



Dealing with challenges

Advice for your placement year

In all work environments, you will encounter difficulties and challenges to overcome. This guide has been put together to help you resolve issues effectively when on placement.

You should always first discuss problems with your workplace supervisor and/or line manager, working with them to find solutions. However, before approaching them, you should think about the problem and possible resolutions.

If, having discussed the issue with your managers, you still feel a solution has not been found, you should contact the Placements Office and discuss the situation with us.



How to resolve issues

Challenges are a feature of the modern workplace. Whether it be a difficult client, unforeseen consequences of a course of action, or a testing relationship with a colleague, challenges will arise during your working life. Dealing with them effectively will make your work more fulfilling, and can highlight your skills and talents in the eyes of management.

If you want to discuss concerns or suggest changes it is important to be tactful and diplomatic. Choose your time carefully – do not expect your supervisor to have time to talk on the spur of the moment. Arrange an appointment and be well-prepared for the discussion. Clarify in your own mind what you want to get out of the situation and be positive: do not simply go along with a list of complaints or criticisms. Before your appointment, you should think carefully about the issue and possible solutions.

Remember that your expectations or interpretation of tasks or situations may be different from your colleagues, particularly as a student who has not been long-established in the organisation. ‘Review’ meetings with your supervisor can be used to establish clear lines of communication and ensure that you understand what is expected of you. You should not be afraid of making suggestions for improving or developing the scope of your work: most people welcome the display of interest and initiative (providing your request is reasonable and realistic, of course!). Handled in a positive way, a review meeting of this kind will usually result in a better time in employment and will earn you the respect of your supervisor and team as well. **At the end of the discussion it is worth ensuring that the proposed action is recorded in writing (you can do this) and agreed with your supervisor to avoid any misunderstandings.**



Actions to take if things do not improve

If things do not improve immediately, be patient. It does take some time to sort things out but try not to let your motivation diminish. If nothing improves despite tactful reminders, the next step is to telephone or email your Placements Advisor to talk things through – if you are unsure how to tackle the situation, do this first, rather than upset people in the workplace by taking inappropriate action. However, do not expect us to intervene at the outset if you experience problems – you should make the first approach yourself. Remember, no one will know you have problems if you do not raise the matter with your supervisor, and things are often easily resolvable.

Changing your placement organisation is rare and should only be a very last resort. This must only be done in consultation with your Placements Advisor and tutor. Identifying problems early on and ensuring that they are addressed appropriately should prevent this situation.

Even if your placement is not ideal you will find, on reflection, that you have learned a lot both about yourself and the world of work, management styles and culture. Keeping a positive attitude is important. Remember that how you conduct yourself will affect others and those who work with you will want to enjoy having you in their department.

Finally, most students agree that with placements, ‘you get out as much as you put in’. A cliché, perhaps, but it is usually very true. Whether your experience proves to be superb, good, or not as good as you had hoped, you are certain to come away with some valuable experience for the future. Above all, try to enjoy yourself and your work.



Problem checklist

If you are faced with a problem, this checklist may be useful in helping you solve it.

1. Identify the problem

Is it due to:

- The nature of the job?
- Supervisor’s misunderstandings of your needs?
- Your behaviour?
- A particular issues relating to a specific area of work?

2. Establish what you want

- What do you want to get out of the job?

- What would a successful resolution of your problem look like?
- Which topics/areas are you most interested in?
- Do you require further training or help?
- Are there any projects you can identify that it would be possible for you to do? (This is especially useful if your current work is not very stimulating).

3. Decide who to talk to

- Supervisor/manager/immediate boss/mentor or colleague
- Placement Advisor/Office
- Personnel Officer

4. Raise the issues

- You could suggest a more balanced programme of work.
- You could ask for more variety and work in a different area/different project.
- You could ask for training or to attend courses/meetings.



Difficult people

Not everyone with whom you interact will be easy. Keep your calm, and always be polite and professional. Sometimes situations or personal factors can cause someone to behave inappropriately or aggressively towards you. Make sure you familiarise yourself with the relevant policies and procedures in the organisation which will guide you in dealing with such situations.

Speak to your Workplace Supervisor about any training you feel you may require and remember it is your responsibility to ask for advice and support concerning situations you are unsure about. Communicate issues with your supervisor and with your Placements Advisor.



Hidden meanings

Not everyone is direct in saying or stating what they want or how they want it done so the placement or any workplace can seem full of hidden meanings. Often the way things are said may seem to be a suggestion but it is actually a 'softer' way of telling you that you should do something, such as:

'You might like to...'

'If you have time could you...?'

'Have you considered...?'

'Perhaps you could just...?'

'This seminar might be useful...?'

The above can all be implied commands and sometimes actually mean 'Do this!'

Similarly if someone says to you, 'I just want a word...' this may be to discuss something related to your placement or your work, Take a notebook along to write down any points made.

If someone says, 'We're having a meeting', take along a notebook. It looks professional and you will not forget what is said or what you are being asked to do if you make notes.

Finally, should your supervisor say, 'Had a late night?' it may mean you look tired or scruffy or that you are late (again) and he/she is not impressed.



How to effectively raise complaints

If you wish to make a complaint about any aspect of your placement that you have not been able to resolve directly with your employer or your Placement Advisor, then you are required to put your complaint in writing to the Placements Office. We will be unable to take any action without your written complaint.

Should you wish to make a complaint about any aspect relating to the Faculty Placements Office, you should follow university procedures regarding student complaints. More information regarding the complaints procedure can be found at <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/studentadmin/appeals/>