

## **5. What does learning to be professional through the work placement experience mean?**

### **School of Law**

#### **Legal assistant at a firm in France**

I admit that on my Erasmus documents I put that I had 'learnt how to be professional' during my work placement. But what did I really mean by that? I had worked for several months with 'professionals' but I certainly didn't mean to say that I had become one. Did I instead learn to *be* professional in the sense that I 'became suitable for a profession', 'engaged in a given activity as a career' or that I 'showed great skill, as an expert'? The latter may be a bit farfetched but when I reflect upon my experience I can see aspects of the other definitions resulting from my placement. I believe I have become more 'suitable' for the legal profession, having a greater understanding of the demands of the job, which can have long hours, or continual meetings and a large work load, an appreciation that not every law student may ever realise until their first day. As for 'engaging in a given activity as a career', spending four months living and breathing my placement couldn't have been more engaging and for that time abroad I was certainly absorbed enough into my work to appreciate it as my career, albeit temporarily.

It's not often that someone has the opportunity to work full time for several months in the career that they are aiming for, because, like in my case, I am studying the degree that will give me the necessary qualification to enter that career. So the work placement can be the first opportunity students like me get to being employed in that profession, because employers recognise the work already achieved and are willing to employ us, not just for cheap labour (as technically we are unqualified), but also to help us become professional at an earlier stage. Learning to be professional through the work placement, to me, means bridging the gap between the jobs you may have had in the past and the future career you hope to achieve, and also between the knowledge you have from your degree, and applying that knowledge in your career and in real life situations. So how did I learn to be professional during my placement? I learnt to be professional through the people I worked with, the environment I was in, my personal mentor and the challenges I faced amongst other things.

#### **The people I worked with**

Learning to be professional means working with a huge variety of people from all aspects of life. At my placement, I was at a closer age to my co-workers than I have ever been when I've done work experience. I was still the youngest, of course, but because my placement was two thirds through my degree I was technically only one year behind having the same qualifications as my colleagues, and that made a huge difference to my experience. The only difference then, between my co-workers and I, was their professionalism and to me that only meant experience. Professionalism is the manner that you speak to the people you work with, saying 'hello' in the mornings and 'good evening' when you leave. In my office, for example, I learnt that a few people took it upon themselves to say 'Hello' to everyone in the office before work began. Professionalism also means understanding the office hierarchical system, which doesn't necessarily correlate to position but perhaps age, or even both. In the French language, for example, do you 'vous' someone that is older than you for respect, or use 'tu' because they are the receptionist and you are potentially a Trainee solicitor? In a bid to be professional and formal, I used 'vous' towards all my colleagues until they told me that we could be informal with one another and use 'tu'. It is a great help to have already been immersed in that situation, because I feel now, were it to reoccur, I would know what I would feel confident enough to address them without worry.

## **The environment I was in**

The work environment was also essential to me becoming professional. It is the mirroring of your co-workers and their professional manner in the work place that is the educational tool in this vital experience. I thoroughly enjoyed my work placement because it gave me such an insight into the career. I had learnt a lot about Law at university, but looking back now, I see I learnt how to apply my knowledge in real life situations, and that is what learning to be professional means. Experiencing a work environment at any placement is beneficial because work environments can be so similar regardless of where or for whom you work. There will always be a start to the day, a point where you are tired but a lot is being asked of you, a lunch hour (or two if you are in France) and there may be certain jobs that you don't like doing but that are required of you. Also, from my placement I see now that work environments can involve team work, and everyone has their part to play. As I was on placement I did have some of the more basic and at times monotonous jobs to do, for example, I had to write over fifty letters to town councils regarding different heirs in a succession case asking for birth certificates. Although it was repetitive, having seen the development of the case I now know the importance of that job I had to do. My work environment also involved interaction, cooperation and a pooling of resources with every different demand with every new case as certain people had skills in a different area of law, so there was a great deal of cross referencing. Cooperation is common in most work places, again showing that any experience in a work 'environment' is beneficial and will thus my placement will help me be prepared for my next work environment. I believe this preparation will allow me to be more 'suitable' in the work place because I appreciate all aspects of a job and I am already acclimatised to a work environment, making me more professional. I have had so much experience through my placement, and it must be remembered that learning to be professional has meant learning to apply my knowledge, and that has happened through the experience of working in a placement.

## **My personal mentor**

I had a great mentor at my placement. Not only was she the kindest and most gentle person I had ever met, she was also great at her job and was extremely hard working. Even though I was already hardworking and determined, she definitely helped shape my work attitude and approach, and now I am even harder working and have refined my study skills to include professionalism in the work place. Knowing people in a professional sphere is also a great way to become professional yourself. I have learnt that people can be completely different at work than they are outside that environment, where they can change from being completely focused and driven, to being open and relaxed. Some professionals however, like my mentor, didn't even need this work/social division, and she was extremely professional at the same time being kind and helpful throughout my placement and have become great friends because of it. My personal mentor, along with all my work colleagues at my placement have been great examples of what it means to be professional in a work place.

## **The challenges I faced**

It is certain that through my placement I learnt what it meant to be professional. I maintained this professionalism throughout my placement, and even learnt how to be professional, even when it was the last thing I wanted to do. At my placement I was speaking a foreign language and could easily get frustrated with myself when the language became challenging. Keeping calm under such pressure was another experience I had, because no matter how troubled I felt about the language, I found a way to get around the issue and remained professional. Also, I

understood the complications of working when you may have to face personal difficulties. It wasn't so much whether I had remained professional when I found out my dad was ill, the difficulty I actually faced was how to approach the issue to my colleagues or boss, or whether I approach it at all as it was after all a personal issue. We are now experienced with how our friends, family and even school are able to deal with us when we face a challenge. But how does the workplace react when their staff are faced with such a challenge? My mentor was extremely helpful and my boss even offered me time off if I needed it. It was nice to see that I could in fact approach my work, it didn't mean I was unprofessional by bringing up a personal issue.

The experience abroad was an amazing contribution to my personal growth and that includes how I learnt to be professional. I have recommended to everyone contemplating a work placement to do one, as I believe it is invaluable experience that employers will love, after all, you will not only be newly qualified, but you have a year in industry and will have faced all the uncertainties of a first job during your placement. I know my placement certainly makes me more employable and I have absolutely no regrets about the experience. To everyone that is about to leave on a placement, the only advice I can give is to enjoy the whole experience and although you may face challenges, remember that there is rarely a time in life when you are not faced by challenges, and that it is in fact these challenges that make us better. Go forth and prosper on the placement, the end result is near guaranteed to be amazing if it was anything like mine. Good luck.