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#### **Abstract**

*The music industry is a highly fragmented commercial sector, which is facing major challenges and undergoing rapid change. When evaluating potential employees during a time that key roles are evolving to meet the demands of the contemporary marketplace, the music industry attaches real credence and weight to practical experience in addition to academic achievement. This article considers the importance of students not concentrating solely on their academic work, but also applying focus on acquiring employability skills, experience and work-based knowledge. For example, highly structured, short-term, work-based learning activities and the knowledge and employability skills these opportunities provide students are considered. Looking at how various learning styles and theories can be applied to enhance the experience of individual students, it is clear that, although most music industry related companies offer work placement opportunities which are unstructured, the integration of activities such as reflective and analytical dissertations aimed at building self-awareness, self-reflection and self-confidence, are just as important as practical experience and can cater for the needs of a diverse range of learning styles.*

#### **Introduction**

The formal study of music industry history, theory and structure is a relatively new addition to the roster of academic options available at most universities. As such the direction, shape and output of these courses is, in most cases, still evolving. At a time when the music industry is facing significant challenges in terms of falling product sales and declining revenues across most of its sectors according to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI, 2012), universities

are facing questions from both undergraduates and the industry about how best to design these relevant music-based courses to ensure a tangible benefit for all involved. In particular, with employment opportunities in the industry becoming ever more limited, key questions being asked include: how much do work placements within companies operating in the music industry sector help undergraduates with their studies and how, in turn, does this add to their learning and attainment of practical experience, knowledge and future employability? This article will examine whether undergraduates undertaking the type of courses that purport to offer a holistic overview of the music industry, should have a reasonable expectation of employability at the conclusion of their studies. In addition it will examine whether undergraduates undertaking relevant and productive work-based learning and work placements are, as a result, in a position to fulfill the requirements of employers.

### **The music industry's attitude to graduates seeking employment**

The music business is a multi-faceted industry with numerous sectors competing against one another for a share of rapidly declining consumer revenues. According to the British Phonographic Industry (BPI, 2012) official website, "the music business is composed of rich, diverse and passionate organisations...that includes self-employed individuals, small businesses and large multi-national companies." The modern music industry has evolved along highly entrepreneurial lines with few obviously defined career paths. While some of the larger companies, particularly the major record companies (e.g. Sony Music Entertainment, Warner Music Group and Universal Music Group), do offer structured graduate entry schemes, the majority of companies do not. Employability remains a key challenge for any university course but particularly for those courses with a vocational emphasis. The Confederation of British Industry (2011) stated that, "Universities, student unions, businesses and other agencies....have an essential role to play in getting the message across to students about the importance of shaping up their employability and giving them ways to develop and practice these essential skills." In addition Brown *et al* (2002) quotes one human resources manager as saying, "academic qualifications are the first tick in the box and then we move on."

Today we simply take them for granted.” It is also worth noting that the traditional entry points for those wanting a career in the music industry have tended to be either unpaid internships, junior positions or recommendations through personal networks with the employee then working their way ‘up the ladder’ to more senior managerial positions. The attainment of a relevant degree level qualification in music industry studies, while a useful and potentially valuable addition to a *curriculum vitae* does not, in itself, guarantee the employability of the graduate. It can further be argued that work placements and work-based learning for undergraduates during their period of study on music related courses are among the most important aspects of their learning and development. Mantze Yorke (2006), for example, argues that whilst employers might ask for multi-competent graduates, some aspects of employment-related capability can only be developed in the employment context: work placements of various kinds during a higher education programme may, therefore, make a significant contribution. In other words potential employers in the music industry tend to look beyond the classroom achievements of graduates and towards the efforts and achievements of graduates in relevant work environments and will usually value ‘hands on’ experience over academic study in isolation.

### **Understanding why and how work placements are important**

When studying for any qualification that has a vocational focus there is a danger that the student may become trapped in an insular academic environment which has the potential of limiting the practical application of their learning and potential employability. A period spent on work placement therefore, can enhance student learning through experience and lend weight and credibility to their academic achievements. Knight and Yorke (2004) suggest that higher education establishments can provide an effective employability curriculum by emphasizing 4 key areas they refer to by the acronym ‘USEM’:

- **Understandings about work**
- **Skillful practices** (the deployment of skills in different and/or new situations),
- **Efficacy beliefs** (legitimate self-confidence in one's capacities to achieve and succeed at work)
- **Metacognitive capabilities**

Moreland (2005) takes Knight and Yorke's USEM approach and adds further detail as follows:

- Learning about oneself – one's capabilities, confidence, life interests and career orientations (Efficacy and Metacognition);
- Learning and practicing skills and personal attributes of value in the world of work (Skillful Practices)
- Experiencing the world of work (or facsimiles thereof) in order to provide insights
- Learning into the world of work predominantly associated with the subjects of one's higher education studies (Understandings)
- Experiencing and learning how to learn and manage oneself in a range of situations, including (of course) those to be found at work and central to self-management and development activities (Metacognition)

Therefore taking on board both Knight & Yorke and Moreland's work around the USEM model, it can be argued that self-awareness, self-reflection and self-confidence are just as important as practical experience and that practical experience in and of itself lacks viability if these other aspects are not incorporated in the overall development of 'self'. Another key factor to consider when understanding why work placements are important to the learning and skills development of students, is the changing face of the modern employment market (Buff, 2011).

This article considers the music industry sector, but it can be argued that the employment market in general is evolving, with people now applying different criteria when making employment choices. Edgar Schien (1978 & 2007) who created the influential 'career anchor' theory in the mid-1970's, which broke down the reasons why people made career choices into five categories reflecting basic values, motives and needs, has recently updated his findings and now feels that careers in the future will be governed by 'internal' factors rather than 'external' ones in the rapidly evolving employment market. He asks, "Will there even be a concept of an 'organizational' career or will careers become a more fragmented set of jobs held together far more by what I have labeled the 'internal career' – a subjective sense of where one is going in one's life, as contrasted with the 'external career, the formal stages of what an individual can expect in the occupational structure." It is interesting to link Schien's ideas with those of Knight, Yorke and Moreland and to note that they all emphasize the need for self-analysis, intuition and reflection when considering both work placement and career choices. In a fractured and fast evolving marketplace like the music industry it can be unsettling for students witnessing the roles they might see themselves undertaking in the future changing, sometimes beyond recognition, in relatively short spaces of time. With the advent of digital technology, for example, the consumption of music by consumers has shifted away from physical formats, such as the compact disc, towards Mp3 downloads and online platforms. This has meant radical new ways of working for people in a number of key roles within the music industry. Marketing, promotional, sales and numerous other disciplines have had to adapt to these seismic changes and new skills and approaches have had to be developed by those practicing them. Students entering a work placement, particularly one which may require them to involve themselves in any of these changing roles, need to be aware, therefore, that the adoption of those key concepts of self-awareness, self-reflection and self-confidence are just as important as the practical experience of 'being there' if they are to gain maximum benefit from the exercise.

The ability to absorb information and engage with new ideas within a fast evolving environment is a prerequisite of working in the modern music industry and the more the student engages with this process and takes responsibility for their own experience the more they are likely to gain from it.

### **Adding value to students learning experiences and employability**

There are arguments for and against the type of structure and indeed the type of work placement that will enhance a student's learning experience and employability. It can be argued, for example, that any length of time spent working in a relevant organization will enhance the experience and employability of a student regardless of the structure and that simply by 'being there' the student will learn and benefit from the experience. Conversely some would argue that without a defined structure and tangible learning outputs work-based learning may be of limited value. The Quality and Curriculum Authority (2003) defines work related learning as, "planned activities that use the context of work to develop knowledge, skills and understanding useful in work, including learning through the experience of work, learning about work and working practices, and learning the skills for work." The use of the phrase 'planned' activities could, however, be seen as contentious, as the effectiveness and validity of either approach depends of the student and their individual learning style.

Building on earlier learning style concepts developed by David Kolb (1984) a number of theories were published by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford (2000) that saw them break down individual learning styles into four separate 'personality' types: 'Activist', 'Reflector', 'Theorist' and 'Pragmatist'. Students who fall into the category that Honey and Mumford define as 'activist' tend to have a number of key characteristics which include: a gregarious personality, a desire to seek challenge and immediate experience, an open-minded attitude and a tendency to be bored with implementation. They would perhaps benefit from a fairly unstructured work placement that required them to be self-motivated and to use their own initiative. This type of work placement may also suit 'pragmatists' who tend to: seek and try out

new ideas, are practical, down-to-earth, enjoy problem solving & decision-making quickly, and are easily bored with long discussions. A 'theorist', however, may benefit from a highly structured and rigid placement that obliges them to follow set guidelines and an inflexible programme, their key qualities being: the ability to think things through in logical steps, assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories, be rationally objective, and reject subjectivity and flippancy. The same environment may also suit a 'reflector' who could be defined as someone who: 'stands back', gathers data, ponders and analyses, delays reaching conclusions, listens before speaking and is thoughtful. A conclusion could be made therefore that work placements should, wherever possible, be tailored to the individual's particular learning style. Adopting too rigid an approach when putting students into work placements could, it might be argued, not play to the strengths of that individual and indeed prove to be a counterproductive experience. There is, however, a counter-argument that exposing students to learning styles that do not exactly match their own personality type is a good thing in that it may be a more accurate representation of the real world employment environment.

Another issue to consider is resource. To find, vet and design work placements for upwards of 40 students studying on the Music & Entertainment Industry Management (MEIM) course at the University of Hertfordshire would take a huge amount of time and energy and this simply isn't possible given the resources available to the department. The answer therefore is to encourage students to, wherever possible, find and secure their own work placements during the final academic year of their studies. The course leaders provide guidance and assistance where necessary, but the process of securing their own placements by contacting employers directly is seen as a valuable learning experience in itself. The music industry traditionally prizes initiative and enthusiasm, and asking students to identify and secure their own work placements is an exercise in both. Most students on the MEIM course have an idea of which sector of the music industry they would like to work in and as such, target their efforts in that particular direction. A student, for example, who is keen to work in live music, might approach promoters, agents or venues in the hope of securing a work placement. If successful, the course leaders

would contact the employer to ensure the relevant insurance and health & safety assurances were in place before approving the placement. From that point on it is entirely up to the student how that work placement is carried out. It is a fact that most work placements undertaken by students in music industry related companies are wholly unstructured. Students are expected to carry out low-level tasks such as making tea, data input, filing, manning reception desks and so on. It is therefore incumbent on the student to make their time on work placement worthwhile by showing initiative and enthusiasm. This situation clearly suits students who fall into the 'activist' and to a certain degree 'pragmatist' categories but may not be particularly fruitful for 'reflectors' or 'theorists'.

So, how do we ensure that work placements add value to all students learning experiences and employability? The answer is straightforward: we play to their strengths. Every student undergoing a work placement during the final year of their studies is required to submit a dissertation on their experiences, which counts towards their final grade. They are expected to evaluate their own experiences during the work placement in a reflective manner, to provide insight and comment on the structure, workings and practices of the company and to provide a wider industry context for their thoughts and analysis. The students completed dissertation is usually shown to the employer, which they often find revelatory and extremely useful. On several occasions this document has actually led to students securing permanent employment with the company on the completion of their studies. This exercise ensures that 'theorists' and 'reflectors' also gain from the experience alongside 'activists' and 'pragmatists'. 'Activists' and 'pragmatists', therefore, thrive in an unstructured work placement, where they are able to use initiative and self-motivation, while theorists and reflectors can use the experiences they have gained to provide insight and analysis.

### **Work placements in a structured environment**

As well as work placements that are, as mentioned, sourced by students themselves and that cover a set time period lasting weeks or even months, it is also



possible to create and engage in intensive, highly structured work-based learning. We are fortunate that the MEIM course has nurtured excellent relationships with the music industry and as such we are able to draw upon those relationships to create opportunities for students to experience work-based learning in real-life environments. An example is an exercise that MEIM runs on an annual basis with The Ministry of sound Group, a successful, London-based music company specialising in recordings, events and branded products. Positioned as a one-day programme, MEIM takes 12 students to visit the Ministry of Sound offices for an intensive series of presentations from the key departments that make up the company, for example recordings, events, digital, sponsorship, marketing and so on. Following these presentations, which take place in the morning, the students are given lunch and have a chance to interact and ask questions of the staff at the company.

The afternoon session is comprised of 'innovation workshops', whereby students work with department heads to find ways to improve their current products and practices and to come up with new ideas for enhancing the company's commercial offering. This exercise is successful because it is a mutually beneficial experience. The students enjoy a focused, stimulating, practical work-based learning experience in a 'real-life' environment and Ministry of Sound receive access to bright, motivated students who bring ideas and fresh thinking to the challenges facing their company. Stephenson (1992) argues that 'capability' should be a key employability aim of all higher education and states that skills and knowledge make up only part of the equation. This idea of 'capability' takes on real clarity when applied to this type of highly structured work-based learning, when students are immersed in problem solving, innovative thinking and challenging tasks. This also links to the ideas of self-awareness, self-reflection and self-confidence discussed earlier in this article.

### **Summary and conclusion**

Given the challenges facing the modern music industry and the fact it has been in a state of rapid evolution for a number of years (Alhadeff, 2006) it can be

concluded that there is a need for students seeking employment opportunities on graduation to have made full use of work placements and work-based learning opportunities during their period of formal study. The music industry attaches real credence and weight to practical experience and it is therefore important that students do not concentrate solely on their academic work, but also focus also on acquiring employability skills, experience and work-based knowledge. While it is important to recognize the individual learning styles of students when evaluating effective work-based learning and identifying work placements it is not always possible, due to resource issues, to match individual students to their ideal environments. This is not to say that the inability to achieve this necessarily impacts adversely on the opportunities available to students. Asking students to find their own work placements is a valuable learning exercise in itself.

Given that most music industry related work placements are unstructured, it is interesting to conclude that students who gravitate towards the Honey and Mumford (2000) 'activist' and 'pragmatist' learning styles are well suited to these opportunities as they tend to thrive in these type of environments, but the use of reflective and analytical evaluation exercises, such as in-depth dissertations, can be extremely useful for those students who have what are described as 'theorist' or 'reflective' learning styles. Also, where possible highly structured short-term opportunities, such as the Ministry of Sound example described above, can also provide a stimulating, practical work-based learning experience in a 'real-life' environment, which adds considerable value to student's learning experiences and employability skills. To quote Stephenson (1992) again, "The educational challenge is to devise courses and invent learning experiences which help students acquire the necessary expertise - both knowledge and skills - for effective performance in familiar and predictable circumstances in ways which give students confidence in their ability to cope equally effectively with uncertainty and change."

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