



Expert Opinion - Edition 5

Virtual Work Experience: a lifeline for career-starters

As The 5% Club outlined recently in its paper *We can't let our young people bear the economic brunt of COVID-19*¹, one of the most severe long-lasting impacts of the pandemic could turn out to be its reduction of social mobility and of the future prospects of a generation of young people in the UK. An example of this is the access to those all-important work experience opportunities for those about to make their career choice.

Indications are that recruitment for internship and work experience opportunities has dramatically reduced as businesses respond to the impact of COVID-19 and social distancing restrictions remain in place, with surveys showing that the number of UK internships available has fallen by 64% in the past 12 months².

That's why virtual work experience has become the new lifeline for young people looking to explore industries to work in, boost their employability and take their first tentative steps on their chosen career ladder. Inversely, it's also a new essential for all employers trying to find ways to create and deliver their own programmes.

The 5% Club member, Pinsent Masons, has offered a successful virtual programme since September 2019, which has been accessed by almost 5,000 participants from nearly 300 different schools and universities from across the globe. The average participant rating of the programme is 4.79 out of 5.

Deborah McCormack, Head of Early Talent at Pinsent Masons shares their top tips for those looking to set up their own schemes.

Q. What made Pinsent Masons first set up its virtual work experience programme?

Our colleagues in Australia had already worked with an innovative new tech-focused company called *Inside Sherpa* to build and launch an Australian virtual legal work experience programme. The team in Oz were infectiously enthusiastic about their programme. Learning from their experience, and building on that success, our Early Talent team was keen to create and launch our own virtual programme which could be delivered to students globally.

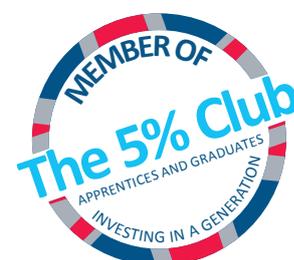
With support and contributions from across our business, the Inside Sherpa team's expertise and the creativity of our Early Talent team, we successfully designed and launched our first open access programme in September 2019. The programme was instantly successful, with a high volume of students enrolling and completing the modules.

When the COVID-19 pandemic fully hit the UK, we quickly recognised that delivering our 'traditional' in-house Summer Vacation Placements was not going to be possible. Having created a virtual programme already, we were in a fantastic position to move quickly, expediting a business case to build a bespoke virtual programme specifically for our 2020 summer intake. The business liked that idea and so we quickly set to work to design and build that programme – which launched on 22 June.



¹ <https://www.5percentclub.org.uk/we-cant-let-our-young-people-bear-the-economic-brunt-of-covid-19/>

² Glassdoor, May 2020



Q. What are the benefits for Pinsent Masons and the wider industry?

Virtual work experience has a number of benefits. Most importantly for us, it has the potential to democratise access to legal, or really any kind of work experience, which historically has been challenging for students to secure. The demand for in-office legal placements far exceeds the number of opportunities on offer. That's frustrating for pupils and students keen to gain insight into a profession they may want to qualify into.

Despite best intentions, law firms and in-house teams in larger commercial organisations, find it increasingly challenging to manage the high volumes of work experience requests. These come via individual candidates, on behalf of schools, universities and clients. As a result, the most fair and transparent approach is to adopt a robust application and assessment process.

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One of the key benefits of open access virtual work experience lies in its accessibility. And that's incredibly helpful in widening and diversifying the talent pool, providing the opportunity to gain insight and experience into the type of work a trainee might be doing day to day. Whether you live in a rural area, are struggling with travel expenses to get into a city-based office, have caring responsibilities or other employment commitments which preclude you from participating in a conventional work experience programme, virtual offerings overcome many obstacles. Virtual opportunities give students the chance to try their hand in multiple sectors and organisations, building different skills and knowledge along the way.

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Firms spend a lot of time in the design and build of their programmes. They are an easy way for candidates and their parents to peek behind the corporate curtains, getting a sense of employers', culture, clients and work. Technology becomes a great enabler, opening the world of legal and other work experience to more candidates than has ever been possible before.

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Q. How does your virtual work experience work, in a nutshell?

We are currently running two types of programme. The first is open access, which anyone can enrol for. It's really straightforward. Candidates access the programme from our early talent website, create a profile then work through the pre-recorded content about the firm and the available tasks. There are explanatory instructions for each of the tasks which candidates can complete. We've used the model of a mock matter to provide a realistic experience and access to different practice areas. Candidates are asked to undertake exactly the types of task our trainees would be getting involved in day to day. Once they complete tasks, model answers are available for them to compare their own efforts against.

The second type of programme is the more bespoke virtual internship. This has been designed to replace our in-house summer placement for undergraduate students. This programme requires candidates to apply and be assessed in advance because our placements are part of the pipeline for future trainee solicitor recruitment. This virtual programme tries to replicate, as best we can, the experience our summer vacation students would get if they joined us in the office. Examples include a live intro and Q&A with our Senior Partner, personal welcomes from each of our Office Heads, a commercial awareness workshop, resilience & wellbeing training, a due diligence workshop and virtual social events to help the students network and get to know each other. It's a blend of live, facilitated content, alongside curated, pre-recorded sessions and set tasks. We were mindful that some students will have other commitments so the programme is designed to be flexible, so students can work through the content at their own pace.

Q. Are those on the programme assigned a dedicated mentor or point of contact they can speak to and ask questions of?

Yes, for the bespoke virtual internship. Students are paired up with trainee buddies and qualified solicitor mentors in exactly the same way they would be if they were completing their placement in the office. They also have access to the Early Talent team to answer questions and provide on-going support, information and feedback.

On the open access programme, we don't have the capacity to allocate mentors, but candidates enrolling can ask questions of our Early Talent team.

Q. How many students do you have on each intake and what dictates that number?

So far over 4,000 students have enrolled on our open access programme, and counting! The sky is the limit on this - accessibility is key. On the virtual internship, as mentioned, that's a 'gated' programme to which students had to apply and be interviewed. This year we have around 100 students participating in that programme.

Q. How do you ensure that those on the programme have a meaningful experience, given the lack of face-to-face interaction and the fact that they aren't going into the office environment?

We were very thoughtful about the design of the programme when considering the constituent parts of what makes a great work experience programme. We recognise that nothing will perfectly replicate the excitement and butterflies of putting on smart office clothes, attending meetings, being taken out for lunch or a coffee by your mentor or socialising with other interns. However, we've tried to include every aspect of a conventional programme, including the social element, and build that in. Another benefit of virtual is that all students can access the same materials and examples of work, so it's a consistent approach.

Q. How important is it for those on the programme to get a real flavour of the company's culture and how do you make sure they can do that virtually?

That's fundamental. Every interaction we have with potential recruits is an opportunity for us to demonstrate who we are as a collegiate team and firm, what we do professionally and technically for clients, and how we do it. Our values are about being 'Approachable, Bold and Connected'. Those elements of the firm's purpose have been very much front of mind when designing our virtual programmes. That's why we have worked with colleagues from across the

business to capture their contributions and various approaches. Students are exposed to lots of different people and insights as a result.

Q. Do you provide additional material, such as video tutorials and support on developing the softer skills such as communication and office etiquette?

So far, we have built in sessions on resilience and wellbeing, commercial awareness and assessment hints and tips. We are still very new to the world of virtual work experience, so no doubt in the future, we'll be looking at including more of these types of soft skills sessions to add even more value for our students. We'll also be asking them what they'd like to see built in, to continuously improve and evolve our virtual offering.

Q. How much work do you put in before the work experience starts in terms of making sure students are aware of what's expected of them and what they will get out of the experience?

For the virtual internship we had a lot of upfront communication with our placement students to sign-post what we were planning and how it would work. This culminated in a pre-launch event to road-test the technology for the participants before the formal live launch. Fail to prepare, prepare to fail, as they say! The students appreciated the flow of comms and that contact certainly helps to calm pre-programme jitters. It also helps students get to know the key contacts within our Early Talent team. Again, the students appreciate the approachability and accessibility of the team to help answer queries and allay any concerns.

Q. How do students get feedback on their performance and how are their achievements marked?

For the open access programme, we use model answers which students can compare their completed work against and learn from. For the virtual internship, we are very deliberately not 'assessing' or formally observing the students via the virtual programme. There is a separate assessment process for future training contracts which these students will undertake. Their performance during those assessments is what we will consider when making offers for training contracts. Usually, colleague feedback would form a part of the overall assessment process, but we felt that might not be fair this year given the unusual circumstances.

Thank you so much to Deborah for sharing her thoughts and experiences on this topic.

For further editions of Expert Opinion please visit our website: www.5percentclub.org.uk

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