Increasing Workplace Engagement for Cooperative Education: Thai’s Perspective

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Bilateral cooperation between universities and workplaces is crucial for the Cooperative Education (co-op) management. Therefore, University co-op coordinators must establish networking and develop relationship for sustainable cooperation among workplace administrators, co-op coordinators and job supervisors. This process can later build up co-op partnership that leads to mutual benefits. Moreover, not only personnel in workplaces become co-op partnerships but also faculties and students. When these graduates are in their career, they will be competent job supervisors and fully supportive in other various co-op activities. Faculties also play a major role in co-op education as co-op advisors.

As the Director of the Center for Cooperative Education and Career Development (CCECD) for 6 years, the author aims to discuss and shares her experience in establishing workplace co-op partnership making the management of the co-op efficient and continual. In addition, more cooperation on other activities are enhanced and expanded. For example, University co-op coordinators can be the first contact in providing help for workplaces as appropriate, prompt, and convenient by being ready to communicate or connect to different divisions, and departments in the University.

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Developing Workplace Engagement for Cooperative Education Program
To organize the co-op program, universities can develop their cooperations with workplaces both in bilateral and multi-lateral cooperations. They might have cooperations with workplaces by placing co-op students or having other mutual benefit activities. Both private and public organizations can be workplaces. Best practices in co-op management come from the close and sustainable relationships between universities and workplaces especially when they become a partnership.
1. Building Co-op Partnerships from Workplaces

1.1 Finding Qualified Workplaces

Universities have to specify the qualified workplaces before approaching them. In general, the specifications of workplaces are as follow:

(1) having activities or work that meet students’ professional-training experience.

(2) students’ job supervisors have academic backgrounds related to students’ fields of study.

(3) not too small as family business.

(4) having safe and occupational environment to work.

(5) providing students’ salary or fringe benefits.

Co-op staff could find this information by searching from workplaces’ annual report, from government information system i.e. Provincial Commerce, Provincial Industry or the Federation Thai Industry or the Thai Chamber of Commerce. Co-op staff or faculties might go to talk directly with workplaces. It is better that faculties go with the co-op staff and have the chance to talk with proposed Job Supervisors. Workplace visit will help the co-op staff to check for workplaces’ facilities and occupation health environment.

1.2 Managing Workplace Information System

To have efficient co-op management and sustainable relationships with workplaces, universities should manage workplace information database containing necessary information below:

(1) business type, financial support and funding.

(2) address, telephone and fax numbers, map website homepage

(3) Name-surname, position, telephone and fax numbers and email address of co-op workplace coordinators and supervisors
(4) Quality of workplace i.e. size of workplace (not-family business), providing qualified jobs for students, having safe and occupational health environment, providing salary or fringe benefits for students, and good practice ranking status.
1.3 Approaching Workplace Method

Generally most workplaces are willing to help universities in many activities i.e. workplace visit, student summer training program. To seek co-op coorporations, co-op university staff should set the meeting with the workplaces’ co-op coordinators for detail of the beneficial co-op program between them.

For Thai’s perspective, not only the university co-op coordinators, it would be better that the faculties should go to meet with the workplaces. The university staff who meet the workplace should have communication, negotiation, good personality and human relations skills. In addition, they should have their own information concerning the curriculums, the co-op program, and other facilities that possibly serve the workplaces.

1.4 University – Workplace Meeting

Before meeting with the workplace, university co-op staff should study detail information of workplaces and identify whom they want to meet. It would be great if they can set a short meeting with the workplace’s administrators because the administrators are the persons making a decision to set the co-op program in their workplaces. Moreover, the university co-op staff should find opportunities to discuss about the co-op program, the benefit and the qualified works with the proposed job supervisors.

The examples of the meeting agenda between involved people are shown in Table 1.

For efficient meeting, the university co-op staff should prepare co-op multimedia to provide important information to all involved parties. The multi-media should be brief and easy to understand. Mostly the meeting always come up with good corporations, therefore the co-op university staff should prepare to leave the job-offered forms to workplaces.
Table 1: The meeting agenda between involved people of workplaces.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting Person</th>
<th>Meeting Agenda</th>
<th>Meeting Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Workplaces Administrators</td>
<td>Co-op philosophy, co-op mutual benefits, workplaces preparation, service-facilities from university</td>
<td>15 – 30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Co-op Coordinators, HR persons</td>
<td>Co-op philosophy, co-op mutual benefits, workplaces preparation, service-facilities from university, co-op process, co-op evaluation, coordinations between university and workplace, and timeframe for important activities.</td>
<td>1 – 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Job Supervisors</td>
<td>Co-op philosophy, co-op mutual benefits, service-facilities from university, co-op process, co-op evaluation, qualified co-op jobs for students and examples of students’</td>
<td>1 – 2 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.5 Developing Partnership between Workplace and University

1.5.1 Continuing the co-op corporations i.e. placing students in every academic year. Finding other students from partnership-university instead if there is no students placement in that particular term. If the university could not place the co-op students, it would be better to send apology letter to workplace. Keeping the old workplaces is better than finding a new workplace because more resources will be required. Thereafter, the numbers of workplaces should not be more than 20% over the required numbers.

In the other way around, sending the same co-op advisors and the same co-op staff to the same workplaces makes them become more acquainted and their relationship becomes more consolidated.

1.5.2 Broadening more mutual benefit activities with workplaces i.e. human resource sharing for example sending the English lecturer to teach English at the workplace and inviting the HR personnel for the co-op workshop in university as a guest speaker on the topic “how to write a good resume?” or “how to have an efficient interview?”.

These mutual activities will make workplaces feel honored that they can share their expertise and make contribution to the university resulting in feeling comfortable working with the university.

1.5.3 Turning the position from the Taker to the Giver by affordable helping workplaces, Universities can provide various services for workplaces for instance offering academic services, or even giving 25% discount for using universities’ facilities.
In addition, the co-op center has to be like the university guest room or front office. It can take an action immediately in response to the workplace’s requirement. For example, when the workplace needs the English lecturer, the co-op staff could enthusiastically manage to find the contacting person. Then inform both the workplace and the contacting person. The co-op staff should not just easily transfer the telephone line to the contacting person. The call might not reached the right contacting person.

1.5.4 Seeking and signing the memorandum of understanding (MOU). In fact, an MOU is just a paper. Universities have to make an MOU active to run the co-op program efficiently.

1.5.6 Co-op customer Relation Management includes the features below.

(1) Placing competent students to workplaces. The students’ preparation process, both in academic background and working skills, is vital in the co-op program.

(2) Having an effective co-op management system to provide convenience, and fast services for workplaces focusing on the process that is not a burden to workplaces but still keeping the co-op standard.

(3) Be sensitive to details and learn more about individual workplaces’ characteristics to serve them much better and better.

(4) Frequently contacting workplaces to let them know co-op activities or other information that is helpful or essential for workplaces.

(5) Managing the information about the workplaces to rank and serve them better. There is an important rule to run the co-op program efficiently. It is “Do not stop the relationship with any workplaces but foster them to be more qualified each year”. The cost of finding
new workplaces is much higher than sustaining the old ones.

(6) Following up the co-op management from workplaces i.e. their reflections and satisfactions by evaluating, meeting, and experience sharings.

(7) Providing activities promoting loyalty to organizations and workplace relationship retention as follows a) presenting honorable activities such as giving workplaces gifts as tokens of appreciation and celebrations, b) sending them cards on different occasions or events such as season greeting cards, Thank You card, or other kinds of cards expressing care and concern for a special or important events of the workplace, and letters from students to workplaces’ administrators and job supervisors. c) inviting them to join the important ceremonies such as the founding day ceremony and the convocation day, and d) Asking them for their comments or suggestions on graduate program development such as curriculum development and revision, or inviting them as guest lecturers, university senates or committee in academic activities.

(8) Increasing the workplace benefits by establishing more sophisticated projects or works such as multi-discipline projects, multi-level student projects from bachelor to master or doctoral level or the co-op program for faculties,

(9) Accepting invitations from workplaces to join their activities.

2. Building Co-op Partnerships from Faculties and Alumni

Success in the co-op program depends on co-op students and advisors. The co-op center has to give them the best services and facilitates them to perform their duties very well. If both of them get the best services from the co-op center, they will find their ways to help the center run the
program efficiently and then they will become the co-op partnerships. For example, after graduation from universities, the graduates can be good and efficient job supervisors. They will find jobs for their juniors. To be successful, the co-op staff have to have service minds, and strong intention to listen to their reflections.