

Win-win

Careful planning leads to great outcomes for Shepparton employer and student



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Dean Rochfort

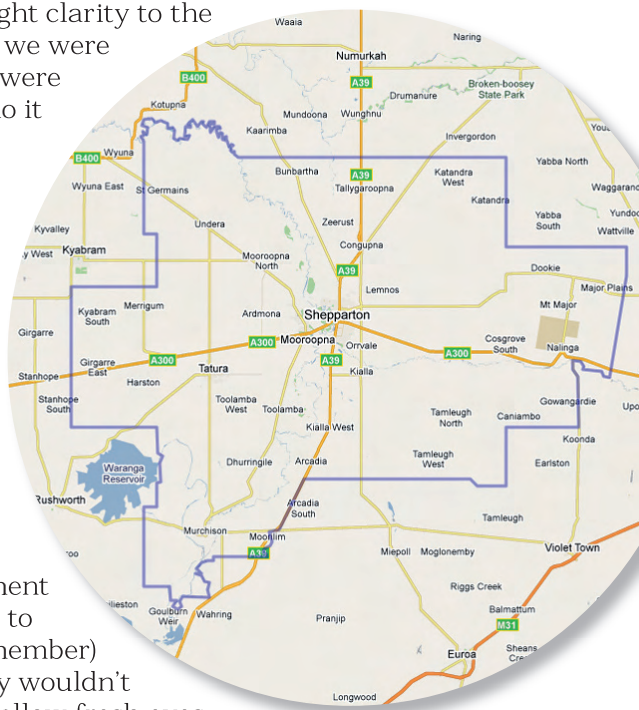
When the Greater Shepparton City Council trialled a new workplace integrated learning (WIL) initiative from La Trobe University, it first worked closely with the university to develop the project and set boundaries and methodologies that the student would work with. The project they agreed was one where the student, Geraldine Christou (who is completing a Bachelor of Business at La Trobe University’s Shepparton campus and is also an employee of the Council), would conduct a 12-week review of the decision-making processes around annual budgeting. It involved observing and working with the most senior executives of the Council, sitting in meetings with councillors and discussing strategically important matters such as rate rises and debt levels. The review also examined how the information then cascaded through the organisation to other levels.

General Manager – Sustainable Development of Greater Shepparton City Council, Dean Rochfort, who mentored the student, said the process of working with her lecturer brought clarity to the placement. “We all knew what we were getting into, we knew what we were doing and we knew we would do it justice,” said Dean.

Part of that process involved discussions around the Council’s willingness to be open in its dealings with the student. “We had to allow Geraldine to have insight into the inner workings of Council, plus we had to commit to making the time available for mentor/mentee meetings.”

The Greater Shepparton City Council viewed the WIL placement as a great opportunity not only to expose the student (and staff member) to areas of Council activity they wouldn’t normally get to see but also to allow fresh eyes to look at how Council was doing business. “We saw it as a win-win – a development opportunity for the student and, for us, an (almost) internal consultancy opportunity,” said Dean.

The WIL student enjoyed a very open process including attending a number of confidential briefings that staff would not usually be privy to. “Geraldine sat in on the meetings and heard many sensitive and political discussions. She could see things happening within those meetings that reflected a range of management practice frameworks that she was studying as part of her course,” Dean said.



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The course work involved examining case studies that students would compare with their workplace learning. This led to Dean and Geraldine having conversations around how the Council's processes compared to the theory. "We discussed our alignment with contemporary best practice in the area of integrated management and we found that there was room for improvement in our processes. As executives we don't always take time to reflect

and consider the system so it was a great opportunity for me to remove myself from the day-to-day stuff and look at things differently. Actually, that was quite a luxury," Dean admitted.

Dean said the experience was valuable for the Council, the student and the university: "To date we've focussed on students who are already within the organisation and who we support through professional development

but we are certainly open to bringing people fresh into the organisation and establishing WIL as a pathway to employment. It provided benefits for all parties and we would be interested in being involved again."

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Greater Shepparton City Council is a member of the Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Success factors for WIL

Dean Rochfort said several factors contribute to a successful WIL placement:

- The organisation has to be willing to reveal itself to the student "warts and all" and be brave about that.
- There needs to be a high degree of trust between the mentor and student so they can have deeper, robust conversations about what the organisation is doing and what the student's observations are.
- The organisation must ensure that there is regular time set aside for the mentor and student to jointly review progress.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and Innovative Research Universities (IRU) are working in partnership to assist small, medium and large businesses to participate in work integrated learning programs. IRU members are: Charles Darwin University, Flinders University, Griffith University, James Cook University, La Trobe University, Murdoch University and The University of Newcastle. Participating ACCI members are: ACT and Region Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Business SA, Chamber of Commerce and Industry Northern Territory, Chamber of Commerce and Industry Queensland, Chamber of Commerce and Industry Western Australia, NSW Business Chamber, Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

For more information on WIL partnerships for employers please go to:
www.iru.edu.au/group-activities/wil or www.acci.asn.au