

Work placements

There are a number of companies that work directly with language travel agencies, as well as with language schools and universities, to offer work experience placements to students. For agents, this could be another business avenue, says AMY BAKER.

Many agents report that work experience programmes represent one of their fastest growing business sectors. “This year, I have wondered what to do to match these [requirements],” says Renato Andrioli, Branch Manager of STB São José dos Campos in Brazil. “I also wonder why we don’t have good [opportunities] for this market, which has been growing faster and faster each year.”

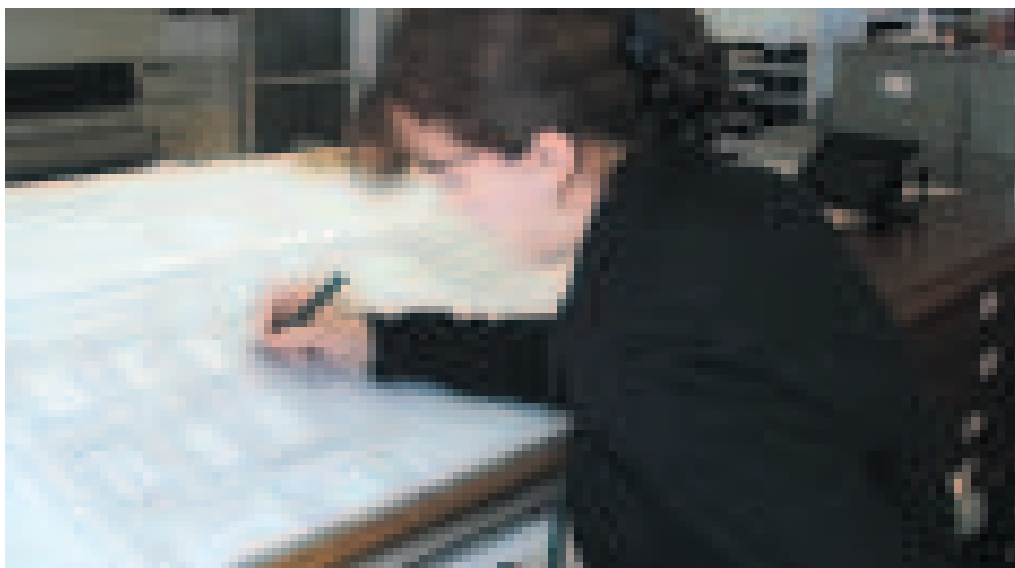
Rebecca Natapof, of Lenguas Educational Counseling in Argentina, adds, “Approximately 60 per cent of clients ask for [work experience] and the problems we are faced with is that sponsors are not able to provide enough jobs.”

One solution could come in the form of work experience or internship placement agencies, which operate separately from language schools overseas, although sometimes in partnership with them. There are a considerable number of these companies around the world offering to organise salaried or unpaid placements to overseas students.

An advantage for agents in using such companies is that they can cater for clients who don’t need or require language training prior to their work placement. As Paula Devries, Manager of Trident Transnational in the UK, explains, “The English course makes the programme more expensive than necessary. An agency like ours can offer full-time work experience placements at a lower cost.”

Keith Locker, from Eagle UK Work Experience Programme, adds that students are able to work full-time if they go directly through his agency, instead of part-time, referring to the fact that some language schools’ own work experience programmes require students to attend classes during the week. Devries adds that if required, “We can enrol applicants on a part-time English course in the evening hours at additional cost.”

Another advantage of using work experience providers is their experience in the field. Many organisations have been in business for a number of years and have strong relationships with a wide range of companies, as well as a watertight knowledge of regulations and the visa issuing system. Devries points out that all their employers are checked for health and safety arrangements, while at Exchange Training Communication International (ETCI) in the UK, programmes are accredited by the



University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. “This enables all students participating in our programmes to apply for an International Work Experience Certificate issued by the examination board,” explains Dominique Tuckett, International Business Director at ETCI.

Many established work experience organisers offer overseas agents a commission for referring their clients to them. Di Pilling, Managing Director of Australian Internships in Australia, explains that they offer a basic 20 per cent commission, although there is an agent incentive scheme that offers higher rates based on larger numbers. At ETCI, a similar commission rate is offered to overseas agencies. “Seventy-five per cent of our placements are from agencies abroad, 20 per cent are from UK language schools and five per cent from universities abroad,” says Tuckett.

InterExchange in the USA offers commission on some programmes, while for others, its partner agencies add a fee to the net price of a package. Students are advised to approach these agencies directly on the InterExchange website. Indeed, most students are not eligible to enrol on a programme without having attended an orientation and interview session beforehand in their home country, explains InterExchange’s Paul Christianson.

In the case of Trident Transnational, Devries says, “Being a charity, we cannot offer agencies a commission. We charge the

minimum amount we need in order to run and develop our placement programme.” She points out, however, that agencies are welcome to raise the fees on their side.

Devries ventures, “Most applicants are willing to pay some extra, because they have the benefit of dealing with an organisation in their own country, speaking their own language.” Trident Transnational works with about 50 agencies, mostly based in Europe, as well as Japan and the USA.

There can be problems when placing students in work placements, of course. One key concern is always visa issuance, and this can depend on the country the student is from and the country where they intend to work. In the UK, Locker explains that while nationals from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) are eligible for work experience under the UK’s Training and Work Experience Scheme (TWES), they need to be paid in accordance with national minimum wage regulations, which means employers can be reluctant to take them on. “[These] work permits are difficult and time consuming to obtain,” he says. “For us, it is not a viable proposition. With 10 more countries set to join the European Union (EU) in the next year, we receive sufficient applications from within the community already for this not to be a problem.”

Devries agrees that it can be harder for non-EEA nationals wanting to undertake a work placement in the UK. “Many employers

Successful orientation

Agents stress that it is important to point out to students doing a work placement that it is, in many cases, a cultural and linguistic experience and not an obvious first step on the career path. "Agencies play an important role in educating their potential students/clients for this kind of work experience," says Ivonne Navas from Latin American Links, part of Latin American Associations of Canada. "Agents must... make it clear, with a bit of humour, that the positions of president, director and manager are taken in virtually all of the companies where they will be doing their placement."

This is a common theme voiced by agents and providers active in this field. "Common problems are unrealistic expectations [from the] students," agrees Milena Langer of GLS in Germany. Di Pilling, of Australian Internships in Australia, adds, "One issue is making sure interns' expectations are realistic."

To try and minimise problems, the work experience organisers take care to ensure that students know exactly what to expect from their experience. "We do an initial telephone interview with the candidate upon enrolment and give them advice on possibilities based on the impression we have of their skills

and expectations," says Paula Devries at Trident Transnational in the UK. "We also encourage applicants to show initiative and suggest tasks they could or would like to do [once in their placement]."

Australian Internships in Australia has a similar approach. "We take time to ensure that there is a good match for the intern and the employer and often arrange telephone or videoconference interviews so that both parties have an opportunity to discuss any issues prior to making the final arrangements," says Pilling. She says they also ascertain if a candidate has the appropriate level of English by asking for Toefl or IELTS results. "We do also issue tests that have been prepared by our language partners to assist in measuring the language level," says Pilling. "Our processes are quite developed and we have a client services officer in contact with each of the interns prior to the internship and then at least every fortnight."

Some agents, such as Milena Langer, Programme Manager of Internships at GLS in Germany, say they prefer to work with language schools offering these programmes, rather than placement agencies. However, while this may continue to be a significant feature of the work experience market, Langer adds that they are beginning to explore new avenues working with providers directly. "We have started to work with an agency that is mainly an internship provider, but also organises language courses with a local school. This should be an interesting way to build up internship programmes in the future," she says. □

What is available?

There are a wide range of work experience programmes available around the world – both paid and unpaid. Typical placements can include jobs in areas that match a student's career interests or basic positions in retail or service industries or at a summer camp, which allow programme participants to earn some money and perhaps travel around the country at a later date.

Career-oriented placements can be paid and may be subject to the discretion of the employer. Paula Devries at Trident Transnational in the UK says that, in her experience, employers are willing to look into allowances, such as money to cover lunch and travel, and raise the amount or offer wages when the candidate has proven their

capabilities. "We have seen this development in a growing number of work placements for European candidates," she says.

Dominique Tuckett at ETCI in the UK explains what they can offer: "For over 10 years, we have specialised in organising professional non-salaried work placements and hotel salaried work placements for international students," she says. Last year, ETCI added a new product to its range, the Holiday Village, which is a salaried work placement programme. "This programme takes place in some of the biggest and best known holiday parks in the UK," explains Tuckett.

She points out that ETCI is a specialist in its field, with a wide range of contacts among employers.

"We work closely with UK language schools that... choose to come to ETCI because of our expertise in this field and our reputation for finding the most unusual work placement, such as topography, dental technician, lab assistant and dietician." Keith Locker of Eagle UK similarly points out, "Eagle UK has arranged over 5,000 placements since 1986 in virtually every sector of British industry and commerce."

According to agents, popular fields of interest for work experience include tourism and environment-related jobs, as well as engineering and business administration, and the most popular destinations for placements are Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK.

we have dealt with are reluctant to get involved in work permit arrangements when they can have EU applicants, even if we process the whole application on their behalf," she says. However, she acknowledges that they do deal with a small number of non-EEA clients and "a growing number of [such] applicants now find their own placement and ask us to process their TWES permit." And at ETCI, Tuckett says, "In the last few years, we have expanded our business with non-EEA agencies."

Elsewhere, work experience organisers stress that their experience in the field usually means few visa problems. Pilling in Australia says, "We are the only internship programme approved by the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs for the 416 (special program) visa for a period of up to 12 months, and we are still managing 100 per cent [success] with visas."

At InterExchange in the USA, overseas students are promised the documentation and support necessary for obtaining a J-1 visa and Christianson says, "For work programmes that have been regulated by the US State Department, the level of visa refusal will be in the single digits." His company has had some visa rejections from East Asian countries, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, and some from Eastern Europe, but in this latter case, the rejection rate "is still less than five per cent".

As President of the new Global Work Experience Association (GWEA) launched by

Fiyto, Christianson is well placed to comment on the growth of the work experience sector. His own company offers placements as camp counsellors, au pairs, entry-level employees in a range of fields, and interns and trainees in business environments. "The industry has mushroomed over the last few years," he says. "A few years ago, it was hard to find a handful of organisations [willing to form an association]. Now there are hundreds of organisations interested in some form of, as we call it, life experiential programmes."

Christianson further underlines that for some nationalities, notably Eastern Europeans, work experience programmes represent a unique opportunity to travel abroad because students can earn some funds while undertaking their programme – he points out they might not otherwise be able to consider travel overseas. "I think our experience last year is somewhat indicative [of the buoyancy of the sector]," he says, "and we saw an 18 per cent increase in overall growth last year."

For agents in any country, work experience programmes are an ideal opportunity to build business. In an impoverished economic climate, paid work placements are an attractive prospect for clients who might not otherwise be able to afford to travel overseas. In any developed market where language skills are high, work experience programmes can significantly add to an already accomplished CV and enhance a student's life experience.