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The Issue: *Co-op Education*

One of the greatest dilemmas of the information and communications technology (ICT) labour market is that, even when ICT companies are faced with acute shortages of skilled workers, the work they offer demands several years of experience. This presents a particular challenge to new graduates seeking to enter the industry. For many years now, ICT companies and students have relied upon co-op education programs as a means of overcoming this problem.

The co-op learning experience blends classroom learning with on the job deployment of skills acquired through formal learning. Co-op placements are of limited duration, typically a semester out of a scholastic year.

The concept of co-op education was introduced in Canada in 1957 at the University of Waterloo. The idea was controversial at the time with many educators arguing that the close relationship with business would tarnish the integrity of the post-secondary educational experience. The University of Waterloo persisted and from a modest beginning of 75 engineering students, its co-op program has grown to be the largest in the world with over 12,000 students currently enrolled.

The program proved popular with employers and demonstrated strong educational validity, particularly in technical disciplines. After the success of the University of Waterloo, co-operative education began to spread all across Canada. The University of Sherbrooke began its program in 1964 followed soon after by Memorial University of Newfoundland, the University of Regina and Nova Scotia Technical College. Today, co-op educational programs are commonplace at the undergraduate level from coast to coast.

The benefits of co-op education are extensive. Co-op programs give the business community a cost

effective way to fulfil staffing requirements with students exploring the latest developments in science and technology in their academic programs. In a competitive labour market like ICT, where success or failure depends heavily upon the talent that a company can attract, co-op programs also give employers a sneak peek at some of the best minds emerging from colleges and universities and position them to recruit accordingly.



Students and their academic institutions also benefit immensely. Co-op students earn income while on placement and this helps to offset the costs of their studies, a potential savings of \$26 million for the Government of Ontario. Even more valuable is the hands-on business experience that equips students with exposure to the social mores and behaviours of the workplace while encouraging them to deploy their knowledge and skills for business outcomes. As a result, co-op students typically enjoy a starting salary premium – as much as \$5,000 to \$10,000 more than their non-coop peers. And co-op students are also more likely to find permanent employment after graduation.

Any educational institution is enriched by the experiences of all its faculty and students. Real world experiences add texture and context to classroom learning, particularly when shared with fellow students. A high co-op placement rate, particularly among professional schools, is a key competitive advantage in attracting enrollment.

Co-operative education's fifty year history in Canada suggests it was an extremely positive innovative in education. ICT companies are avid users of co-op programs and, along with many educators and other knowledge-based sectors, would like to see the program expanded.

Because of the potential of co-op education to contribute to a qualitative, stronger labour pool in Canada, governments should ensure funding provided to institutions to deliver co-op education should fully reflect the cost of providing the program. The University of Waterloo, for example, has called for a 20 per cent premium for co-operative education in the Ontario funding formula.

The ICT industry believes that post-secondary co-op programs are vitally important to the formation of a strong Canadian knowledge-based labour pool and should both be appropriately funded and expanded. Employers currently receive a \$1000 tax credit per co-op employee per co-op term. Raising the tax credit to cover a more substantial portion of the actual cost of employing a co-op student would expand industry's capacity to engage more students.

The benefits of post-secondary co-op education are indisputable. The ICT industry sees real value in extending co-op opportunities to post-graduate students. As valuable as bachelor level graduates are, masters and PhD graduates can make an even greater contribution to businesses. For graduate students, exposure to business applications of advanced knowledge and research may open new career paths and improve Canada's overall commercial performance.



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