Making the most of your work experience

September 2012
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1. Introduction

This booklet has been designed to help you make the most out of your work experience by supporting you to:

- Planning the right type of work experience
- Prepare for your work experience placement
- Plan and record your learning and development
- Reflect on how your work experience has enhanced your employability

Work experience of any kind from part time work, to summer internships, volunteering and year placements; provides you with an opportunity to develop skills which will be invaluable in your future employment.

In today’s competitive labour market employers are looking for more than a good degree, they want graduates with the skills and experiences to succeed in the workplace.

Many of these skills and experience can be developed by undertaking work experience, but to make the most of these opportunities you need to play an active role in planning your own personal development.
2. Planning the right work experience for you

Types of work experience

Before you start looking for a work experience opportunity, you should give some thought to the different types of work experience available and think about which is most appropriate for you.

| Year Placements / A Year in Industry | - Taken in an occupational setting  
- Involves graduate level recruitment processes and employment  
- Lasts approximately 48 weeks  
- From June/July to September of the following academic year  
- Taken as part of your degree or as a year's absence  
- Formal company schemes tend to target penultimate year students and advertise from October onwards  
- Helps develop career specific and transferable skills  
- Paid – between £13,000 and £15,000 on average |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Summer Internships                     | - Taken in an occupational setting  
- Involve graduate level recruitment processes and employment  
- Taken during your summer vacation, lasting up to 3 months  
- Formal company schemes tend to target penultimate year students and advertise from October onwards  
- Helps develop career specific and transferable skills |
| Part time work                         | - Many students work part time at university during term time and the holidays in a range of roles, commonly in the service sector.  
- These can help develop valuable transferable skills such as communication, team building and organisational skills.  
- Helps develop transferable skills |
| Voluntary work                         | - Volunteering offers a great opportunity to get experience in diverse settings and occupations, and can vary greatly in terms of the time you commit.  
- Helps develop career specific and transferable skills |
| Work Shadowing                         | - Involves spending a few days to a few weeks observing someone at work and learning more about an occupation.  
- Supports career planning decisions |
Selecting your work experience

To work out what work experience is for you, you should consider a number of different factors including:

1. **How much time can you commit and when?** This will impact on the type of work experience you select as each requires different levels of commitment from you. Think about your study commitments and how much time you have to spare.

2. **Where can you travel to for your work experience?** Do you have friends and family you can stay with in different areas whilst on work experience; and/or what areas can you travel to from your current residence?

3. **What skills you want to develop?** What are your existing skills and what are you skills gaps?

4. **What are your future career aspirations?** How can a work experience placement inform your future career decisions; and/or what work experience do you need to access certain occupations when you graduate?

5. **How much do I need to earn?** If you are using your work experience to supplement your income and/or if you will be moving location to undertake work experience, consider how much money you will need to earn to make the opportunity feasible.

What are your personality preferences?

When considering what form of work experience to look for it also helps to consider your personality preferences, for example do you:

- Prefer working in groups or alone?
- Like interacting with clients or working behind the scenes?
- Work well with a strong sense of direction or with flexibility and autonomy?

You can find out more about your own preferences by completing the following questionnaires:

- The Examine your interests and Career Expectations questionnaires available at: [http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/careers/workexperience/choose.shtml](http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/careers/workexperience/choose.shtml)
- MyPotential questionnaires at [www.weblearn.bham.ac.uk](http://www.weblearn.bham.ac.uk) (click Course/Section List on login page, then Corporate Services > Uncategorised > Careers Centre > Psychometric Testing Online Assessment, register with your university login and the course will be added to your WebCT).
Thinking about your career aspirations

You do not need to have a definite idea about what you want to do when you graduate to undertake some relevant work experience during your degree.

For example, you may simply know you are interested in working in the public sector, perhaps focusing on support services to the general public. To narrow down what occupation you might focus on through some work experience, you might start by brainstorming some of the careers you could go into, for example:

![Career Options Diagram]

Next you could look at each occupation in more detail and select one or two that you would like to learn more about and look for work experience in those areas.

Once you have a good idea of the area you are looking for experience in, combine this with your skills assessment and other reflections you have made about your personality preferences and try to find a placement that matches these.

Finding a work experience placement

For information on how to find work experience see:

- Appendix A of this booklet
- The work experience section of our website [www.careers.bham.ac.uk](http://www.careers.bham.ac.uk),
- The work experience notice boards and careers library
3. What do I need to know when I start?

Before you start a work experience placement it is important to familiarise yourself with some of the information you will need to during your first few weeks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Checklist</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Make sure you know what time you need to be in on your first day, where you should go and who you should ask for. This may be different to your daily place of work during the placement period, so check!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Plan your journey to work in advance and if you can do a dummy run to check how long takes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Complete any forms/information requests the organisation has sent to you and take these along on your first day if requested. These may include:</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Emergency contacts details</td>
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<td>o Bank account details</td>
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<tr>
<td>o P45/P60</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Proof of identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o National Insurance Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Check what kind of clothing you should wear and if specialist clothing is needed, check if this will be provided for you by your employer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o When you start your placement make sure you familiarise yourself with the organisation's emergency and health and safety procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Find out what you should do if you are ill or late to work and make a note of and/or save the contact details in your mobile phone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Consider whether there is any additional information you should tell your employer, for example a long-standing health condition which may impact on your work, or require some additional support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Familiarise yourself with your contract of employment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Find out who your line manager or supervisor is and what kind of support you will have from them.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4. Prioritising, planning and recording your learning and development

Many people assume simply by doing a work experience placement they will automatically learn a range of new skills and develop without putting much thought into how it will happen.

Well yes you are bound to pick up new insights and experiences by exposing yourself to new environments. However, the extent to which you learn from those insights and experiences and whether you apply that learning in future contexts, is greatly enhanced if you make a conscious effort to plan, record and reflect on the learning process.

To help you gain more from your work experience placement we would like to encourage you to use some of the following methods to become a more active learner.

**Undertake a skills assessment**

At the start of, or before your work experience placement we encourage our students to think about what they would like to learn and how they would like to develop during the duration of their placement.

To help you think about what skills you would like to develop during your work experience placement you can undertake a quick skills assessment to prioritise some key development areas.

An example skills assessment is provided overleaf. Once you have completed the questionnaire highlight the skills you gained the lowest scores for and prioritise which you want to develop during your work experience placement.

You can also undertake a skills assessment on >>Progress>> the University’s online tool for creating Personal Development Plan. You can access >>Progress>> via My Bham at [www.my.bham.ac.uk](http://www.my.bham.ac.uk); login using your university login and password.
# Skills Assessment Questionnaire

Simply read each skill and the accompanying definition and rate your current competency against that skill from 1 (the lowest) to 5 (the highest).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Competence Level Enter - 1 (Low) to 5 (High)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team working</td>
<td>Can work effectively in a collaborative team setting with others to complete a set of tasks.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation skills</td>
<td>Can structure a logical and engaging presentation, tailored to the audience and present with clarity and confidence.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interacting with different groups of people</td>
<td>Has the ability to interact with a range of people in different roles from customers to frontline staff to senior management.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict resolution</td>
<td>Has the ability to keep calm in a heated situation and work with the people involved to form a constructive and positive way forward.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Skills</td>
<td>Can use multiple resources and materials to research specific topics and has the ability to extract and relevant information.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational skills</td>
<td>Is capable of planning and prioritising their workload, of structuring tasks and ensuring all elements are delivered on time.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Has the ability to take a lead role in a situation to get other people to take on activities and to work together to achieve a shared objective.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT skills</td>
<td>Is IT literate, familiar with Microsoft packages and competent in using email and the internet.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Has a good understanding of record keeping, filing, correspondence and general office management protocols.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill</td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Competence Level Enter - 1 (Low) to 5 (High)</td>
</tr>
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<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical skills</td>
<td>Has the ability to interpret a range of information and draw out the key issues of concern and their implications in relation to a specific task.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>Is competent in planning the deliver of a range of activities to ensure each critical milestones and deadlines are achieved effectively.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event organisation</td>
<td>Has the ability to organise meetings and other events and deliver/oversee all the activities involved.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning tasks/activities</td>
<td>Can set out the different stages involved in delivering an activity and plan what needs to be done and when to achieve each stage, and ensure the overall success of the activity in question.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational processes</td>
<td>Is aware of organisational processes such as inductions, supervision and mentoring and can use these to maximise their individual performance and personal development.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in group discussions/meetings</td>
<td>Is able to contribute to discussions constructively by clearly putting across options and suggestions to take the debate forward, whilst encouraging others to participate and respecting their space.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing skills</td>
<td>Can communicate ideas in a clear and logical manner, and tailored to the target audience in question – by using written forms of communication.</td>
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</table>
Set learning objectives

Once you have prioritised some areas for development you can set yourself some learning objectives; statements about what you would like to gain or achieve through your work experience.

For example learning objectives could include:

- To develop my leadership skills in group work situations
- To increase my confidence to contribute to meetings
- To gain a better understanding of a sales working environment and whether I would enjoy a career in sales
- To develop my ability to work with a range of different client groups
- To gain a better understanding of the work involved in accountancy

As the above examples demonstrate the objectives you select can relate to very different dimensions of your learning and development. We have summarised some of these dimensions in the table overleaf, which we hope you will use to start thinking about where you need to develop most.
## Learning and development areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transferable Skills</strong></td>
<td>Transferable skills are generic skills you need to develop whatever career you go into. This includes things like: team working, presentation skills, time management, conflict resolution and organisational skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career specific skills</strong></td>
<td>Career specific skills are skills you need to develop to work within a particular occupation such as classroom skills in teaching, recruitment skills in human resources, and research and writing skills for journalism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Attributes or Skills</strong></td>
<td>Personal attributes are softer qualities which impact on your ability to achieve what you want to in the world of work. For example having the <strong>confidence</strong> to interact with different people and contribute to discussions; or having the <strong>objectivity</strong> to reflect on situations rationality and being able to take constructive criticism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sector or industry knowledge</strong></td>
<td>During a work experience placement you can also develop your knowledge of particular sectors or industries. This can help you function more successfully within your chosen area and/or highlight to you whether it is the kind of environment you want to work in longer term. For example you may develop your understanding of the sales sector and what it is like to work in a competitive environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organisational culture &amp; processes</strong></td>
<td>Organisational culture can be simply defined as the <strong>principles that direct how people work within the organisation</strong>. These are not necessarily written down or explicit and will vary greatly between organisations. Similarly organisational processes can be explicit or implicit, from finance processes, to decision making and line management protocol. Having a good understanding of an organisation’s culture and processes will enable you to function more successfully in the work place; and whilst organisations do vary, experience in one organisation can be transferred to and support your position in future work environments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning objectives continued…

Set yourself a realistic number of learning objectives; obviously what is realistic will vary depending on the length of your placement. If you are undertaking a long term placement you may be able to change and build on them as you go along.

For example during a summer placement you could start off with 2 to 3 objectives and work toward these during the first month or so, then take time to assess your progress against them, and if you think you have achieved them, change them for others.

Remember! When you are setting your learning objectives don’t make them too easy – the purpose of them is to challenge and push you beyond your current limits!

Utilising learning opportunities

Once you have identified your learning objectives, you need to plan how you will achieve them. You can do this by identifying different aspects of your work which will present the learning opportunities needed to develop the skills, knowledge and/or experiences included in your objectives.

If you don’t think your current work programme will present the learning opportunities you need you should think creatively about other work going on around you or work that might be coming up in the future and ways you could get involved.

Recording your learning and development

Once you start your work experience we advice you start bringing together a number of different resources to support you in recording your learning and development.

Overleaf is an example of how you might record and plan your progress against some learning objectives. This example is completed to give you an idea of the observations you can include. A blank copy of this template is located in Appendix B for your own use.

Furthermore, if you can back up your own statements about your overall learning by obtaining feedback from colleagues or customers, or some other evidence of learning, this is a great resource to keep for the future when you need to complete CVs and application forms.

>>Progress>> also contains a template by which you can plan and record your learning against a number of distinct development areas. See page 7 for details on >>Progress>>.
## Planning and recording your learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Objectives</th>
<th>Identify Learning Opportunities</th>
<th>Progress made</th>
<th>Barriers to learning &amp; how to resolve them</th>
<th>Overall learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To improve my team working skills</td>
<td>Encouraging other members to participate in steering group meetings.</td>
<td>Getting better, but still interrupting to make my point before I forget it.</td>
<td>Instead of interrupting I should write down my point and then intervene at a more appropriate opportunity when others have finished.</td>
<td>Waiting to put my point across meant I encouraged others to participate more, and I had chance to think my views through in more detail before communicating them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve leadership skills through my lead role on the Fresher’s Week steering group.</td>
<td>I have been clearer in allocating tasks and deadlines to group members and sending around a joint action plan so everyone knows what they are doing.</td>
<td>I find it difficult to allocate deadlines to tasks as I am unfamiliar with how long they take.</td>
<td>I will seek advice from experienced colleagues on the time required to complete different tasks.</td>
<td>I found having a clear project plan setting out everyone’s contribution and deadlines gave me a tool to direct people better in an objective way, as opposed to chasing people on an individual basis. It also makes it very transparent who is and is not working effectively.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recording other learning situations

It is also important to capture other learning opportunities you engage in during your work experience, for example training, be that formalised sessions or on the job training/observation. Below is a simple table you could complete to record these activities.

You may find that one off scenarios also provide great learning opportunities. For example, during your work experience the arrangements for an event may go wrong at the last minute and you may be called in by your employers to make alternative plans requiring you to react to immediate demands on the spot.

When you encounter challenging situations you can learn from it is important to capture what you did, what you learnt and what you would do differently in the future to enhance your personal development. They also make great examples to include in CVs and application forms in the future. Overleaf is a simple way to record such a scenario.

Training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title and brief description of the training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What did you learn?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will you apply this learning in the future at another place of work and/or within your studies?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## One off learning situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Describe the scenario:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What was the context?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When did it take place?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What was your role?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who else was involved and what was their role/s?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were the outcomes?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What did you learn?</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
</table>

| What would you do differently if you encountered a similar situation again in the future? |  |

## Recording your overall learning

Towards the end of a work experience placement it is also very useful to reflect back on your entire experience and consider what you have learnt, what you have enjoyed, what you haven’t enjoyed and how this will impact on your career planning in the future. In appendix C we have designed a simple questionnaire to help you capture the full outcomes of your experience.
Appendix A

How to find work experience

Getting started

The first thing you need to do before you start looking for work experience is to:

1. Think about possible careers or sectors you are interested in going into when you graduate and find out what work experience will benefit you.
2. Consider what skills and experience you already have and what skills you would like to develop.
3. Decide how much time you can commit and when.

Once you have set out your work experience requirements you can use this to guide what type of work experience you look for.

What types of work experience opportunities are there at university?

- **Year Placements** - Normally taken in between your second and final year, either as part of your degree or as a year absence.
- **Summer internships** - Undertaken during your summer vacation mostly aimed at penultimate year students.
- **Part time work** - Many students work part time at university during term time and the holidays in a range of roles, commonly in the service sector. These can help develop valuable transferable skills such as communication, team building and organisational skills.
- **Voluntary work** - Volunteering offers a great opportunity to get experience in diverse settings and occupations, and can vary greatly in terms of the time you commit.
- **Work Shadowing** - Involves spending a few days to a few weeks observing someone in their role at work and learning more about an occupation.

For more information on the different types and benefits of work experience, see [www.careers.bham.ac.uk](http://www.careers.bham.ac.uk).

How to find work experience

There are two main ways to gain work experience:

1. by responding to adverts for work experience vacancies.
2. by creating your own opportunities by speculatively approaching organisations.

The route you adopt will depend on the type of work experience you are looking for.

Companies working in engineering, IT, finance and business management are more likely to advertise vacancies than organisations in the public, voluntary and community sectors, and competitive industries such as media, marketing and journalism.

If you are looking for work experience in less well advertised fields, you will need to spend more time finding out about organisations in the field and making speculative approaches to them.

More formal types of work experience like year placements and summer internships are also more likely to be advertised than short term and part time positions in professional settings.

Work experience career directories

Some, particularly larger, companies advertise work experience opportunities through career directories including GET, TARGET and Prospects.

You can pick up copies from the Work Experience section of the Careers Centre.
Finding out about organisations for speculative applications

- **Practitioner journals/magazines** in the relevant field often advertise vacancies. They won’t necessarily be work experience positions, but they can inform you about what organisations are out there and their contact details. Also look in **local and national newspapers**.

- **Professional bodies and their websites** often provide details of organisations working in a particular field/sector.

- **Lecturers and other contacts** may be able to give advice and contact details of companies and individuals.

- **Internet search engines** provide a quick and easy way to find out about relevant organisations.

- **Online directories of local businesses**. Example directories for the Birmingham area include:
  - [www.city-visitor.com/birmingham](http://www.city-visitor.com/birmingham)
  - [www.chamberdirect.co.uk](http://www.chamberdirect.co.uk)
  - [www.birminghamameconomy.org.uk](http://www.birminghamameconomy.org.uk)

How can the University help?

**The Careers Centre**

- Advertises year placements, summer internships, part time work in career settings and other work experience vacancies online.

- Offers support with CVs, application forms and interview skills, as well as one to one advice sessions with Careers Advisers.

- More info on [www.careers.bham.ac.uk](http://www.careers.bham.ac.uk)

**Job Zone at the Guild**

- Advertise part time, casual and temporary work.


**Involving in the Basement at the Guild**

- Supports students to gain volunteering opportunities with local and national voluntary organisations and charities.

- More info on - [http://guildofstudents.com/content/188475/get_involved/volunteering/](http://guildofstudents.com/content/188475/get_involved/volunteering/)

Websites advertising work experience

- [www.employment4students.co.uk](http://www.employment4students.co.uk) - under JobZone search for internships in the UK.

- [www.graduateadvantage.co.uk](http://www.graduateadvantage.co.uk) - matches West Midlands employers and students with work experience.

- [www.gowales.co.uk](http://www.gowales.co.uk) - advertises diverse 10 week paid placements in Wales.

- [http://targetjobs.co.uk/work-experience](http://targetjobs.co.uk/work-experience)

- [www.gradjobs.co.uk](http://www.gradjobs.co.uk) - organises work experience fairs and exhibitions.


- [www.Placement-uk.com](http://www.Placement-uk.com) - under opportunities search for placement opportunities.

- [www.work-experience.org](http://www.work-experience.org) - National Council for Work Experience including a database of work experience opportunities in the UK.

- [www.step.org.uk](http://www.step.org.uk) - matches employers and students with work experience across the UK.


- [www.trident-transnational.org](http://www.trident-transnational.org) - volunteering opportunities. service industry in the main.

- [www.yini.org.uk](http://www.yini.org.uk) - organises year placements.
Appendix B - Planning and Recording learning template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Objectives</th>
<th>Identify Learning Opportunities</th>
<th>Progress made</th>
<th>Barriers to learning &amp; how to resolve them</th>
<th>Overall learning</th>
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</table>
Appendix C - Recording and reflecting on your work experience

Name: ____________________________
Work experience position: ____________________________
Work experience organisation: ____________________________
Start date: ____________________________
End date: ____________________________

What were your main activities and responsibilities during your work experience placement?
______________________________________________________________

Why did you select this placement and did it meet up to your expectations?
______________________________________________________________

What did you learnt about the organisation you were working for? Do you think it is the type of organisation you would like to work for in the future and why?
______________________________________________________________
What aspect of your work experience did you find most satisfying and why?

What aspect of your work experience did you find least satisfying and why?

What was the greatest challenge you encountered during your work experience, how did you overcome it and how might you approach a similar situation differently in the future?

Describe a situation from your work experience when you used your initiative; what did you do and why, and what was the outcome?
What is the most significant thing you have learnt through your work experience and how do you think it will help you in the future?

Looking back at what you have enjoyed and disliked about this work experience, how will what you have learnt about yourself influence the type of work experience or employment you will look for in the future?