

ABSEL AWARENESS AMONGST BUSINESS SCHOOL FACULTY: A TEN YEAR UPDATE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

An e-mail survey of 30,137 business faculty members from 426 AACSB schools across all business disciplines was undertaken to investigate business simulation game adoption and usage behavior in 2013. The survey produced 1024 fully complete responses for a 3.40% response rate. While many issues were addressed in this survey, the current paper examines only respondent awareness of ABSEL among business faculty members and compares this awareness to survey findings reported in 2003. The current survey results show that only 10.2% of all survey respondents are familiar with ABSEL. This can be compared to the 13.7% of 1056 survey respondents who were familiar with ABSEL as reported in the 2003 survey. Among current simulation game users in 2013, 15.5% stated that they are aware of ABSEL compared to 28.0% who were aware of ABSEL in 2003. Amongst former simulation game users, 17.3% are aware of ABSEL in 2013 compared to 22.9% in 2003. Finally, in 2013, only 2.5% of non-users of simulation games are aware of ABSEL which is exactly the same percentage of non-users of simulation games who were aware of ABSEL in 2003. The survey results suggest that ABSEL awareness has declined significantly in the last ten years while simulation usage itself has actually gone up. As was found in 2003, advertising, direct mail and e-mail may be the best means of communication for ABSEL to increase awareness. A cooperative advertising effort between ABSEL and simulation game publishers might also be useful.

INTRODUCTION

ABSEL has been in existence since 1974 and just recently celebrated its 40th anniversary as an organization.

The first ABSEL conference was organized by Bernie Keys, who became the first ABSEL President. The Conference, held at Oklahoma Christian College in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, came about through the efforts of Bernie Keys who contacted simulation game authors and known simulation game users to come together to discuss business gaming. Fifty-two papers were presented at this first conference which attracted 111 attendees who became the first ABSEL members. In the forty years since, ABSEL membership has continued to run between 100 and 200 members. It has long been a concern of ABSEL leadership as to how to grow the membership beyond these levels.

While ABSEL has been successful in that it has survived for forty years, continuously attracting enough new membership to replace lost membership, it has not thrived. Attendance at the most recent ABSEL meetings in San Diego in 2012 and Oklahoma City in 2013 has not been much larger than the attendance at the first meeting in Oklahoma City in 1974.

Being a small organization with restricted finances limits the ways in which ABSEL can promote itself. ABSEL members are expected to spread the word among colleagues about the organization; ABSEL has a website; ABSEL distributes the Bernie Keys Library; ABSEL has a featured column in each issue of *Simulation & Gaming*; ABSEL proceedings can be found in a number of libraries; ABSEL published the *Guide to Business Gaming and Experiential Learning* (1990); ABSEL spreads its yearly conferences from east coast to west coast across the U.S.; etc.

PAST RESEARCH

Although the issue of how to increase ABSEL

organizations among former business game users is likely to be less than the awareness among current game users. It was also felt that in the ten years since the last survey reporting on ABSEL awareness that ABSEL awareness should have increased given the widespread use of the internet by academics and the longer presence of the Bernie Keyes Library on the internet. As such, the following hypotheses are put forward:

- H1: Current simulation game users are more likely to be aware of ABSEL than non-users.
- H2: Current simulation game users are more likely to be aware of ABSEL than former users.
- H3: Former simulation game users are more likely to be aware of ABSEL than non-users.
- H4: ABSEL awareness in 2013 will be higher than ABSEL awareness in 2003 amongst current users, former users and non-users of simulation games.

METHODOLOGY

The data on ABSEL awareness in 2013 was gathered via an e-mail survey of 30,137 business faculty members from e-mail addresses compiled from the websites of 426 AACSB member schools, the ISAGA membership list and the ABSEL membership list. While our sample was quite large, not all faculty members at AACSB member schools were contacted. Only member schools in Canada and the continental United States were sampled. Among the 426 member schools selected, 131 were found to have spam filters that bounced the e-mail contacts. A follow-up direct mail appeal to these 131 schools is pending. A small number of schools did not have an English language website and some schools did not publish e-mail addresses for their faculty members.

There is no common format or approach to providing website information among AACSB schools and, as such, the identification of faculty members and their teaching areas could not always be determined. This resulted in some e-mails being sent to non-business faculty or to administrators or staff in the business faculties at certain schools. The e-mail cover letter preceding the questionnaires was designed to address the situation of unintended contact and to allow respondents to forward the e-mail to potentially interested parties or to opt out of the

survey.

The survey was addressed to simulation game users, former game users, and never/non-users of business simulation games. The appeal for participation was non-disguised and clearly identified the purpose for the survey and provided the names of the investigators and their contact information. Respondents were asked to log into a survey that was made available on a Fluid Surveys website using a link that was provided in the contact e-mail invitation. Once logged in, respondents were asked nine classification questions which were designed to stream them towards one of three questionnaires. One questionnaire was intended for current simulation game users, another for former simulation game users, and a third questionnaire for non-users. The current user questionnaire was the longest of the three consisting of nineteen questions, the former user questionnaire contained twelve questions and the non-user questionnaire contained ten questions. A number of the questions, it should be noted, were multiple part questions.

To encourage responses to the survey, the investigators indicated that respondents could opt to receive the survey results.

Potential respondents were targeted for contact four times. Fluid surveys monitors responses so follow-up e-mail contacts were sent only to non-respondents. The four e-mail contacts were flighted in two ways. Firstly, the e-mail list was divided into seven groups ranging in size from 4000 to 5000 e-mail addresses and a different group was e-mailed the evening (Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday) prior to each regular workday until all of the groups had been contacted. The follow-up rounds of contacts were begun after approximately two weeks and the groups were rotated so that their contacts would go out on different days to reduce response bias related to "weekdays of contact" (Churchill 1993).

The initial e-mailing went to all 30,137 compiled e-mail addresses resulting in the following: 36 out of the office replies were received, 487 people completed the survey, and 126 people requested that they be removed from the e-mail list. The second e-mailing went out to 29,132 individuals resulting in: 221 out of the office replies, 234 people completing the survey, and 104 people requesting that they be removed from the e-mail list. The third e-mailing went out to 28,390 individuals resulting in

**TABLE 1
USAGE OF SIMULATION GAMES AT AACSB MEMBER SCHOOLS**

Study	Sample Size	Percentage Using Simulations
Dale and Klasson (1962)	107	71.1%
Graham and Gray (1969)	107	90.7%
Roberts and Strauss (1975)	107	94.5%
Faria (1987)	315	95.1%
Faria (1998)	381	97.5%

membership has been discussed at ABSEL Board and Fellows meetings and frequently discussed throughout ABSEL Conferences by interested members, only one study (Wellington and Faria 2004) has been reported with regard to examining awareness of ABSEL as part of an initiative to help ABSEL grow its membership. This paper reports on a second, large-scale follow-up examination of ABSEL awareness across an audience of AACSB business faculty members across all business disciplines.

While ABSEL membership has not increased over the years, it is clear that simulation game usage has. Table 1 shows simulation game usage rates at AACSB member schools as reported by five studies conducted over the 1962 to 1998 period. As further evidence of this growth, the total number of business faculty simulation game users at AACSB member schools was estimated at something in excess of 800 by Goosen (1977) in 1977 while a large mail survey undertaken by Faria (1998) resulted in an estimate of nearly 11,000 simulation game users across all universities and community colleges in the U.S. in 1998.

ABSEL has experienced heavy turnover in its membership from the start. In a paper written during the fourth year of ABSEL's existence, Goosen (1977) states that 250 different people had joined ABSEL between 1974 and 1977, yet ABSEL's membership as of 1977 was only 140. Goosen (1977) concluded that ABSEL is largely unknown and, even at schools where simulation games are used, ABSEL is not considered an important enough organization for simulation game users to join.

With regard to the second point raised by Goosen (1977), Burton (1987) surveyed business school deans (165 responses) and business school faculty (601 responses) at U.S. universities. Burton (1987) asked the respondents to rank a number of organizations with regard to the value of attending their conferences. Across the twenty organizations listed in the survey, ABSEL ranked seventeenth in the sample of deans and fourteenth in importance in the business faculty sample.

Patz and Morgan (1994) surveyed ABSEL members to get their views as to why ABSEL has not been able to grow its membership. Based on responses from 101 ABSEL

members, Patz and Morgan (1994) concluded that ABSEL suffered from the following problems: (1) poor papers presented at the conferences; (2) little reason to associate with ABSEL between conferences; (3) lack of good outlets for publishing quality research findings on simulation and experiential learning; (4) few reasons for practitioners to join ABSEL; (5) organization slow to respond to emerging technologies in simulation gaming and experiential learning; (6) lack of organizational goals and direction; and (7) lack of an organizational structure geared to promoting membership.

In 1987, about a third of the way through ABSEL's existence, Gosenpud and Sanders (1987) presented a paper entitled, "ABSEL – At a Crossroads." Gosenpud and Sanders (1987) felt that ABSEL had grown as far as it was going to grow unless several issues were addressed. First, did ABSEL need to become more professional, less informal, that is, move away from the "ABSEL style"? Second, did ABSEL need to address the theoretical and conceptual foundation of the organization – to adopt a broader perspective? Third, did ABSEL need to change its management structure to adopt one that was more geared to long-term strategic planning? Now, twenty-seven years later, it is not clear whether the ABSEL organization has addressed any of these issues.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

While not really a theoretical paper, several research issues were addressed in our survey based on logical expectations. As was reported in 2003, and thus expected in 2013, users of simulations should be more likely to be interested in academic organizations supporting the use of simulation games. Consequently, they are more likely to be aware of ABSEL than would be non-users of simulation games. As was found in 2003, and thus expected in 2013, former business game users are also more likely than non-users to be aware of simulation and gaming organizations. However, having stopped their use of simulation games, it is felt that the level of awareness of simulation and gaming

**TABLE 2
AWARENESS OF ABSEL BY SIMULATION GAME USAGE**

Aware of ABSEL	Users	Former Users	Non-users	Total
2003 Yes	28.0% (90)	22.9% (41)	2.5% (14)	13.7% (145)
2013 Yes	15.5% (59)	17.3% (34)	2.5% (11)	10.5% (104)
2003 No	72.0% (231)	77.1% (138)	97.5% (542)	86.3% (911)
2013 No	84.5% (322)	82.7% (163)	97.5% (435)	89.5% (920)
			2003	2013
Users vs Former Users vs Non-users		Chi-Square Sig	.000	.000
Users vs Former Users		Chi-Square Sig	.211	.302
Users vs Non-users		Chi-Square Sig	.000	.000
Former Users vs Non-users		Chi-Square Sig	.000	.000

100 out of the office replies, 201 people completing the survey, and 96 people requesting that they be removed from the e-mail list. The fourth and final e-mailing went out to 28,105 e-mail addresses resulting in 240 out of the office replies, 142 people completing the survey, and 108 people requesting that they be removed from the e-mail list.

As of the reporting date of this survey, 1,317 individuals accessed the survey of whom, 1197 individuals started the survey, of which 1,064 completed the survey producing 1,024 usable ABSEL measurement scale responses. A total of 434 individuals from the mailing list requested that they be removed from the mailing list for a 1.44% unsubscribe rate. As such, the survey e-mail contact was attended to by 1,751 individuals producing a 5.81% attention rate. The result of the survey was a cumulative response rate of 1,024 usable responses from an original e-mail list of 30,137 or a 3.40% response rate which is less than half of the 2003 response rate of 7.48% (Faria and Wellington 2003). According to the most recent reports (Ray and Tabor 2003), response rates to e-mail surveys are relatively low, generally in the 5% to 10% range. As such, the 3.40% response rate is not atypical but it is clearly lower than the researchers would have liked to receive. Even with the low response rate, the researchers are comforted by the volume of responses with 1,024 respondents. This compares well to the 2003 study which reported on 1,056 total respondents.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The survey findings with regard to awareness of ABSEL are reported on in Tables 2 through 5. Table 2 shows that in 2013 only 10.5% of all survey respondents were aware of ABSEL. This is a considerable decline from the 2003 survey findings that reported 13.7% of all survey respondents were aware of ABSEL. This low awareness is consistent with opinions expressed at ABSEL conferences and is consistent with the ongoing low membership in ABSEL. Clearly the organization has failed at raising awareness over the last 10 years. It is difficult to attract

membership to an organization that business faculty, even those who are using simulation games, are not aware of.

The findings shown in Table 2 support the acceptance of H1 and H3 while H2 and H4 are rejected. The survey results indicate that current simulation game users are more likely to be aware of ABSEL than non-users. As well, former simulation game users are more aware of ABSEL than non-users. However, the awareness levels of ABSEL among current game users and former users are not significantly different. Overall, ABSEL awareness was found to be lower in 2013 than in 2003 and ABSEL awareness was found to be lower within both the current user group and the former user group thus resulting in the rejection of H4. The acceptance of H1 and H3 is not surprising but the ABSEL level of awareness of only 2.5% among non-users remains 'shockingly' low while the overall level of awareness of ABSEL among current simulation game users at 15.5% in 2013 is much lower than the 28.0% awareness level reported in 2003. Overall ABSEL awareness among survey respondents of only 10.5% is quite low and, surprisingly, is lower than reported in 2003.

The data in Table 3 indicates that as was reported in 2003, in 2013 there remain significant differences in awareness of ABSEL across disciplines. As was the case in 2003, the awareness of ABSEL is highest among Management, Business Strategy and Marketing instructors. However, the level of awareness declined dramatically amongst Business Strategy and Management Instructors. As was found in 2003, the awareness is lowest in the Accounting and Finance areas but the level of awareness actually increased marginally in 2013 for both of these disciplines. These findings are consistent with the availability of business games (most are Management, Top Management, Policy, International or Marketing games) and with the current membership in ABSEL. These findings are also consistent with reported usage rates of simulation games by academic discipline as reported by Faria (1998).

The results shown in Table 4 indicate that as was

TABLE 3
ABSEL AWARENESS BY ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE*

Academic Discipline	ABSEL Aware				ABSEL Unaware			
	2003		2013		2003		2013	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Accounting	2	1.5	6	4.6	128	98.5	124	95.4
Finance	1	1.2	2	2.2	82	98.8	91	97.8
Management	55	22.4	17	11.6	191	77.6	130	88.4
Management Science	23	12.3	13	10.7	164	87.7	109	89.3
Marketing	30	14.0	33	15.1	184	86.0	185	89.9
Business Strategy	27	25.7	20	18.2	75	74.3	90	81.8
Other	7	7.9	7	6.5	82	92.1	100	93.5

2003 Chi-Square Significance = .000

2013 Chi-Square Significance = .000

* 2003, 1051 respondents; 2013, 927 respondents

generally the case in 2003, in 2013 ABSEL aware respondents still come in contact with simulation information in greater numbers from all information sources than ABSEL unaware respondents. The exception was with respect to seeing games at conferences. In 2013 the percentages of ABSEL aware and unaware respondents who saw simulation games displayed at conferences was nearly equal with 30.1% of ABSEL aware respondents reporting noticing them and 31.2% of ABSEL unaware respondents reporting noticing them. In both instances, these percentages increased from the findings of the 2003 survey. In general, it is logical to assume that ABSEL aware respondents are more likely to be attracted to simulation information and remember it and are more likely to be actively seeking information on business games at any point in time.

In 2003, the authors reported being surprised that 73.9% of ABSEL aware respondents claimed to have seen simulation advertisements and 64.6% claimed to have received direct mail pieces on simulation games. In 2013 the amount of promotion and e-mail devoted to simulations has definitely increased and 74% of ABSEL aware respondents report having seen simulation advertisements, as do 62.5% of ABSEL unaware respondents. Similarly, 67.3% of ABSEL aware respondents report having received either direct mail or e-mails about simulations and 60.4% of ABSEL unaware respondents report this experience. The percentages have increased slightly amongst ABSEL aware respondents in the last 10 years but ABSEL unaware respondents show considerable increases. As was reported in 2003, the very low percentages of respondents (21.7% of ABSEL aware and 10.4% of ABSEL unaware) who indicated that they have received information on simulation games from publishers' representatives remains low in 2013 (18.4% of ABSEL aware and 14.3% of ABSEL unaware).

There have been a number of changes found between 2003 and 2013 in the types of information sources that ABSEL aware and ABSEL unaware respondents would use when searching for information on new simulation games as shown by the results reported in Table 5. The number one source for both groups in 2013 was colleagues as

compared to the web in 2003. In 2003, the second most likely source for both groups would be to consult a publisher while in 2013 it was the web. The third most likely place was to confer at conferences. One major difference between the two groups reported on in 2003 that still remains in 2013 is that ABSEL aware respondents are more likely to consult a professional organization.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this survey indicate that ABSEL has declined in awareness among business faculty members in the U.S. and Canada. As was the case in 2003, in 2013 ABSEL is still presented with both a tremendous challenge and a tremendous opportunity. The level of awareness of ABSEL as an academic organization is extremely low among business faculty with only 10.5% of our survey respondents reporting awareness of the organization in 2013, a decrease from the 13.7% awareness reported in 2003. As was the case when these survey results were reported at the 2004 ABSEL conference, in 2014 the challenge for ABSEL remains the same, how to raise the awareness of this organization?

The results shown in Table 5 once again indicate that both those aware of ABSEL and unaware of ABSEL do go to a number of, and basically the same, information sources to learn about new business simulation games. However, the 2013 survey findings show that seeking out colleagues and talking with attendees at conferences has increased in importance. In essence, personal influences are far more critical in 2013 than they were in 2003. These sources must be explored with regard to providing information about ABSEL. For example, ABSEL members need to be willing to promote the organization within their own circle of colleagues and to take literature to other professional conferences that they attend. ABSEL also needs to team with publishers of simulation games to have links on the publishers' websites leading the individual searching for information on business games to the ABSEL website. ABSEL might also work with publishers to get simulation games more prominently displayed at conferences.

**TABLE 4
WHERE ABSEL AWARE AND UNAWARE RESPONDENTS
HAVE RECEIVED INFORMATION ON BUSINESS GAMES**

Information Source	ABSEL Aware		ABSEL Unaware	
	2003	2013	2003	2013
Have Seen Ads for Simulation Games	73.9%	74.0%	49.8%	62.5%
Have Seen Simulation Games Displayed at Conferences	28.6%	30.1%	24.2%	31.2%
Colleagues Provide Information on Business Games	40.9%	26.2%	27.2%	18.7%
Have Received Direct Mail or Email Ads for Business Games	64.6%	67.3%	42.4%	60.4%
Publisher Reps Have Provided Information on Business Games	21.7%	18.4%	10.4%	14.3%

ABSEL might also work to get publishers' sales representatives to provide more information on business games when in contact with faculty.

As was the case in 2004, in 2014 the issue for ABSEL is how to increase awareness of the organization on a non-existent promotional budget. The results shown in Table 4 suggest the kinds of communication sources where business faculty currently receive information about business simulation games. Advertising and e-mail are noted as the two most frequent sources of communication on simulations in the most recent survey. In addition, the third most noted source is communication at conferences. The results in Table 5 indicate that in 2013, when simulation users search for information on simulations, they confer first with colleagues and then go to the web and then look for information at conferences.

The implications of the 2013 findings on communication sources for an ABSEL promotional campaign to raise awareness bring forth the following recommendations. As first stated in 2004, a paid advertising campaign is not feasible. Then as now, ABSEL needs to resort to an alternative means of communication which is within the resource means of the organization.

In 2004 it was proposed that electronic communication via the internet be used since it is highly accessible to academics and virtually free. However, despite the use of this approach over the past 10 years, ABSEL has actually lost ground in terms of raising awareness. It is not that the web has been a poor medium of communication, it is more likely that it is so highly cluttered that this approach has not been as successful as hoped.

ABSEL needs to raise its website profile among search engines so that any search request for business simulations or business games brings the organization's website into the top 10 or 20 sites that appear. In addition, some type of *quid pro quo* arrangement might be made with simulation game publishers as suggested above. A simple website link between simulation publishers and the ABSEL website would be a good start. A more aggressive approach might

involve developing an ABSEL seal of approval to be placed on selected simulation games, particularly those authored by ABSEL members.

The ABSEL call for papers should be distributed in an e-mail format to all current and past ABSEL members who can then "electronically" redistribute the call to their colleagues so that a combined "direct" e-mail campaign is undertaken which also represents colleague referral. The ABSEL list file that is reached will also be encouraged to send the "call for papers" to their colleagues. This snowball approach would be virtually free and would raise awareness of ABSEL tremendously. In line with this, many universities have offices of research services that routinely redistribute calls for papers to interested parties at their institutions. Compiling an e-mail distribution list of these institutions and routinely sending these universities ABSEL paper calls would increase awareness and interest in the organization.

Finally, let's make greater use of the ABSEL membership. In the past some members have taken materials to other conferences that we attend to distribute to interested attendees. However, these materials have not been made available in recent years. With the findings of the 2013 survey that more personal influence is involved in simulation adoption and usage it would seem wise to make a truly concerted effort to promote ABSEL at other conferences with anyone who expresses an interest in business simulation games.

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TABLE 5
WHERE ABSEL AWARE AND UNAWARE RESPONDENTS
WOULD SEARCH FOR INFORMATION ON NEW BUSINESS GAMES

Where Do You Look When Searching for New Simulations?	ABSEL Aware		ABSEL Unaware	
	2003	2013	2003	2013
Consult Publishers	31.1%	16.3%	27.7%	9.2%
Search the Web	33.3%	27.9%	32.5%	16.7%
Confer with Colleagues	18.9%	38.5%	16.0%	18.8%
At Conferences	12.2%	23.1%	8.7%	13.4%
Consult Professional Organization	15.6%	18.3%	3.0%	6.4%
Write My Own	7.8%	8.7%	2.6%	3.5%
Consult Books/Journals	6.7%	0.0%	6.9%	2.0%
Not Looking	8.9%	10.6%	18.2%	7.8%
Don't Know	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%	0.5%

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