

Communicating the VALUE of International Work Terms

CE 'Work Abroad': <https://uwaterloo.ca/co-operative-education/working-abroad>

What is 'International IQ'?

iIQ in simple terms is your ability to understand the differences in cultures, adapt yourself to better fit in the new environment, and over time, bridge the differences for greater positive outcomes. iIQ can be developed, if you have a job that is stationed in another country, work with companies who work with other countries, or work with companies who have international teams in addition to other socio-cultural experiences. You can also develop iIQ by interacting with students from different parts of the world who have come to study at UWaterloo.

Selected attributes/skills you can acquire by mindfully developing your International IQ

When abroad, once you've settled in, take the time to identify 2-3 skills you want to develop in the new environment via your experiences in this environment. You'll be in a new country – food, language, cultural norms, expectations – might all be vastly different from what you've known all your life. Reflect on what's different and what it will take from you to 'fit' in the new environment, and make the most of your experience. These are the skills you will gain that will be part of you for the rest of your life – they will transform you as an individual.

Some skills that students gained and have shared with us include:

1. **Adaptability / flexibility** – You find out on the first day of work that the hours you are expected to be at work are longer than you thought. How do you respond? Or, you learn that in that culture most people get around by bike; so, although you have not ridden one for a while, you decide you're going to hop back on one. Your ability to handle stress can increase with each successful incidence where you adapted to a given situation
2. **Appreciation of diversity** – You can demonstrate leadership in promoting positive interactions and encouraging others to work together despite individual differences – get people socializing and mingling in the workplace despite language barriers through team building activities
3. **Being innovative / creative** – You will encounter numerous situations that you have not been exposed to before. Or, your usual approach will just not work. How did you handle such situations? How did you think differently, and still manage to resolve the issue?
4. **Broader crisis management and conflict-resolution skills** – As you are exposed to situations you would not likely encounter on a Canadian work term (e.g.: faux pas with communicating in another language, learning local workplace nuances), you will encounter different situations where crisis management and / or your conflict skills will help you resolve challenges that come your way
5. **Critical thinking / problem solving** – Reflect on situations where you wondered: how am I going to do this task so that it works for that culture? For example, in marketing, who are you marketing to? That could include how to market your ideas within a different culture. Or, did you need to convince somebody to do something? How did you do it? Did you do anything differently as a result of your location?
6. **Cultural awareness** – Aside from communication, there are many ways you will see things in a different light because you are in a different culture. In some countries, employees do not ask for clarifications as it might look like they are challenging authority; any clarifications are researched on one's own, or the help of peers is sought. These cultures have very collaborative peer networks in the workplace
7. **Foreign language proficiency** – Many students either more fully develop language(s) they currently use, or may introduce a new language to their repertoire
8. **Not just communication skills, but 'cross cultural' communications skills** – Even if the company converses in a language in which you are fluent, there are lots of examples of differences in the way work is conducted (such as, do meetings always start on time?) that can influence your understanding

- of a successful conversation. Your improved listening and observational abilities help you understand messages/conversations fully and pick up cultural references
9. **Perspective taking** – This is the ability to look at something, not from our own experience but from another person’s point of view. We do ‘perspective taking’ naturally with people who are like us, but less so when they are unlike us. An international work term can assist in broadening our perspective. For example, when composing an email, look at it from the perspective of the recipient to see how it will be interpreted
 10. **Resilience** – It’s just about keeping at a problem until you find your way or a solution. Think about times that you bounced back from something that did not go as expected – perhaps your apartment flooded and the landlord could not be found? Did it leave you unafraid of facing similar circumstances again?
 11. **Resourcefulness** – Did you ever find effective resolutions to new or stressful situations? Were you able to easily adjust to changing priorities and circumstances? Something simple like – Have you even flown before? On your own? How will you get to your residence from the airport? – can identify how you were able to overcome situations and find a solution, and can help demonstrate your independence
 12. **Self-motivation** – You see an increase in self-confidence and your ability to clarify goals as you set and achieve new challenges. You’re able to persevere even within chaotic or ambiguous situations, thereby developing self-awareness. Examples include finding your own place to live (where there might be language barriers), navigating the transportation system or successfully making it to work on your first day
 13. **Teamwork / collaboration** – Build collaborative relationships with colleagues and customers representing diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, religions, lifestyles, and viewpoints. Think about a time where you had to read your team dynamic, and work within that structure to negotiate and manage conflict
 14. **Willing to take educated risks** – You have either stepped out of your comfort zone by coming to Waterloo to go to school, or have travelled to take a job – either of which have several risks. Either way, you determined the net value of this change and the benefit it will give you – you took an educated risk

Being reflective and mindful about how you’re being impacted by the experience

While planning the experience, and when you are actually going through it, keep asking yourself:

- What are the significant skills you’re learning on your work term that will be helpful to you in your classes when you’re back?
- What are the significant take-away(s) of the experience that will be helpful to you in your work experiences ahead? What added value will you be bringing to future employers?
- How has the experience changed you as a person for the rest of your life?

During the term and when you’re back

You might already have been discussing the VALUE of your international experience with your WTS through the work term, which is excellent. In case you’d like to continue that discussion, or start a new one, talk to your WTS who supported you on your international work term about how to communicate the added VALUE of the international experience to future employers when you’re back on campus. To internationalize your cover letter and résumé, reflect on how your international experience shaped you. You may also work with career advisors at the Centre for Career Action (<https://uwaterloo.ca/career-action/>) on this, once back.

Who can you contact for more information

- Start with ‘My World Abroad’, accessible via Centre for Career Action’s ‘CareerHub’, for several tip-sheets
- To know more about international co-op opportunities: cecaintam@uwaterloo.ca