



Building Occupational Identities Through Work-Based Learning

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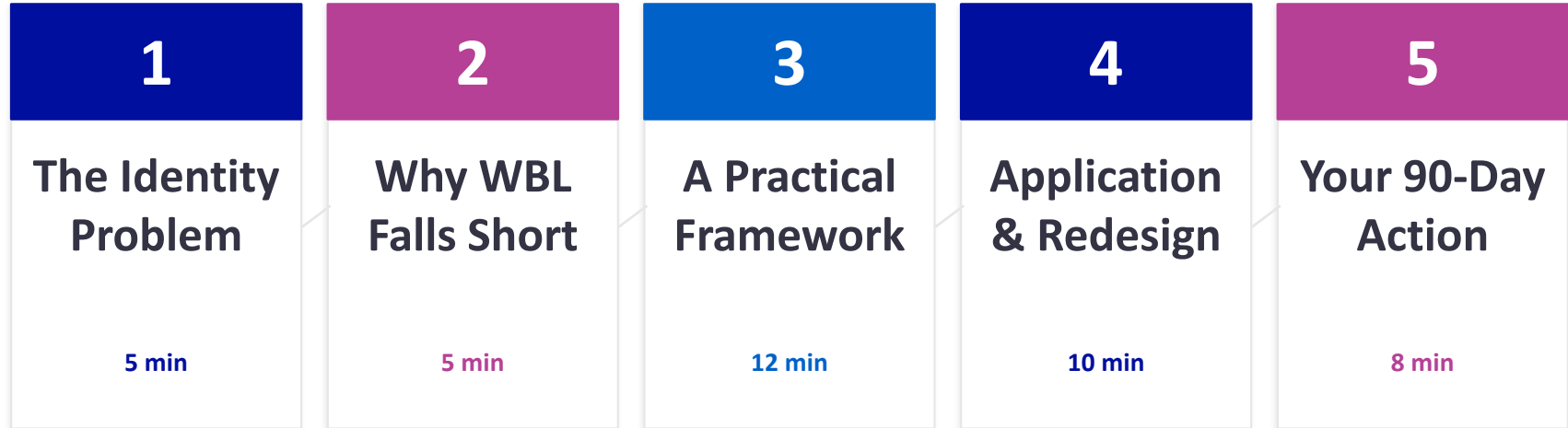
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MGT

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Today's Flow

Problem → framework → action. Every section builds toward something you can implement next week.



The Gap Isn't Awareness — It's Identity

Students know careers exist. The crisis is they don't know themselves well enough to claim one.

WHAT WE DESIGN FOR

- Students know jobs exist
- Exposure to careers
- Task completion
- Positive experience

WHAT STUDENTS ACTUALLY NEED

- To know themselves as workers
- Identity formed by design
- Clarity — not just completion
- A sense of fit and direction

The gap is design — not effort.

What Occupational Identity Actually Means

A functional checklist — four questions students should be able to answer after quality WBL.



IDENTITY

What kind of worker am I?



ENVIRONMENT

Where do I thrive?



BEHAVIOR

How do I show up?



VALUES

What do I value in work?

Can students answer these after your program?

WBL Shapes Identity — By Design or Default

WBL shapes who students think they are as workers. The only question is whether your design makes that better — or worse.

WBL shapes identity — always.

INTENTIONAL DESIGN

→ **Stronger identity**

Students leave with clarity about fit, values, and direction.

DEFAULT DESIGN

→ **Distorted identity**

Students leave with confusion, misread signals, or nothing at all.

Discovery Runs Both Directions

A student learning what they don't want is just as valuable as one who finds their passion. Both are identity wins.



THIS FITS ME

- I like this work
- I thrive in this environment
- I want more of this



THIS IS RULED OUT

- I don't like this work
- I don't thrive here
- I don't want this path

Ruling out is progress. Both directions count as success.

Where Is Identity Forming?



TURN & TALK

Where are students building identity — vs. just observing — in your current program?

- Think of a specific placement
- Pair up with a neighbor
- Share one example each



WRITE / REFLECT

- Name one moment where identity IS forming
- Name one moment where identity is MISSED
- Be specific — name a real placement or touchpoint
- We will use these in Section 4

Where Systems Stall

Most WBL systems are built for completion — not clarity. The gap between those two is where identity formation gets lost.



The logic that stalls:
Exposure → tasks →
completion

The missing link:
Structured reflection

The cost:
Students finish without
identity clarity

The Common Outcome: Done But Unclear

A student can have a great experience and still leave with no identity clarity. That is the most common outcome in WBL today.



CASE FILE

A familiar story

- Student completes placement
- Experience is positive
- Supervisor is supportive
- No structured reflection
- Student leaves — unclear or with “vibes” only

WHAT HAPPENED

A positive, well-run placement — by every surface measure, a success.

WHAT WAS LOST

The identity opportunity — present the whole time, never captured.

Where Does Your System, School, or Program Sit?

COMPLETION FOCUS

IDENTITY FOCUS



Where is your system today?



TURN & TALK

What would be your first step in filling the gaps in the case study?

Where does *your* system sit today — closer to completion or clarity?

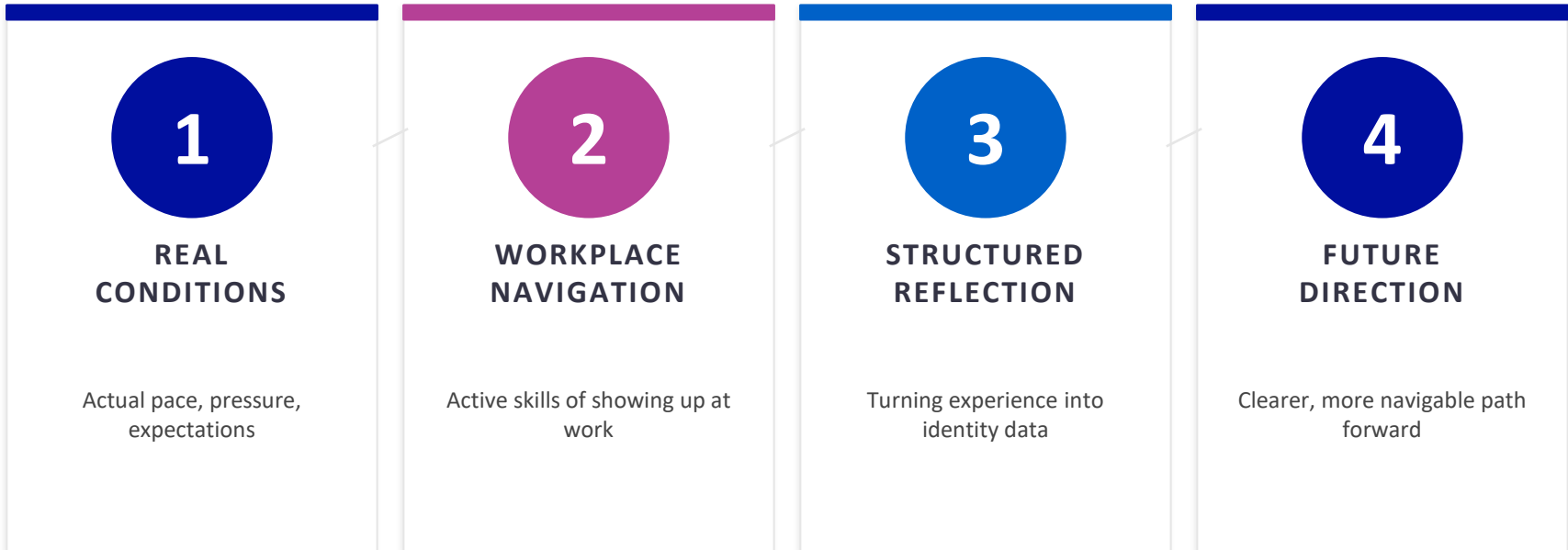


WRITE / REFLECT

- What is the last touchpoint where identity is actively supported?
- What happens after that point?
- Be honest — the diagnosis is the starting point
- How does the data gleaned from your touchpoints drive your program design?

4 Components That Build Occupational Identity

Real Conditions, Navigation, Reflection, Direction. All four must be present — they work as a system, not independently.



All four must be present for any functional, high-quality WBL experience.

Component 1: Real Conditions

Students cannot learn who they are as workers in artificial environments. Real identity requires real conditions.

1

Discomfort is data – not something to avoid.

CURATED EXPERIENCE

- Sanitized environments
- Over-supervised tasks
- Simplified expectations
- Discomfort avoided

REAL CONDITIONS

- Actual pace and pressure
- Genuine expectations
- Imperfect environments
- Discomfort is data

Component 2: Workplace Navigation

Students discover how they show up as workers only by practicing the real skills of navigating a workplace — not by watching.

2

Active participation — not observation.



Communication

in workplace contexts



Self-advocacy

with supervisors and peers



Roles & systems

understanding how work flows



Relationships

building workplace trust

Component 3: Structured Reflection

Reflection is the mechanism that turns experience into identity clarity. Without it, WBL is just time spent.

3

Must be built in — not assumed.

1 What did I like — and why?

2 What didn't I like — and why?

3 What did I learn about myself?

4 What does this mean for my path?

Component 4: Future Direction

The measure of WBL is not what students did — it is whether they left with a clearer, more navigable sense of where they are going.

4

Direction narrows the field — that is success.

MANY POSSIBILITIES

PATHS REFINED

CLEARER DIRECTION



Preferences clarified

through lived experience



Interests refined

not just listed



Paths eliminated

ruling out is progress



Next steps actionable

what to do next week

Strongest and Weakest Component

Turn & Talk: Which component is strongest? Weakest? | Write/Reflect: Fill in the table below.

COMPONENT	WHAT WE DO	WHAT IS MISSING
1. Real Conditions	-----	-----
2. Navigation	-----	-----
3. Reflection	-----	-----
4. Direction	-----	-----

Circle your biggest gap — it becomes your redesign target in Section 4.

Access Isn't Equal — WBL Is an Equity Lever

When identity-building WBL is left to chance, students with the least access pay the highest price. Intentional design is an equity mandate.



WHAT VARIES BY BACKGROUND

- Networks that open doors
- Confidence to navigate
- Exposure to real conditions
- Family knowledge of careers



WHAT INTENTIONAL DESIGN CAN EQUALIZE

- Access to identity-forming experiences
- Structured reflection for every student
- Placement in real conditions
- Expanded network exposure

Design for access — or design out equity.

Case Scenario: The Missed Opportunity

A student can do everything right and still leave a WBL experience without identity clarity. This case shows how.



CASE FILE

WBL Placement



Student

CASE FACTS

- Student completes 120-hour internship at local employer
- Assigned mostly low-risk, task-based work (data entry, basic support)
- Supervisor is friendly, available, gives positive feedback
- Student is rarely asked to make decisions or solve problems
- Limited exposure to team meetings or cross-department work
- No structured check-ins beyond task completion
- No prompts to reflect on preferences, strengths, or fit
- Student reports: “It was good... I guess?”
- Leaves with no clearer sense of next steps or direction

What did this student gain? • What did they lose?



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Analyze the Experience



SMALL GROUP (3–4 people): Analyze the case using the four-component framework:

1. Real Conditions
2. Workplace Navigation
3. Structured Reflection
4. Future Direction

1

What worked in this experience?

2

What is missing from this experience?

3

What identity opportunity was lost?

4

What is the single highest-leverage change?

5 Moves That Shift the Work

Structural moves — not mindset shifts. This is what it takes to redesign WBL for identity outcomes at the system level.

1



Build reflection in by default



Adding a midpoint identity check-in, using 3-question weekly reflection prompts, requiring a short end-of-week debrief

2



Train supervisors — not just students



Giving supervisors 3 questions to ask students weekly, hosting a 30-min supervisor orientation, sharing a simple “how to coach students” guide

3



Ensure real conditions — resist curation



Letting students attend real team meetings, assigning work with real stakes or deadlines, allowing exposure to challenges or conflict

4



Expand network access for all students



Requiring 2+ professional introductions per student, hosting a mentor or networking session, connecting students to multiple roles/departments

5



Redefine success: identity, not completion



Tracking student clarity - not just hours, asking “what did you rule out?”, celebrating “this isn’t for me” outcomes

Dot it down — which of these 5 shifts and which specific examples resonate with you?

Your 90-Day Shift

Every practitioner leaves with one specific, realistic, and owned commitment — not a goal, a shift.

SPECIFIC

Not a general goal

REALISTIC

Within your authority

ACTIONABLE

Starting next week

OWNED

You are accountable

YOUR 90-DAY COMMITMENT

In the next 90 days, I will _____
so that students

_____.

Your signature

Write it as: I will ___ by ___.

Your 90-Day Commitment



WRITE / REFLECT | 3 min

Complete your 90-day shift statement.

Format:

I will _____ by _____.



TURN & TALK

2 min

- Share your shift with a partner
- Partner asks: Is this specific enough to track? What does this look like in reality? How will this move my program(s) forward?
- Brainstorm with your partner: Are my current business/industry partners ready for this? What would support look like in this shift?

Make It Real: Simple Execution Framework

Define it. Involve the right people. Pilot in one place. Gather feedback. Keep the first move small enough to actually make.

START HERE

1

Define

the shift with precision

2

Involve

the right stakeholders

3

Pilot

in one program or site

4

Gather

feedback before
expanding

Small first move beats a perfect plan.

The One Question That Matters

Every WBL design decision should be tested against one question.

Can students leave with a clearer sense of:



WHO THEY ARE



WHAT FITS THEM



WHERE THEY'RE GOING

If not — the design needs to change. Start small, pilot the shift with a strong partner, keep what works, and expand!

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Action > Perfection

One move. One student. One program.

Want help in redesigning your approach? Reach out!

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