



Competitive edge

Asper Co-operative Education Program

Employers who pursue top talent from the I.H. Asper School of Business are gaining a competitive edge through the Asper Co-operative Education Program.

Established in 2006, the program gives employers an opportunity to recruit and “test-drive” highly motivated students who consistently excel during their four-month work placements.

“Approximately 80 per cent of our students will end up with their first career job post-graduation with one of their previous co-op employers, so it’s a great recruitment and retention tool for employers,” says Kelly Mahoney, director of the Asper Career Development Centre.

“You can bring them in for a four-month period and assess the skill set, the aptitude, personality fit with your team ... and then if you like them you certainly have the opportunity to invite them to work full-time or do another placement.”

Mahoney says 96 per cent of employers who participate in the program say they

would hire their co-op student if given the opportunity, and 99.6 per cent would recommend the co-op program to other employers, who may be eligible for a tax credit that covers 15 per cent of the student salaries.

The benefits run both ways. Students compete for paid work placements that are meaningful and relevant to their field of study. Starting at the end of their second year of university, they have three four-month co-op placements over the following two years. They’re exposed to different workplace cultures and management styles and they’re able to apply their academic training in hands-on roles that contribute to the employer’s bottom line.

The employment rate for graduates last year was 100 per cent, and with a full year of job experience under their belts, students have a better understanding of the type of work and workplace environment that suits them, a factor that may contribute to higher retention rates

for their employers.

Each year, participants are invited to nominate a Co-op Student of the Year and a Co-op Employer of the Year.

International student Liying (Jenny) Peng won the 2016 Student of the Year Award following her first co-op placement with Manitoba Harvest Hemp Foods last summer.

Peng, who is majoring in Accounting and Management Information Systems, completed two projects – testing a new online store and rewriting a financial reporting package – with a degree of independence and professionalism the company would expect from a full-time employee.

“It’s almost the first time in my life that someone put so much faith in me and delegated really high level work for me,” Peng says.

“I think I was lucky – however, I also think I did an exceptional performance.”

Peng has since completed a second co-op placement with Investors Group, and her



Top left: 2016 Student of the Year Jenny Peng.

Above: 2015 Student of the Year Indigo Adam-Grant.

Photos courtesy of the I.H. Asper School of Business

Opposite page: 24-7 Intouch staff and students. Top from left: Director of Marketing Jaime Dzikowski, former co-op student and recent hire Brittany Karam. Middle from left: Charles Ventura, Shelly Plett, co-op student Indigo Adam-Grant, Bradford Gyselman. Bottom from left: current co-op student Paige Small, Celyna Yu.

Photo by Darcy Finley

experiences have inspired her to strengthen her communications and leadership skills.

The 2016 Employer of the Year was 24-7 Intouch Contact Centres, an innovative, rapidly growing company that provides customer service for many high-profile brands. Mahoney says three co-op students who nominated the company said they looked forward to going to work there every day.

"They were exposed to an amazing range of professional opportunities, and all made significant contributions for which they felt appreciated."

24-7 Intouch vice-president of Marketing Morgan Stewart, a 2009 Asper School graduate, says company executives were honoured to receive the award.

"It gives us recognition among new grads that we provide meaningful work to junior team members and have energetic people ready to motivate and mentor them," Stewart says.

"It's important that we continue to grow our corporate headquarters here in Winnipeg, and by investing in the best of the best that

the Asper School has to offer we're hopeful that they will choose us when they graduate."

Recent 24-7 Intouch co-op student and graduate, Brittany Karam, has chosen to start her career with the company.

2015 Co-op Student of the Year Indigo Adam-Grant was among the students who nominated 24-7 Intouch. Her work there included researching potential clients' current customer service practices and writing detailed sales requests for proposals.

"I did some major work for some major brands, which would mean a lot of money for the company if they did get them as a client," Adam-Grant says.

A Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) student, Adam-Grant has completed three co-op placements. Her first co-op employer, PepsiCo Canada, hired her for an entry level management position that she'll take on when she graduates next spring. During her PepsiCo placement, she significantly increased incremental display space in stores and demonstrated the value of implementing a new sales practice.

During her second co-op placement, at StandardAero, Adam-Grant and another co-op student built automatic Excel templates to update data reports, saving some full-time employees hours of time each week.

"The co-op program has been by far the best decision I made in my degree," she says. "It allowed me to learn new skills, and the positions that I was put in were real positions that actually helped the companies I was working for."

The only program in Manitoba accredited by CAFCE (the Canadian Association for Co-operative Education), the Asper Co-op is also one of the province's largest.

Along with academics, Mahoney says students participate in professional development training to ensure they have all the tools they need to be successful, including business communications, professional etiquette, teamwork and problem-solving skills that employers value.

"You can take advantage of that training process and not have to go through it yourself." ■