Matching and mismatch: Understanding employer expectations of work placement applicants

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e-placementscotland.com
The context: e-Placement Scotland

• Funded by the Scottish Funding Council, originally for 4yrs, (2010-2014) then refunded until 2019

• Specific remit to focus on the IT sector, to address the conundrum of higher-than-might-be-expected graduate unemployment, when employers are also reporting a lack of work-ready graduates

• We work with industry to make available quality, paid placements for students studying computing, computer science, software engineering, IT – for students at ANY Scottish college or university

• We work with universities/colleges to maximise student applications
The context: e-Placement Scotland

- Project partners Edinburgh Napier University and ScotlandIS (the trade body for Scotland’s Digital Sector)

- Edinburgh Napier leads on student engagement, ScotlandIS leads on employer engagement

- Has made over 1000 paid, quality placements available through our website – students must be returning to study-post placement

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The operational approach

We are Employer Led

• Starting point - employers have a need for which they are willing to pay a salary, and so employer requirements determine the placements offered

We aim to get Students ‘signed up’ before applying for roles

• We have a university/college outreach programme to encourage students to register at our hub website. Students pre-register and upload a CV

Hub Website - https://www.e-placementscotland.com

Roles are posted on the website, students receive alerts, pre-registration means that the application process is simply a matter of pressing an ‘apply’ button
Placements Scotland

Shaping the stars of tomorrow

Home Students Employers Universities & Colleges News & Events The Team Social Media

Placement Search

Any Type Any Discipline Any Location

search view all

Students

Employers

Universities & Colleges

Featured Placement

Failure Analysis Engineer - East Scotland Failure Analysis Engineer, 12 months, Edinburgh The main purpose of the Failure Analysis Engineer is to perform

Employers

Whitespace

Whitespace was founded in 1997 with a focus on digital and brand design. A commitment to building long-term client relationships has resulted in consistent organic growth. Now, 19 years later...

Industry News

Speed Networking Event - Stirling University

03.11.16

e Placement Scotland is giving employers the chance to meet university students at our next speed
The operational approach

The Trade Body talks to Employers

- ScotlandIS hosts our *Employer Engagement Champion* who builds relationships with employers and promotes placement as an answer to capacity/growth/expertise issues

University talks to Universities and Students

- Edinburgh Napier University hosts the Director of HE/FE Engagement who builds relationships with course leaders and aims to have a presence in the lecture-room, through an annual outreach programme of ‘pop up’ guest lectures, employer ‘speed networking’ etc

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This Study

• Particular focus on SMEs, companies with headcount 50-250
• Review of e-Placement Data and follow-up interviews
• Seek to examine employer decision-making processes and priorities when offering placement roles
• Aiming to order to better understand ‘mismatch’ between employer expectations and student applications
Why SMEs?

• In our work with employers we have consciously ‘segmented’ the employer base according to size, and crafted distinct ‘offers’ about why companies should take placement students.

• SMEs dominate the tech sector in Scotland. They offer huge experiential value as placement employers, but often don’t have the resources to engage with universities themselves.

• e-Placement set out to provide a route for SMEs to enter the wider placement marketplace – for the benefit of students.

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Why SMEs?

• Simultaneously, SME lack of experience with recruitment processes can be problematic

• Some rarely recruit, many lack formal processes and in-house HR

• How do they go about the basic activities, and make good decisions around job specifications, interviews and selection that work well?

• What support or steering can e-Placement Scotland offer or give that will help produce good outcomes?
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**Promote placement as a resource rather than as an overhead.**
- Case study materials to illustrate benefits.
- Build relationships with incubators

**Plug gaps in expertise: skills definition, job spec writing, shortlisting and interviewing.**

**Help scale up existing placement processes and bring greater visibility for the company in the placement marketplace.**

**Complement their existing placement operations through providing access to our website as another route to market.**

**Maintaining the focus on placement as a way to plug specific skills gaps and as a contributor to early-stage business growth.**

**Getting it right first time - good initial results are critical for year-on-year repeat business.**

**ePS being seen as route to enable the company to access talent.**

**Companies seeing a stream of applicants coming via our channel – as long as this is visible to them**

**‘Fit’ becomes important, recruitment and selection processes must account for this. Tendency to write ‘superstar’ specs**

**Business seeking ROI, versus the need for students to be developed. Placements being used directly as a way to fill permanent positions.**

**Development of in-house placement capacity reducing reliance on ePS.**

- e.g. Skyscanner

**Students perceiving e-placement as an adverts board rather than as source of unique opportunities**

**Companies perceiving ePS as adding little value.**
Methodology

• Utilise e-Placement Scotland as a data collection site

• Semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 6 SME employers, to explore their priorities and identify the issues that affect their decision making when offering placement roles

• Aim to surface and explore approaches to the placement process normally hidden, from assembling the role description through to shortlisting and appointment

• Thematic analysis of transcripts – six themes emerged, relating to organisational capacity and strategy as well as about perceptions of candidates
Organisation size, length of placement, salaries

- SMEs have been a rich source of placements
- Aligning with this is popularity of 3mth placement (SME preference)
- Salaries have been respectable, most between AUD$24,277 – AUD$28,062
Profile of Placed Students

- 26% of placed students female. Less than computing student female population (27%), but more than percentage of female registrations (22%)
- Mature students successful in securing placements, equaling registrations
- Most placement students are in 3rd year, next in 2nd year
Profile of Registered, but not yet Placed Students

- > 25 years
- 23 - 25 years
- 21 - 23 years
- < 21 years

- Female
- Male

- Masters
- Fourth year
- Third year
- Second year
- First year undergrad
- 0 year of study
Thematic Analysis of Interviews

Theme 1  Improvisation
Theme 2  Business Positioning
Theme 3  Skills as ‘Gateway’
Theme 4  Initiative and Self Management
Theme 5  Company Focus
Theme 6  Making the Appointment
Theme 1: Improvisation

• Experience in writing job specs is often limited:
  “the CTO had some experience of this, he managed his own company before so he knows what should have been in it”

• The examples provided on the e-Placement Scotland website were used as a resource:
  “we looked at what e-Placement Scotland ads were before, and there was a ‘template’”
Theme 2: Business Positioning

• Employers appreciate that they compete for the ‘best’ students and for each employer the role description was developed with this in mind. “(we aimed to) try to convince [the student] that this is a company they should want to be considering”

• The role description forms a dual function – setting out the role specification, but also articulating the company proposition for the applicant to attract the applicant towards a company that may have little name recognition.
Theme 3: Skills as ‘Gateway’

• A focus on technical skills focus is evident during the role descriptor writing, shortlisting and interview processes.

• To some extent this reflects what already works for the company
  • “the job spec is basically a description of what our current staff look like. Familiarity with some languages is a giveaway that they will like working here”

• Employers need convinced that, if a student lacks a particular programming language or technique, they will be able to pick it up without too much support – ability to learn is valued
Theme 4: Initiative and Self-Management

- Employers are looking for attributes other than specific technical skills.
- Online portfolios of work are seen as a sign of initiative and ambition.
  
  “someone can have a great CV but I could pay £10 right now and someone could make me a good CV – so it’s about online presence as well.

- Effort put into writing a covering letter regarded as a positive.
- A degree of self-management was seen as a key attribute.
  
  “we’re looking for technical skills, definitely, but also someone who will ask questions…..the world of work is changing and our software developers talk to our clients sometimes”
Theme 5: Company Focus

• Employers wanted to see students display a positive attitude towards working for that company, for example through a tailored CV showing how the applicant meets the job specification.

• By interview stage, employers wanted students to have researched the company

  “we wanted students to be knowledgeable about the company – I had no expectations but it helped a lot”

• For some participants this was expressed as a means of differentiating candidates with similar skillsets, and used as a proxy for motivation
Theme 6: Making the Appointment

- Two sub-themes emerged: ‘going beyond the brief’ and ‘face-fitting’.

- Going Beyond the Brief
  
  “he was able to talk at length and it wasn’t in the job advert – his course had covered that”

- Wider knowledge of the tech sector - used to infer interest, being keen to learn and taking enjoyment in work.

- There were also culture-based influences summarised as face-fitting
  
  “I felt I could work with him”
Conclusions

1. ‘Improvisation’ suggests the need for some support to produce job descriptors that meet baseline skills will also specifying ‘the capacity to learn’

2. For ‘Business Positioning’, a balance may be required for adverts that communicate the company’s goals without making this off-putting or intimidating

3. ‘Company Focus’ raises questions the time demands on students and the necessity of researching roles. There may be scope for ‘expectations management’

4. ‘Initiative’ clearly establishes the need for students to have a positive online footprint
Next Steps

Extend study to collect data from student placement applicants

  • Experimental approach – using a number of archetypal job specifications as ‘probes’
  • Look to assess role of specific terminology or trigger statements

Ultimate Study outcomes:

  • Better advice and assistance to SMEs in crafting job descriptions

Interim Study Outcomes:

  • Feedback to students on what SME employers value (four example slides following)
What Matters to SMEs - Skills

• Skills are important to an SME – they don’t have in-house training programmes or huge staff development budgets

• But they don’t expect you to know it all. If you have the baseline skills and can demonstrate an ability to learn on the job then that’s very attractive

CV takeaway – how will you show an ability to learn?
What Matters to SMEs – Non-Technical Attributes

• In the tech sector, old stereotypes have dissolved and companies are looking for staff who communicate well, are keen to ask questions and take the initiative

• You need to present yourself as a person who codes rather than as a coder

• The want to know about you as a person – your story so far and your aspirations for the future

CV takeaway – how will you distinguish yourself from another person who has done your course?
What Matters to SMEs – Your Online Footprint

• What you put online that is linked back to you matters a lot to SMEs – we recently talked to one CTO who preferred an online search to reading a CV

• Not just LinkedIn – an online portfolio of projects and interests can be impressive

• But don’t forget your Instagram, Facebook, Twitter etc – if these give a non-professional impression, then check your privacy settings

CV takeaway – can you link to any work you’ve done?
What Matters to SMEs – ANY experience

• Had a three-month summer internship in the tech sector? Got a reference from the CEO? Superb

• Got a part-time job in a shop that shows you understand the world of work – you can turn up on time, work in a team, respond to management direction – don’t underestimate the importance of this to a future employer

CV takeaway – what are you making out of your current work experience?
Any questions?

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