

MAKING PLACEMENT MORE SUCCESSFUL

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Introduction

Placement is a general term. Sometimes it means getting people jobs. More usually, however, the word placement describes a means of training people through experience. Placement can include different kinds of activities. For example, the work experience which is offered to craft apprentices, and the professional experience which is offered to members and future members of numerous professions, are different.

In the professions, well-known examples of placement are those which occur in connection with legal, medical, engineering, teaching, pharmacy and business training. The growing interest in placements of all kinds in the 1980s was reflected not only in numerous reports about it from the professions which had traditionally used placements as a training method, but also in a growing number of publications which helped employers to organise placements for completely new groups of learners. These new groups of learners included school children (DES, 1988) and their teachers (DTI, 1988). In this period, for example, the DTI Teacher Placement Programme was launched as a major government initiative in the field of placement. Its aim was to have school teachers learn about business culture, roles and methods, by doing brief placements in local businesses and industries (UBI, 1989). Until then, such things had featured hardly at all in a teacher's training. Many reports were published to emphasise the importance of placements within working organisations. (DES, 1984; DES, 1989; DoI, 1986; RCGP, 1985; UKCC, 1986). Such placements are the responsibility of training managers and their equivalents.

Placements take place on different sites. Trainee engineers work on remote development sites, in factories and in power stations; student pharmacists work in chemist shops; student doctors and nurses work in hospitals; trainee teachers work in schools; trainee accountants work in businesses; trainee solicitors go to law firms.

Despite their differences, however, all placements have a common purpose. They help the people who are on the placements to understand and to carry out real and difficult tasks in real environments, in touch with real clients and customers, in a culture of real deadlines and in the company of actual job-holders.

Such essential learning cannot happen on the campus of an educational institution. It can only be done through experience in real organisations in the field. Accordingly, the quality of placement is not only personally important for the trainees themselves, but is also critical for the effectiveness of their training.

The quality of placement is also important for the organisations which act as hosts. They put resources into placements. Such resources include, for example, the time it takes to design placement programmes and to brief and mentor people. It includes the tact and effort which are needed to help and accommodate people who observe or shadow the organisation's employees. Putting resources of this kind into placements can mean a company bearing noticeable 'opportunity costs'.

Placement is often also used internally within organisations as a means of staff development. This happens when, for example, staff go on attachments to other parts of the organisation in order to learn new roles. In addition, external placements are often a feature of the external training courses which are attended by company staff.

Despite the importance given to placement in recent times, however, no method for evaluating and monitoring it has been readily available to managers. This article reports such a method. It was extensively piloted for its usability by training managers and placement supervisors.

A Scale for Evaluating Placement

The scale is given as Figure 1. It is a semantic differential scale.

The scale is straightforward to administer. One copy, with an appropriate heading at the top (e.g. 'My Placement at Company X'; 'My Placement at Hospital Y') is given to every person involved in the placement. Each person puts a tick on each line, using the space which best represents his or her feeling about the placement. A tick close to an adjective shows strong feeling but a tick near the middle shows undecidedness. People take about five minutes or less to fill in the scale. Once the sheets are gathered in, the responses are scored as seven to one or, whenever 'good-bad' adjectives are reversed, one to seven. (In the construction of the scale the 'good-bad' adjectives were randomly reversed in order to inhibit response bias.) The scores are easy to add up, and it is a simple matter to draw up the kind of profile which is shown in Figure 2. Such a profile gives a useful general picture.

More detailed information can be obtained from the scores if it is needed. This is because the scale contains two subscales. One tells how valuable the

Example heading: e.g. 'For me, the placement was'

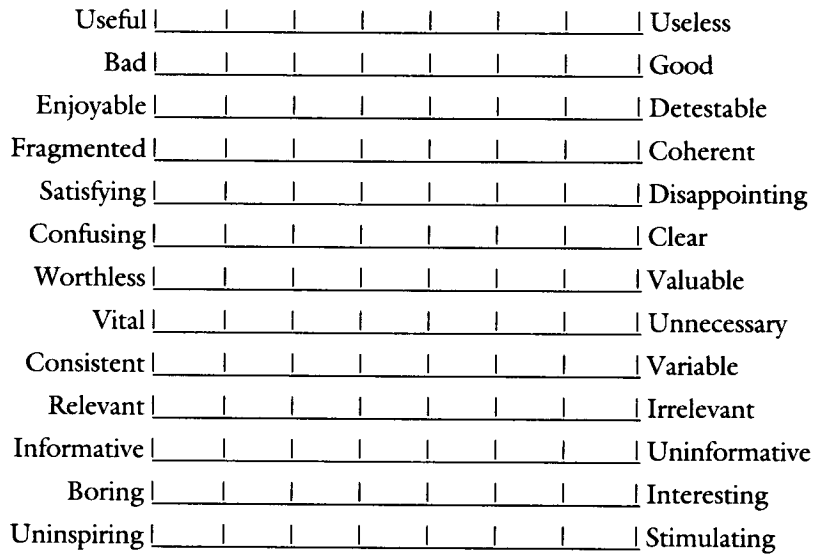


Figure 1 The Scale for Evaluating Placements

Profile (mean scores) of the responses of 1,262 people who evaluated placements they had done in various parts of Britain

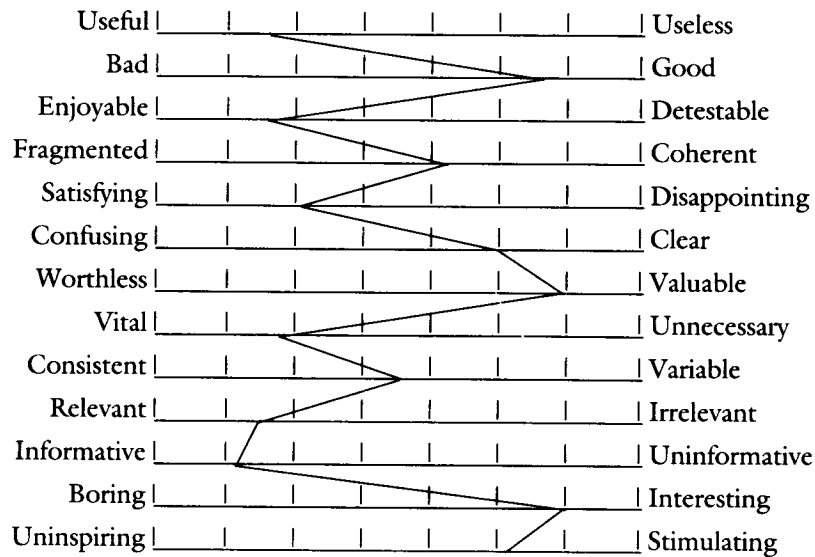


Figure 2 The Scale for Evaluating Placements



placement felt (the 'Value' subscale). The other tells how organised it felt (the 'Organisation' subscale). The 'value' and the 'organisation' of any placement are essential characteristics to know about, if one aims to make a placement more effective and successful.

Figure 3 shows which pairs of adjectives contribute to the score on the Value subscale and which pairs contribute to the score on the Organisation subscale. It also shows which pairs of adjectives must be reversed for scoring. The maximum score for Value is 70 and the maximum score for Organisation is 21. The minimum score for Value is 10 and the minimum score for Organisation is three. The maximum total score on the full scale is therefore 91 and the minimum total score is therefore 13.

The pairs of adjectives which contribute to the score for 'Value'
(minimum score = 10, maximum score = 70)

Useful/Useless
Bad/Good (reversed scoring)
Enjoyable/Detestable
Satisfying/Disappointing
Worthless/Valuable (reversed scoring)
Vital/Unnecessary
Relevant/Irrelevant
Informative/Uninformative
Boring/Interesting (reversed scoring)
Uninspiring/Stimulating (reversed scoring)

The pairs of adjectives which contribute to the score for 'Organisation'
(minimum score = 3, maximum score = 21)

Fragmented/Coherent (reversed scoring)
Confusing/Clear (reversed scoring)
Consistent/Variable

Figure 3 The Items in the Two Subscales

Background

The scale was developed from a much longer one which was first published by Hoste in the 1970s (Hoste, 1977; Hoste, 1981). The longer scale was used in a series of studies which evaluated the placements of teachers, pharmacists, engineers and nurses (Cameron-Jones, 1980, 1988, 1989a, 1989b). From successive analyses of the responses of groups totalling 733 people who completed the longer measure (Cameron-Jones and O'Hara, 1990) the short scale which is given in this article was developed.

Findings

As explained above, the scale can be used to obtain an overall, general profile of the quality of a placement. If more detail is needed, the scale can also be used to obtain, by means of its two subscales, information about the value and the organisation of a placement.

A general picture of British placements of various kinds was shown in Figure 2. This profile is based on the most wide-ranging study of placements ever carried out in Britain. The profile shows the mean responses of 1,262 people who evaluated placements which they had done in Britain in the late 1980s (1987-1989). Corresponding to this figure, but giving more detail, Table 1 gives these people's scores for their placements' Value and Organisation.

	No. of items	Min/max scores	Mean score	S.D.	% Score*
Value	10	10/70	59.1	10.2	82
Organisation	3	3/21	14.1	4.1	62
TOTAL	13	13/91	73.2	12.9	77

$$*\% = \left(\frac{\text{mean-min}}{\text{max-min}} \right) \times 100$$

Table 1 Mean Scores on the Two Subscales from 1,262 People who Evaluated Placements they had done in Various parts of Britain

From this table it can clearly be seen that attitudes about placements done in this country were very positive indeed. Further, people generally valued their placements highly, giving them 82% of the maximum possible rating. On the other hand, people were a little less satisfied with the organisation of their placements, giving them only 62% of the maximum score for that.

However, although Table 1 shows that, in general, a placement's Value tended to be more highly rated (at 82% satisfaction with it) than its Organisation (at 62% satisfaction with it), different groups did vary in the *degree* of satisfaction they expressed about the value and organisation of their placements.

An example of two placements in the teaching profession will illustrate the differences there can be in respect of scores on Value. Table 2 shows the scores given to their placements by two groups of university graduates who were training as teachers and who had done placements in schools. From the table it can be seen that both groups were more satisfied with the value of the placements than with their organisation. However, while the differences between the Organisation scores of the two groups were not significant, those

for the Value scores were. The students being trained as primary teachers were significantly more satisfied with the value of their placement than those being trained as secondary teachers.

	Mean Scores						ANOVA	
	Primary (n=26)			Secondary (n=57)			F	P
	Mean score	S.D.	% score	Mean score	S.D.	% score		
Value	61.8	7.7	86	56.3	12.9	77	4.1	.05
Organisation	14.1	3.9	62	12.7	4.9	54	1.8	.19 (NS)
TOTAL	75.9	10.7	81	68.9	16.6	72	3.9	.03

Table 2 Mean scores on the two subscales from 26 primary student-teachers and 57 secondary student-teachers who evaluated placements they had done

An example of two placements in the health professions will illustrate the differences there can be in respect of scores on Organisation. Table 3 shows the responses of 40 trainee nurses and 36 pharmacists who had been on placement in organisations in the Health Service. Both groups attached high Value to their placements. There was no significant difference between them on that. However, the pharmacists were significantly less happy with the Organisation of their placements than the nurses were.

Tables 2 and 3 therefore illustrate the scale picking up quality differences between different placements.

	Mean Scores						ANOVA	
	Nursing (n=40)			Pharmacy (n=36)			F	P
	Mean score	S.D.	% score	Mean score	S.D.	% score		
Value	60.5	9.0	84	57.1	10.3	79	2.3	.13(NS)
Organisation	14.9	3.1	66	12.6	4.3	53	7.3	.01
TOTAL	75.4	10.5	80	69.7	13.2	73	4.4	.04

Table 3 Mean scores on the two subscales from 40 trainee nurses and 36 trainee pharmacists who evaluated placements they had done



Discussion

Our suggestion is that training managers and other people concerned with placement should use the scale to monitor the quality of the placements which are of interest to them. Given the expectation that most people will see organisation as the 'weaker spot' in their placements, that is likely to be the aspect of placement which training managers will want to prepare themselves to improve. What ideas does the literature give to help them in this task?

The fact that, at present, people see placement as not entirely (in the words of the Organisation subscale) 'coherent', 'clear' and 'consistent' is understandable. After all, placements are arranged in the first place precisely because the people doing them need to learn new and demanding things; they need to learn a different mental set from their usual one; they need to be immersed in a different culture; and they need to be in touch with people who construe the world in an entirely different way from the one they are used to. Small wonder that this can feel confusing to them.

Benne wrote interestingly about this in 1976. He said that people who go out on placements are challenged and somewhat shocked because they have to enter not only a new physical world but also a new mental world. He said that people who work in different organisations solve problems in different ways from each other, behave in a different way and act at a different speed. Kilbourn (1986) added to this theory. According to the analyses of Benne and Kilbourn, people in different occupations have different 'mind sets' from each other and from the academics who teach trainees in universities and colleges. It is these subtle mental and cultural differences which are difficult for people to understand when they go out on placement. Small wonder that what they see feels variable and confusing to them, and that they find it difficult to organise things in their minds.

Our studies of placement found that some people, when asked to suggest better words for describing placement than those which already feature in the scale, proposed such adjectives as 'bitty', 'baffling', 'incomprehensible', 'bewildering', 'stressful' and even 'frightening' to describe the placements they had had. This gives a clue to the kind of 'culture shock' which their placements had been to them, and to the fact that they had felt disorganised and disorientated by their experience.

However, as Tables 2 and 3 have shown, placements do differ in their quality. Their quality can be changed if their management is changed. For example, one way to help people is for managers to make use of the understandings which Benne and Kilbourn have advanced. This can stop placement being a 'culture shock'. Such a management strategy means managers pointing out more carefully to the people who come on a placement the critical aspects of the organisation's culture; discussing with greater understanding the mental set of the company and its staff; and making more clear some of the deeper aspects of the company's way of life. The management of placement must include, it seems, not only clarifying what people can observe during the placement but

helping them to understand it and organise it in their minds so that what they see is, in the words of the Organisation subscale, more 'coherent' and more 'clear' to them.

Done well, such management of placement will show up in raised Organisation scores and perhaps also in even higher scores for Value over time. Given the importance of placements, it is worth making them more understandable to the people involved and so, ultimately, more successful.

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