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DEVELOPMENT OF EXPERIENTIAL APPLICATIONS IN HRM: PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH AND PREACHING FOR PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

The critical elements in the development of experiential exercises are the extent to which they incorporate the core judgements and actions which students or trainees will have to apply in their occupational careers, and the degree to which it is concordant with how adults learn. Other design criteria such a efficiency, simplicity, logistics, and entertainment value are engineered around these important elements. A successful application of these elements to a survey course in Human Resource Management is described.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Concordia University, an urban multiversity with a total enrollment exceeding 25,000, offers undergraduates the options of a major or minor concentration, as well as free electives, in Human Resource Management (HRM). Roughly a quarter of the student body are enrolled in business programs and learners in related disciplines such as economics and the behavioral sciences often cross register. HRM and HRM specialties such as industrial relations (IR), industrial health and safety or compensation are common career goals. However, there is general recognition that most university graduates are also expected to understand and implement HRM policies and procedures as managers and supervisors even though their specializations are in professional practice such as accountancy or business law. In 199 1-92, eight regular sections of the introductory survey course were scheduled, with additional sections provided for diploma and extension programs.

Planning and implementing the introductory survey course in HRM is a challenge. The course must capture the interest of HRM and IR majors, who will go on to a series of exposures to the executive responsibilities and technical operations of contemporary human resource managers. Simultaneously, the course must also develop general competence in the approximately two-thirds of enrollees who will likely never formally study the subject again. It must meet short-term criteria such as student evaluations and reasonable preparation and grading workloads for instructors while meeting long-term requirements of effectiveness in an increasingly technical but also socio-politically contentious discipline. It must meet the standards of educational practice, such as motivation, pace, reinforcement, and practice while adapting to the real constraints of large classes, variation across instructors, and the limited time and energy which full-time or employed students are able or willing to devote to class requirements.

Historically, the course was a success in terms of enrollment, course appraisals, recruitment of majors, and student performance on graded assignments and examinations. The analytic problem which arose in revising the course for subsequent years was, in fact, that we could not convincingly account to ourselves for its success on those criteria and, as with most universities, had no means of relating the course to the subsequent job function of enrollees. A number of different approaches were tried. Those included 1) a quantitative industrial psychology strategy with problems to solve; 2) current issues approach focusing on incorporating competing priorities of stakeholders such as top management, HRM staff, supervisors, advocacy organizations, and individual employees; 3) case-based format alternately using "canned" cases and episodes from the instructors' personal practices; 4) group projects keyed to the core topic areas, in which students researched and critiqued current practice in an organization of their choice; and 5) successions of experiential learning exercises selected or adapted to provide real and simulated hands-on exposure to issues germane to the respective topic areas. Each of those classroom strategies demonstrated a significant improvement over the traditional lecture-discussion format; however, they all "worked" equally

well. Our initial conclusions were an archetype of Attribution Theory (Kelly, 1973): instructors were all senior, experienced people with strong backgrounds in both research and practice, and their insights and enthusiasm may have been the explanation why the strengths, weaknesses, and differential emphases on different ways of structuring exercises failed to emerge. Our more candid assessments were that students are incredibly adaptive people who genuinely want to succeed, and they were singly and jointly working at practicing what we preached and feeding it back to us. While they were unequivocally successful at that enterprise, (an acceptable outcome if a university were a closed system) there was less agreement on whether we were preaching what they would actually need to practice after graduation.

There appeared to be two ways of proceeding. One, which our instinct as academics supported, was to do research on the functioning of our graduates as a kind of training needs analysis. That was obviated both by real constraints, such as the absence of any census upon which a sample frame could be constructed, and by methodological problems in ruling out the effects of other experience. The other option, which somewhat surprisingly had not been previously employed, was to conduct an occupational analysis of the role of the HRM practitioner, selecting from that the core responsibilities to be represented. That came closer to practicing what we practice ourselves and was within reach of a series of discussions among the academic and adjunct teaching staff active in the HRM area.

FROM ANALYSIS TO CORE CONTENT

The core content of HRM practice is straightforward. It consists of building and maintaining a match between people and jobs or positions. To achieve this the practitioner must complete five essential tasks: a) analyzing the content of the job, and applying that information to prospective and actual incumbents, 2) by developing and applying selection criteria to fill those positions with the candidates most likely to succeed; d) further improving the job-person match with training and development interventions; 4) reinforcing effective performance with internally equitable and externally competitive compensation; and 5) confirming the adequacy of selection, training and development and reward actions by appraising actual performance (Cascio, 1 992; Stone and Meltz, 1988). This series of tasks is performed in a series of cyclical, iterative loops, enabling practitioners to correct and update as employment conditions and employee progress evolves.

Knowing these core functions, however, does not provide sufficient guidance to identify or select those aspects of the performance or the means of achieving it, which should be developed and emphasized in training activities. The two professional approaches which could be used in our practice are identifying the state-of-the art methods which produce the most satisfactory and complete performance and are likely to be expected by sophisticated employers; and using a critical incident or job element analysis to focus on those aspects which are essential for effective performance yet show the greatest variance in actual function. Restated, we concentrated on those approaches, which would require expert practice and present significant difficulty to an average learner. Applying those criteria to the five core functions resulted in the following conclusions.

Job analysis consists of a sequence of tasks beginning with selecting and sampling positions and concluding with validation. The only aspect in which there is substantial dispute within the HRM field or serious difficulty among practitioners is in integrating job descriptive material into a systematic, comprehensive whole. Despite general professional agreement that a job analysis report or position description should cover the employee's contributions or inputs (know how. effort.

responsibility accepted, and tolerance of working conditions), the action-task sequences which define how the job should be done, and the output deliverables which represent successful completion, few texts or job analysis methods actually generate all three. Most do not cover the position deliverables, which are the primary connection to business plans and general management concerns. Thus, a logical assignment content was to identify all three types of job requirements, using a simplified version of the two most complete formats, VERJAS (Bemis and Belenky, 1 983) and Functional Job Analysis McCormick, 1979.

The selection process likewise consists of a series of substeps or tasks. Principal among those is determining what criteria should be applied, with what weighting, and the corresponding challenge of measuring the strength of those qualities or characteristics among people who (via external recruiting, lateral transfer or vertical mobility) are candidates for the position in question. Three issues in the selection process appear to be both critical to fairness and performance outcomes of those ultimately hired, and difficult for learners to comprehend from published materials. Those are 1) the assessment of criterion validity; 2) the selection of measurement techniques; and 3) the distinction between measurement of potential versus measurement of performance. The point in real world practice at which all three issues converge is in the incorporation of work or job dimension tests into pre-selection measurements. The operational rule of thumb is that the more closely a test corresponds to a "tryout" of the work itself, the greater its predictive validity and potential fairness (Hunter and Hunter, 1984). The assignment content which derives from that is compiling a series of work tests which can be incorporated into the traditional measurement opportunities of interviews, references, testing, and portfolio requirements.

Training and development (T&D) is in outline perhaps the easiest and least controversial material for learners to grasp and apply, consisting in the main of assessing training requirements, sourcing or designing the needed exposure, and evaluating the cost and impacts. A controversy in the field concerns the relation between training methods and subsequent performance. This leads to the design issue of how to incorporate the features of apprenticeship and mentorship efficiently into widescale training and development activities, so that learners will receive adequate development in such key areas as goal setting, modelling, practice, and feedback (Wesley and Latham, 1991). The content which most richly represents that issue is the contrast between excellent and merely adequate performers.

Compensation is not really one function but several. These involve the computation of relative position value, incorporation of corrections for labor market factors such as scarcity, building incentives for superior performance, designing systems of fringe benefits, and administering the total pay package. Achieving fair and attractive base rates of pay is the aspect, which appears most central. Moreover, because of the continuing technical and legal conflict between means of measuring value, learners need to be familiar with all three and with the differences in value, which they imply. The core content thus concerns the means of position valuation based upon inputs, deliverables, and external value in the job market (Belcher and Atchinson, 1970).

Performance appraisal resolves conceptually into two processes: 1) the assessment of the correspondence between employees' actual inputs, task chain completion and delivered outputs and those which are expected from the position analysis; and 2) communicating those findings in a format which is readily communicated and comprehended and which specifies specific gradations of performance. The latter applies both in data collection and in discussion of the findings with subordinates. There is general consensus that the Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scale (BARS) provides a methodologically efficient and reliable method of achieving those objectives, although it requires a substantial population base to justify the development effort (Bernardin and Smith, 1981). Hence, that is the preferred focus for programming in performance appraisal.

DESIGNING FOR THE ADULT LEARNER

Knowing what to teach is necessary, but not sufficient, for the design of teaching materials and techniques. The process must also be adapted to jibe with the way in which the target audience learns. The literature of learning psychology and education provides general guidelines regarding tempo, demonstration, imitation, coaching, feedback, transfer, and reinforcement. They are conspicuously sparse, however, in regard to the requirement most common in training people for employment responsibilities: namely, the fact that all but a tiny proportion of the learners are adults. By about the age of 11-12 the learning strategies of unimpaired students alter. Learners move from a strategy substantially based upon the accumulation of an elaborated fund of knowledge, to a more efficient strategy, which utilizes the information, which they have acquired. In order to tap that technology, one must access the literature of androgogy, or adult learning (Knowles, 1978; Knox, 1 977).

Adult learners tend to start building mastery by acquiring a simplified causal model of how a phenomenon works, because for them the "whole enables them to see where the detail fits into place and to use analogies and modules from their existing fund of experience. This meant that any exercise would ideally be preceded by readings and class sessions in which the general principles could be learned and illustrated with practical examples.

A second feature of adult learners is the way in which they elaborate their understanding of a general principle. While part of that occurs with reference to personal experience, much of the learning activity involves refining and confirming the principles by applying them ideally to live subject matter in which the adult learner can get a "hands-on" feel for the constructs and relationships. In practical terms, this implied that the most effective way to simulate the HRM functions to be illustrated would be not to simulate them at all. Rather the applications should involve field assessments and analyses with real working people instead of classroom exercises.

A third characteristic of adult learners is that they extend the applicability of a general principle in an experimental fashion. That generally involves applying the thinking or method to additional cases to see the sorts of adaptation, which would be required. The design impact of that point was to try to incorporate exposure to doing job analyses, building work tests, or other field assignments in other settings. The approach which appeared to offer the best tradeoff between effort and learning was to have the learners study different occupations and report to one another in the class sessions.

A final element which appears to particularly typify the adult learner is the way in which they utilize colleagues. Whereas immature learners tend to prefer group work as a way of diffusing personal anxieties (e.g., about approaching working people or firms) and setting standards of effort and contribution, the adult learner tends to use colleagues as he/she would on a team or in an office setting that is to promote brainstorming, to get and give help, ideas, and encouragement, and to review and critique modules of work before they are delivered. Inasmuch as group work is both preferred and in the terms outlined should have much the same effect as additional class sessions (perhaps more so because the learner would be receiving the same "message" in different forms from additional sources), a definite implication was to base the field work on a group project model. This was not always possible for logistic reasons. A majority of Concordia students commute to classes and/or hold full-time jobs themselves. However, even by making group work voluntary, the proportion who elect to shoulder the additional effort and complexity is gratifying.

THE FINAL APPLICATION DESIGN

The design which emerged from the consideration of the critical HRM job content and the learning strategies of adult learners is shown in detail in the appendix. The first evening of class provides for no preparation and hence is used for an icebreaker discussion to introduce the issue of human resource planning. Subsequently, the class members are organized into project syndicates within which they will work out the field project requirements. In the week prior to their in-class presentations, the conceptual material they will be applying is reviewed and analyzed. The syndicates receive feedback from the class and the professor, allowing them to present a finalized written report.

The content for each of the group project assignments is derived from the HAM position analysis. The details of the content are described in sufficient detail in the appendix so that little further comment is required here. The reader is urged to note in reading the assignments how the other material from those topic areas must be mastered in order to complete the assignments.

The procedures for each of the field assignments are structurally similar. The problem is stated such that it requires a simplified occupational analysis of a position, for which each group member is asked to contribute an interview with one member of that occupation. That enables much of the data collection to be done independently and concentrates the group discussion on analysis and assessment. The occupation studied can be retained from project to project but in most instances the group members elect to study a range of positions both for exposure and variety. Having completed the position analysis, the group then proceeds to complete the specifics of the assignment, such as developing selection tests, assessing relative compensation value or generating appraisal criteria and measures. Repeated exposure and refinement is built in, as the group members successively develop their findings, organize an oral class report, and then incorporate their experiences into a written project summary submission.

Results based upon two years of utilization of this experiential method do not demonstrate a striking improvement in formal outcome measures such as student appraisals. Those ratings were high and have remained so. Rather, the assurance is based upon the students' feedback and belief of the instructors that they are teaching what will be expected in HAM and supervisory practice and that is being absorbed and applied effectively.

APPENDIX

GROUP PROJECT ASSIGNMENTS

Job Analysis

• Oral presentation week 4
• Written report due week 5

Select a vocation which interests you and study it. Interview people who do that work and if possible watch them in action. If you get stuck for time, pick a job you know well such as lifeguard or salesperson. You should be able to get one interview per group member.

For your report assume that you are giving a briefing to young people (e.g.. new recruits) on how to succeed in that occupation. Make up a series of slides which show: 1) the deliverables or results which the employee produces and passes on to the supervisor or other workers; 2) the chain of tasks and actions the employee performs which produce each of those results (hint: think of writing a recipe); and 3) the inputs, in terms of skills and knowledge, effort, taking responsibility, and tolerating working conditions, which the employee must "give" in generating the required deliverables; 4) The context within which satisfactory performance is expected or unsatisfactory results might be excused.

In your report compare what you learned by organizing the information in this fashion with the way in which the people you interviewed described the job to you. In your written report, analyze the adequacy with which these slides encapsulate the job. For example, what is left out? What is overemphasized versus glossed over? Would they produce solid performance? Where might an employee get confused? How would an employee know how to handle the myriad of little exceptions, threats and opportunities, which inevitably crop up?

Selection Methods

• Oral reports week 6

• Written reports due week 7
The objective of this assignment is to think through how we can make our pre-employment assessment of applicants more valid and fair by making them tests of the work itself or work dimensions. We can achieve that by examining the way the applicant has performed in past assignments and how the candidate can perform if we ask him/her to do samples of relevant work during the interview or testing stages of assessment. That might include actual pieces of work or questions, which ask what if... - or "how would you....

Study a kind of position and determine the critical inputs, methods, and deliverables, which describe successful performance. Those are our selection criteria. You may re-use your previous job analysis or you can look at another kind of work. We would like you to use that information two ways.

First, assume that we anticipate openings for that kind of employee, and that we anticipate hiring from a pool of people who have had identical or very similar positions in the past. For each of the selection criteria which you have listed, identify a way in which we could assess the experienced candidates' strength on that criterion by examining their past performance (e.g., in questions we ask their referees or work samples we ask them to show us) and by testing their capacity when they come for an interview (e.g., interview questions and work tests).

Then assume that we could not find experienced people to fill those openings and that we have decided to fill the jobs by hiring and training inexperienced new graduates. That means that we won't be able to examine how they performed on the actual job. Discuss how we would have to modify the measures we would use with experienced people, while still administering work or job dimension tests.

Does this have any value in how you present yourself when you apply for a job?

Training and Socialization Assessment

• Oral reports week 8
• Oral reports due week 9

The objective of this assignment is to try to identify differences in the training and socialization some people receive that enables them to be genuine high performers. Select a kind of work in which you can make contact with individuals who are extremely successful within their vocation. Interview some of those people and try to account for experiences, which they had, which helped them become high performers.

In particular, look for experiences, which we believe, should make a significant difference in how people approach work assignments. Those might include:

a. having had a mentor who helped them learn
b. being overtrained during training, to do more varying or difficult tasks
c. being socialized to expect to show initiative, solve problems, and grasp opportunities
d. training experience(s) which stressed dedication, a calling, the welfare of the client or customer or employees, responsibility to others
e. training experiences which provided rich opportunity for sheltered practice
f. undergoing training which stressed highly cohesive teams and teamwork

Developing and Rationalizing a Set of BARS

• Oral report week 11
• Written report due week 1 2

Interview people doing a particular job about the way their performances is currently evaluated, and describe the measure and procedures. If possible attach samples of the instruments used as appendices.

Working from an occupational analysis, identify about 6-8 of the most critical criteria or dimensions of the job, which differentiate gradations of performance. Typically those will be things that must be done the right way or results which must be achieved to achieve good performance. In one sentence each, justify those criteria. Try to split your

criteria so that about half represent process measures and half represent outcome measures.

For each of the criteria write a BARS scale describing five levels of performance between excellent and poor. (It will be easiest to split up this portion and then discuss your contributions.) See the example in the text for proper format.

Compensation

• Oral reports week 13

• Written reports due week 13
Select two positions in the same organization, one each from two families of jobs. For example at Concordia you might select secretaries and librarians. Compute what the salaries for those positions should be using three different methods: 1) the "going" or external rate in the job market; 2) the rates which the two jobs should be paid based upon the "compensable factors" of skills and knowledge, effort, responsibility, and working conditions; and 3) the value added by the people doing those jobs. This might be difficult for some vocations, so you might look at the market value of the goods or services, which they produce.

Explain the different rates of compensation, which are generated by these methods, and discuss which produces the most fair and equitable answer.

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