Professional Communication Placements in a COVID World.

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Abstract and Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic many communication students undertaking professional placements and internships have completed or engaged with remote working environments, seen as a move away from the more traditional placement in an office workplace. This paper investigates the potential advantage for knowing contemporary professional purpose as a result of remote operations for the communication industry. Does this shift in workplace access advantage students in terms of now being more capable in online work skills due to remote working experiences, as the professional world moves to more flexible working arrangements? It investigates, through a literature review and comparative analysis of case studies to establish if a new type of professional purpose is developing as a result of a changing workforce environment due to COVID-normal conditions evolving, even though some students in the past have experienced remote professional placements outside of the pandemic.

Communication students studying at a higher education level are expected by industry to "hit the ground running" on graduation (Jackson, 2016). The industry expectation is that graduating students will possess a sense of professionalism that enables them to make a positive impact in the workplace. Many theorists refer to this as understanding one's professional purpose (Bates, Rixon, Carbone & Pilgrim, 2019). This means students have the technical knowledge, the workplace experience and the transferrable skills to confidently perform professional tasks in a workplace (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). Building professional purpose throughout higher education learning involving workplace integrated learning (WIL) has been a focus developed over many years in Australian higher education (Clements & Kamua, 2018). However, in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic shut-downs the communication workspace experienced a transformation from office-based to a remote working environment (Mudditt, 2020; Flanders, 2020). It is believed that a transformation of the office workspace will evolve and change the workplace environment as COVID- conditions become the new normal (Cohen, 2020). This paper highlights what might be the implications for professional communication students graduating in 2021 and beyond due to this evolving working environment.

Since the 1990s the Australian Higher Education sector has contended with employability skills and what attributes students should have on graduation (Moore & Morton, 2017). This notion has highlighted the need for practical competences as part of a student's professional purpose (Bates, Rixon, Carbone & Pilgrim, 2019). There is an ever-developing reliance on digital and mobile proficiencies, and higher education is under increasing pressure to produce employable graduates, with less focus on philosophical and higher-order thinking skills and greater focus on being job-ready (Bridgstock, 2009; author, 2020). This is no more evident than in the professional communication, where technology has emerged as the single biggest influence on the industry (Cook, 2020).

The work environment is moving from a 20th Century man-powered workforce to 21st Century technology-powered workplace, meaning work-ready and purposeful skills are ever-evolving through a central processing unit (Cook, 2020). The influence of COVID-19 on the office working environment has resulted in major philosophical and physical changes to the workspaces and may have accelerated the evolution of the office worker skills regarding remote working practices and

digital literacy, especially with regards for online teamwork, relationship building and communication (Mudditt, 2020; Knaus, 2020).

This paper reviews the professional working experiences for communication students since the COVID-19 pandemic began in late 2019 to pinpoint any directly related changes due to remote work experiences for students. Comparative analysis is used over a selection of published journal articles and case studies referring to the office working environment, with reference to communication strategy. These articles are sourced from Australia and Canada with direct reference to higher education WIL experience for students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The articles source their data from student surveys, student feedback and academic observations. This paper raises questions on the future office working environment, and whether the communication professional may need a new set of employability skills as part of graduate attributes. Students studying this discipline may need to be exposed to substantial practice in using digital and mobile media skills through the course of their study to be work-ready for the new COVID-normal communication workspace.