to say if I had been told who to live with at this point. But hearing you talk like that, Helen, I think it's interesting when we look at what we know from the existing literature and the research that has been done, looking at home working and virtual working, that has predominantly been conducted with people who have either been working for a company for a period of time and then been made a virtual worker.

So, they already knew how the company worked and had relationships. Or it's a company that is set up for this and they had very clearly onboarding in place, and typically the workers who have been recruited in for these virtual roles have already got work experience. I think the group we're talking about here are quite different. But when I think about some of the findings we have from the wider literature, we know there is a danger of people who work remotely or from home for long periods feeling that they are more professionally isolated, and that they miss out on networking opportunities and so on, and that it affects how they share information, doesn't it, and knowledge?

And I guess the worry here might be that if you're more junior, you're even more reliant on those social interactions that kind of sharing of knowledge from people who have got more experience as well for that learning part. And I wonder how much this will have an impact, with the best will in the world, of having maybe social groups or support groups, that lack of in the office, overhearing conversations, the chance to observe maybe your

more experienced peers and how they approach work, what the impact will be on career development. And I wonder, because you have conducted research, haven't you, Helen, in the past looking at social networks in careers and things like this. Have you got any tips, maybe, for students or people who are starting out in their careers at the moment, of ways they can try to build their networks and their relationships whilst we're in this situation?

Helen: Yes. I mean, I think a couple of the things that students are telling me at the moment they have found useful is to just make themselves known to people. I think there is a temptation to sort of creep into work and creep away as a student intern anyway, because, you know, you can be quite shy about what you're bringing to the organisation and it can be difficult to intrude, or feel like you're intruding, on existing networks. So, I think making yourself known, you know, sort of sending those introductory emails and trying to introduce yourself to people is really, really important. But I think there is a danger that… there has got be a reason for that contact.

So, people, particularly in COVID, everyone is really squeezed for time, so finding a way… you know, what can you do for someone else, rather what you can do for me, I think is an important part of this building of trust and careers and so on. So, I think being visible is one thing, but actually thinking about what you can offer to people in your organisation and to others is also very helpful. Lots of organisations have their tools and techniques, so they will have the kind of… the teams set up and so on, so I think those things can also facilitate this kind of stuff. And I think, you know, primarily, trying to build that relationship with line managers and immediate colleagues is probably part of what is necessary as well.

But I think, crucially, you know, we just don't know. I think at the moment we can take lessons from these different programmes of work that you and I and others have already got, but I think what is going to be really important is to think about the importance of understanding more about this in the coming months and years, and taking advantage, if you like, of the situation for the opportunities it brings us to understand more about this topic. So, I know you and I, for instance, are going to be building on our own separate programmes of work to, kind of, think about what we can learn from our current students, you know, thinking about, you know, are there differences in those

who have worked from home from day for the entire year versus people that maybe started in the workplace and have now become remote workers? So, I know there are things we can do to track that and learn, and I think that has really got to be the next thing for us.

Matthew: We're almost out of time. I think one I would just add before we start to wrap things up is just, I think, you kind of hinted at this, Helen, in terms of being explicit, I think, as well. So, I think a lot of the implicit or the more subtle requests for help or what have you have that we have when we're face to face and non-verbal communication is missing when we're online. So, I think one of the pieces of advice I think would have for students is being confident in asking for help and making requests of colleagues and supervisors when there is something you don't know, or you'd like to get involved in something. I think if the research more widely tells us anything, it's the need to really manage those relationships more and be explicit about requests for knowledge and information also. So, I think those who are passive tend to end up being out of sight and out of mind which can be difficult.

But, as you said, Helen, we've got work ongoing and there is an opportunity, particularly if you are an employer and you are recruiting placement students into your organisation or, more generally, you have been involved in the recruitment of workers during the pandemic and getting them onboarded whilst you have been working virtually, we would love to hear from you. Our contact details are at the bottom of the project pages, and information for the… at the bottom of the podcast. And equally, if you're a student in the Business School at the moment there will be an opportunity to share your experiences whilst you've been on placement and you can get in touch with Helen if you'd like to hear more about that. So, with that I'd just like to say thank you very much for listening to today's episode.

Helen: We'd love to hear from you, and thank you for listening.