Developing Tomorrow's Recruiters:
A Win-Win Model for Curriculum Development

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ABSTRACT

The University of Pittsburgh recently created a Society of Human Resource aligned curriculum for its new Human Resources management major. The curriculum of each required human resource course in the major includes a term long experience-based project often involving a corporate partner. The required staffing course has adopted a new corporate partnership model which extends the experience-based learning into cutting-edge areas of the field to benefit not only the student but the corporate partners as well. This paper examines the development of the curricular model and corporate partnerships with special attention to the value added to students and the companies. Student and company feedback on the project suggests strong interest and appreciation for the project itself and the supporting curricular model.

Key words: Human resources, experience-based learning, curricular model

INTRODUCTION

The University of Pittsburgh recently created a Human Resources Management major in its College of Business Administration. The major was developed with the intention of creating a cutting edge focus for students in the field such that program graduates would be sought after for employment opportunities and would be capable of making immediate value added contributions to the hiring firm. The major's curriculum was developed to align with Society of Human Resources (SHRM) initiatives such that students in the major would be prepared to take the SHRM exam upon meeting specified requirements. Most importantly, the curriculum was developed to incorporate experience-based learning projects as a foundation for applying core course concepts.

Human Resources Staffing is a three credit required course in the human resources major. The course provides an in-depth look at the organizational staffing process with a special emphasis on forecasting, recruitment, selection and retention management. Key assessment tools featuring human resource metrics and analytics support coverage of the core topics. But the centerpiece of the class is a two part, semester-long experience-based project developed in conjunction with and carried out with two companies. The first is a large national financial services institution located in Pittsburgh. The second is a small, rapidly growing educational technology firm located in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. These two organizations are willing partners in the development of a new curricular model incorporating experience-based learning into coursework that delivers substantive value added contributions to the students, university and partner firms.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Initial development of a human resource management curriculum built on a foundation of experience-based learning was spurred by a 2002 American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business report, *Management Education at Risk*. The report noted that "preparation for the rapid pace of business cannot be obtained from textbooks and cases, many of which are outdated before they are published" (AACSB, 2002). In addition, the report called for "outward-facing curricula and experiential education [that] can create the critical intersection between classroom and business learning that keeps faculty and students connected to rapidly changing business models" (AACSB, 2002).

More recently studies have shown that stimulating and positive environments energize student learning (Pacarella & Terenzini, 2005) and involving students in real settings with many of the same challenges they will face in a workplace provides authentic experiences for students (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Other empirical studies indicate that active techniques such as problem solving in such exercises increase learning (Hackathorn, et. al., 2011 and Michel, et. al., 2009).

CORPORATE PARTNERSHIPS AND AN EXPERIENCE-BASED CURRICULAR MODEL

The College of Business Administration at the University of Pittsburgh operates under the motto, "From the classroom. To the city. To the world." The school focuses on creating corporate-university partnerships with many of the locally-based nationally recognized firms which are situated within a short bus ride of the urban campus. The human resource major has formulated a unique interpretation of that partnership inviting the human resource departments of major companies to regularly visit the classroom and work with potential hires for their firms in a forum where they will be able to regularly interact with such candidates and assess their

viability for employment in their firms.

This unique curricular model is a "win-win" situation for all parties involved. The central point of the model is, quite naturally, the student. Using a SHRM-aligned curriculum, human resource majors at the university are immersed in the theory of the discipline in the opening survey course of the major. As students progress through upper level required and elective courses they continue to become acquainted with research and theory in the field and then are offered opportunities to interact with corporate partners during class sessions which lead to internship and project opportunities to apply the concepts they have learned. Graduates of the major have frequently accumulated sufficient SHRM approved hours to qualify to take the SHRM certification exam. In addition, the classroom interactions and internship opportunities often lead to job offers.

Corporate partners recognize the opportunity this model affords them to more fully assess potential candidates for positions within their firms in a very cost effective manner. In addition, employees at these firms enjoy sharing their experiences in the field with those entering the area and the opportunity to grow positive perceptions of the human resource area as a whole.

PittBusiness also enjoys opportunities afforded by this curricular model as it provides an easy outlet for recognizing new practices in the field. Research samples and outlets are easily established with the firms and the marketing opportunities to prospective students are obvious. In sum, the corporate-university curricular partnership model represents an effective scenario for all involved parties.

TWIN PROJECTS

The twin projects that are the experiential foundation of this staffing course are designed to give students the opportunity for a simulated look at the detailed steps of a staffing program in a firm. Students began the first half of the twin projects by being placed into randomly generated teams of four to five members to work with the financial services institution. Each team competed against other class teams to be recognized at the project's end as the one team which developed the premiere staffing strategy for an IT department role in the financial institution.

The financial services institution project began the second class of the semester with a visit by members of the financial institution's human resource management team including the vice president of talent acquisition and the senior vice president of operations. The group spent the class talking about the firm's mission, division goals and talent acquisition objectives. In addition, specific details regarding the IT department and its role in the organization as well as the general nature of positions within the area were noted.

COMPONENT 1: JOB DESCRIPTION

Following a class on job analysis and job descriptions taught by the course instructor and a teleconference by three members of the financial services firm's talent acquisition department on specific conventions for job descriptions in the firm, students were individually charged with writing job descriptions for IT department positions assigned to the team. The positions included Application Developer, Business Systems Analyst, Platform Architect, IT Security Specialist, Scrum Master and Project Manager.

Completed job descriptions were graded based on criteria established by the talent acquisition department and instructor. Each team was then charged with creating a single job description for the entire team incorporating the best features of each group member's submission. The team job description became the focus of the remainder of the financial service firm's staffing project.

COMPONENT 2: RECRUITING STRATEGY FIRM ONE

Using an instructor developed model for key components in a recruiting strategy, students were to delineate a recruiting strategy to attract qualified candidates for their target IT department job. The strategy included the sources to be used with accompanying justification, the nature of the message presented in each recruiting channel and one sample of recruiting material that could be utilized in a chosen recruiting channel (e.g. brochure, Monster.com post).

Once more, following a series of exercises in the classroom which highlighted web crawling and analyzing company supplied databases of recruiting data using Excel functions like V-lookups and pivot tables, students took part in a one hour teleconference with two IT talent acquisition specialists from the financial services firm on various elements of the recruiting strategy.

COMPONENT 2A: RECRUITING STRATEGY FIRM TWO

After the students began working on the recruiting strategy with the financial services firm, they took part in a Zoom meeting with the co-founder of the small, rapidly growing educational technology firm located in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The co-founder shared the explosive growth of her firm and the need for IT, educational technology and project management specialists. Given the size of the firm and the nature of the services provided, recruiting strategies could not mirror traditional paths. Accordingly, the students were provided an educational technology specialist job description and charged with creating a recruiting

strategy to fill the position. Two unique constraints were placed on the strategy. First, the strategy had to be developed with minimal costs in mind (i.e. the initial target cost was $300). The other constraint was that the strategy had to target candidates worldwide.

Charging students with this second strategy development was designed to give them an opportunity for creation of cutting edge recruiting activities that they could juxtapose against the traditional methods of the financial services firm. This contrast will provide students a well rounded perspective on the recruiting options available to a firm and create a more realistic look at cost effective processes.

COMPONENT 3A: SELECTION STRATEGY FIRM ONE

Once a pool of candidates for the IT positions were identified, students were to develop a selection strategy for the positions. Class time was dedicated to a discussion of selection theory and specific selection techniques used and exercises were provided that analyzed company data for reliability, validity and predictability. Two IT talent acquisition specialists again participated in a teleconference with students sharing information regarding the financial services firm's selection techniques. A second teleconference was held by two other talent acquisition specialists centering on how to conduct effective candidate interviews including how to create interview evaluation forms for candidate assessment.

COMPONENT 3B: SELECTION STRATEGY FIRM TWO

After acquainting students with the specific elements of a selection strategy and providing them an opportunity to begin development in the financial services firm, group members were assigned a parallel activity in the educational technology firm. The educational technology specialist was again the focal position of the selection process.

COMPONENT 4A: INTERVIEW GUIDE AND EVALUATION FORM

As part of the selection process for the financial services and educational technology firms, teams were required to create an interview guide with questions for a one-half hour structured interview for IT department and educational technology specialist candidates. In addition, an evaluation form for interview responses was created.

COMPONENT 5: INTERVIEW SIMULATION

Undergraduate students in the College of Business Administration are not qualified for IT department or educational technology specialist positions, however, they are viable candidates for recruiter positions in the financial services firm. So, a recruiter job description was secured from the financial services firm and posted for student application. Each student on a team was paired with a counterpart on another team. Each member of the new pair would interview the other member such that all class members would get an opportunity to act as both an interviewee and an interviewer. The interview rooms in the College of Business Administration's Career Development Offices were secured for the simulation to enhance the real-world feel of the activity. In addition, students were required to create simulation based resumes for the activity and were to be in professional attire for the interview.

Prior to the recruiter interviews, teams were to create interview guides for a fifteen minute structured interview. Accompanying interview response evaluation forms were also developed. Each of these items were used in the interview simulation. Following an instructor led class on interview assessment and the actual interview simulation, students were to critically evaluate the content and delivery of their partner as an interviewer and interviewee as well as their own performance as an interviewer and interviewee.

Recognizing the nature of the selection techniques used in the educational technology firm (especially the types of interviews conducted), students were also required to create a Panopto recorded video interview for the position. The focal job was again the financial services recruiter position and the same interview guide and evaluation form used in the traditional interview simulation was used in the video interview with the same counterpart used in the traditional interview simulation. Once more students evaluated their counterparts in the online format. The intent behind this online activity was to acquaint students with a unique approach to selection being increasingly used by companies to select geographically dispersed candidates for positions in firms.

COMPONENT 6: CANDIDATE CHOICE/OFFER LETTER

Though candidates were not available even in a simulated format for students to "hire", teams were required to develop selection criteria and create an offer letter for successful candidates following a final teleconference with two IT talent acquisition specialists who shared the financial services firm's approach to candidate selection and the key provisions in candidate offer letters.

COMPONENT 7A: PROJECT PRESENTATION IT DEPARTMENT

Each team presented their staffing strategy projects in a formal report and in a 20 minute session to a panel of six members of the financial services firm. Given the size of the class, two panels consisting of two HR executives and four IT talent acquisition department specialists were formed.   Each panel was situated in a conference room where they were charged with listening to three presentations. The panels critiqued and evaluated the team presentations and determined a "winner" among the three teams. Each member of the two teams with premiere strategies were awarded gift cards.

COMPONENT 7B: PROJECT PRESENTATION TECH FIRM

Using the Zoom Meeting platform, students were scheduled to present their staffing projects to the co-founder of the educational technology firm and two of her associates. Paralleling the approach used by the financial services firm panels, the educational technology firm trio was to critique and evaluate each presentation. However, this phase of the project was unable to be completed as the educational technology firm had to re-schedule a client meeting during the intended presentation timeframe. In lieu of the presentations, formal written reports detailing the strategies were submitted to the group for evaluation.

COMPONENT 8: RETENTION MANAGEMENT ANALYTICS

The final section of the staffing project began with two instructor-led sessions on the theory of retention management and metrics used with retention management databases. To conclude the experience-based learning scenario, a human resource analyst from the financial services firm conducted a session covering the use of Excel and Tableau in the retention management area.   Using a retention management database from the firm, students analyzed the nature of turnover in the IT department over the past five years.

EVALUATION OF PROJECT

Evaluations of the twin projects generally show that the students felt the project was beneficial and assisted their learning of core concepts in the course. Specifically, 70% of the students responding to a university-administered online teaching survey indicated that the materials used in the course was helpful to learning course concepts and techniques to a considerable or high degree. Identical results were obtained to the query, "The course increased my knowledge."

Anecdotal comments supplied by students on the university teaching surveys also echo the benefit of this type of EBL project. When asked in an open ended survey format as to what aspects of the course were most beneficial to the student, class members replied:

- "The [FINANCIAL SERVICES FIRM] EBL project."
- "The [FINANCIAL SERVICES FIRM] project was a great learning experience."
- "Learned a TON about staffing, [FINANCIAL SERVICES FIRM] project very real life based."
- "EBL is a fantastic way to learn and apply knowledge. Keep doing the [FINANCIAL SERVICES FIRM] project!"
- "I loved the project we did with [FINANCIAL SERVICES FIRM]. It was really cool to work with an actual company and go through the whole process of hiring someone. It opened my eyes to all the work that goes into these types of things and peaked my interest in HR even more. It also gave me a really easy topic to talk about in interviews which was a nice added bonus."
- "The EBL projects are great! Actually learn something from them."

Similar anecdotal comments were found for the educational technology firm's part of the overall project although students also expressed extreme disappointment that the firm was unable to engage in the planned online evaluation meeting.

Negative anecdotal comments were noted by 28% of the responding class members. Those comments centered on the "pressure" that having two parallel projects created resulting from the disparate nature of the firms involved. (It must be noted that the dissimilar firms were chosen to allow students to clearly discern the different approaches to staffing taken in a large traditional firm versus a small "cutting edge" technology firm.)

This "twin" staffing project is a first time application of a corporate-university partnership curricular model developed by this author and beta tested two years ago. At the time of the original model development, participating firms noted their pleasure with the model and the benefits it provided them to assess quality talent for placement in their firms. Since the original model was developed, locally based, nationally recognized university corporate partners have "competed" with one another to participate in the human resource major projects. Currently corporate partner-based experiential projects are featured in the staffing, compensation, training and development and sports management courses in the college's human resource major. This fall human resource analytics were integrated into each of the project segments in each class. Again, corporate partners readily offered or developed databases for use in those instructor-led lessons.

Given the nature of interest levels and learning styles of today's students, presenting upper level human resource

management courses is a challenge. Long standing techniques like lecture and exams that assess recognition and memory effects of terminology and theory elements do not prepare students for today's dynamic work environment. To be globally competitive today's student needs variety in content and delivery. The experience-based learning project is an effective tool to complement other delivery methods to assist students in becoming proficient in the field. Thus, activities, such as this twin project provide a positive experience for students and corporate partners and help a university fulfill tenets of its core mission – to serve all members of a community.

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