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## From in-office to virtual: Workplaces are adapting co-op placements to employ students remotely

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Two months into a coveted co-op placement at Royal Bank of Canada, creative-advertising student Jeanelle Suarez was given a laptop and sent home when the COVID-19 threat closed offices across the country. Although Ms. Suarez was not a permanent employee at the time, the bank kept her on – providing support by way of online training, mentorship and a crash course in adaptability.

The shift to virtual work in mid-March was fairly smooth for Ms. Suarez, who produced content for RBC Global Asset Management. But the accelerated pace of work, due to voracious client demand for information during the pandemic, came as a jolt.

“We would often turn it around that same day. That was where I felt the biggest transition,” says Ms. Suarez, who was recently hired for a full-time position with RBC as a digital marketing and analytics co-ordinator.

Given the dismal job market, especially for new graduates, Ms. Suarez considers herself fortunate.

RBC had already extended more than 1,000 summer job offers to students pre-pandemic – and then committed to taking on an additional 400 when it became apparent that so many other organizations were forced to cancel their summer internship programs, Jenny Poulos,

senior vice-president of talent services and operations, said in an interview. “We decided to proceed ... our goal was that we deliver an exceptional virtual experience, especially during these times.”

RBC delivered high-end laptops to all its summer students to ensure consistent technical access. Chief executive officer David McKay, who kicked off previous summer programs with massive town hall meetings in Toronto, instead connected remotely with students around the globe from his living room.

The ease with which this digitally-savvy generation is able to communicate, collaborate, generate ideas and produce quality work, entirely online, has been instructive and “will help us shape the future of work” at RBC, said Ms. Poulos, who has already recruited co-op students for the fall and winter as part of the bank’s continuing commitment to developing new talent.

While RBC is still taking on students, co-op co-ordinators at campuses across the country recognize that many of the employers they traditionally rely on for placements have been hit hard by the pandemic.

“Within a 10-day span in March, 48 internships were indefinitely postponed. Students were devastated, [workplace] supervisors were devastated, we were devastated,” says Colleen Whyte, an associate professor in the faculty of applied health sciences at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont.

Typically, Prof. Whyte’s therapeutic-recreation students gain hands-on workplace experience at rehabilitation centres, hospitals, long-term care facilities and other venues that physically treat patients and clients. Work placements cancelled over the spring and summer to contain the potential spread of COVID-19 are gradually being restored as treatment centres ease their restrictions and let students back in, Prof. Whyte said in an interview.

But, like RBC’s Ms. Poulos, Prof. Whyte is also looking to the future and the exciting new possibilities emerging in the realm of virtual work. This past summer, Ability Online, a charity that provides online support to youth and young adults with disabilities, actually increased its intake of interns because demand for its services was exploding. “It was the perfect partnership in the moment of need,” Prof. Whyte said.

Her graduating students needed the work term to earn their degrees and Ability Online’s 7,500 members, isolated in their homes, needed the contact and support they would normally get through face-to-face community programs and services.

While the charity has been connecting with its members online for 30 years, “it’s a new way of doing things” for most students in the health care fields, says executive director Michelle McClure. Nonetheless, the interns quickly found ways to establish rapport with her homebound members, developed innovative programs to build their clients' skills and injected a spirit of fun.

One of her summer interns, after discovering vegetables sprouting in her fridge, created a video on growing vegetables from scraps – and soon had the Ability Online community sharing tips on how to get the best yields. One established a weekly movie night, others produced hip-hop and cooking videos to share online, Ms. McClure said in an interview. Brock’s pre-med and nursing students, who have also signed on as interns, are gaining invaluable skills in virtual care, which many health-care professionals have had to master on the fly, she added.

As word of the partnership with Brock University has spread, Ms. McClure suddenly finds herself inundated, and six more colleges and universities are asking Ability Online to accept student placements. The charity provides free services to its members, and she has applied for government assistance to support the growth.

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