BUILDING A STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM: AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Experience-based learning has become a major component of many university curricula especially in business schools. The development and implementation of a semester long human resource management project in an undergraduate Human Resource Management course is detailed. The nature of various elements of the exercise, their positioning and a rationale for their inclusion is discussed in the context of how to administer such an experience-based learning tool for student development and assessment. One core focus of project implementation is monitoring the strategic alignment of each element to create the human resource system orientation that research suggests leads to competitive advantage for a firm. Student feedback on the project suggests a recognition and appreciation of the practical aspects of the exercise.

An ongoing initiative in the undergraduate business program at the University of Pittsburgh is the inclusion of more experiential learning exercises and projects in each course. Annual student evaluations in the University's College of Business Administration Human Resource Management courses indicate a great appreciation for the materials especially as a means to understand and appreciate the overall function as well as gaining insight into processes and procedures to be understood as an employee. To enhance the educational experience, a term long experiential learning project was developed that requires students to create a fictitious firm in the industry of their choice and develop elements of a strategic human resource management system for that company.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

A key impetus for the development of the project was a 2002 American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business report, *Management Education at Risk*. It notes that "preparation for the rapid pace of business cannot be obtained from textbooks and cases, many of which are outdated before they are published" (AACSB, 2002).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, that report calls 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). Even so, claim the authors, the curricula of many business schools continue to be dominated more by traditional lecture-based approaches than with problem-based curriculum.

Additional support for this type of assignment dates back much further. Problem-based learning (PBL) finds its roots in Aristotle and ancient Greece. Aristotle said, "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them." (Bynum & Porter, 2005). What Aristotle is telling us is that experience is a key element in learning, yet one not always incorporated into many courses.

Building on Aristotle's thinking as well as the concept of learning by experience and the work of Locke, Piaget, Freire, Lewin and others (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2005), David Kolb (1984) developed a model of experience-based learning. Defining experience-based learning as, "the process whereby knowledge is created by the transformation of experience." (p. 41), Kolb's model of experience-based learning is characterized by three key elements:

* The involvement of the whole person – intellect, feelings and senses---in learning,
* The recognition and active use of relevant life and learning experience; and
* Continued reflection.

Classic strategic human resource management programming to align with an organization's strategy was developed by Schuler and Jackson (1989) and Wright (1986) using strategic typologies popularized by Porter (1980). Combining the experiential learning approach with the theoretical alignment model of the human resource field lays the foundation for a project to address Kolb's elements. The human resource management project is therefore a viable tool for both learning and assessment in an undergraduate human resource survey course and represents a robust EBL item that is reflective of the business world into which the students will graduate.

THE PROJECT'S CHALLENGES

The choice of topics for the project presented a unique challenge in the development of the exercise. An overriding focus of the course as well as the project is the strategic nature of human resources and its opportunity to build competitive advantage for a firm. Conveying this notion in

a simulation was a challenge compounded by the myriad of topics in the area as well as constraints offered by the size and location of the class as well as the actual scheduling of the course in the overall university calendar.

Strategic human resource management argues that each subfunction in the area must be aligned with others in a clear uni-directional orientation for competitive opportunity to be realized. Thus major subfunctions in the human resource area needed to be included in the project for the alignment concept to be recognized and mastered. Covering the major subfunctions in the classroom setting to establish background and foundation for the applications required by the project was a pedagogical as well as a logistical concern.

THE PROJECT

Creating a Firm

Students begin the project by creating groups of 4-5 members. A series of icebreakers are run during an early class session as a means to acquaint team members as well as to discuss the manner in which firms begin to build teams. Following the group introductory activities, students begin creating a fictitious entrepreneurial firm in an industry of their choosing. The teams are instructed that throughout the semester, they will be expected to meet to create a strategic human resource management system for the firm. A subsequent class is focused upon establishing the principles of strategic human resource management.

Create a webpage for the firm

Using the Wordpress package a webpage for each firm is created. The webpage will serve two main purposes: to inform others about the firm and its products or services and to serve as a vehicle to provide project-related materials to interested class members. Following a class discussion of corporate, business unit and functional strategy, students are asked to delineate the firm's strategy at each level. The chosen business unit strategy will be examined after each stage in the project to ensure that functional strategy elements are in alignment with the firm strategy.

Advertise a job opening

The group will choose a job in the firm for which there is an opening. Team members are then required to develop a job description for the opening using a variety of job analysis techniques described in a class lesson. The job opening is posted on the firm's Wordpress webpage.

Create a strategic recruiting plan

Once the job opening is posted, group members are asked to develop a strategic recruiting plan for the open position. That plan reflects the nature of skills needed by prospective employees, where such skills can be secured and the recruiting sources used to attract those holding such skills. Sample recruiting materials used in the plan are created including those that might be used for a job fair. The content of each recruiting sample must have content supporting the strategy. The job fair is required as a recruiting source in this project as a means to practice networking skills and as a vehicle to efficiently complete job application materials. A class session is dedicated to the job fair.

Selection of interview candidates

Following the job fair, groups develop a selection strategy again with the firm's business unit strategy as the key focus. One element of the strategy will be interviews. Accordingly, groups review application materials completed at the job fair based upon selection criteria created, interview candidates are chosen. Groups then create a series of interview questions to use in mock interviews. Class discussion and lessons during this time period focus upon the nature of interviews and interview questions and best practices for both the interviewee and interviewer. Interview rooms in the college's career development center are secured and one on one 10-15 minute interviews scheduled. Each student interviews and is interviewed. College career services personnel attend a class session and share strategies on developing responses to situational and behavioral interview questions.

Selection of Job Candidates

Group members develop a series of criteria to utilize in assessing applicants for the opening. Then using the completed interviews and candidate resumes as a basis, students are asked to decide which interviewee will be selected for the position. Based upon a review of relevant industry information related to compensation and benefits, groups prepare an offer for the selected candidate. Following the selection, groups develop offer and rejection letters which are delivered to all applicants. Selected candidates are expected to prepare return communication to the company indicating acceptance or rejection of the offer. A critical analysis of the student's role as both an interviewer and interviewee is also required in this project segment.

Training segment development

New hires experience an orientation where general and firm specific training needs are addressed. Students delineate one of these needs and develop a training exercise to address it. Groups then pair with each other and the training activities are administered and evaluated.

Benefits package development

Though a benefit package was offered to the candidate in the firm's offer letter, teams are tasked with re-evaluating the benefit package in light of research in the field. Students are also asked to "price" the elements of the benefit package again based upon research findings. A benefits consulting firm in the local area offers assistance

for any "pricing" difficulties encountered.

Performance evaluation form development

A performance evaluation form is developed to be used to assess "the new hire's" performance throughout his first year in the firm. The format of this form as well as the nature and number of performance elements is at the discretion of the group based upon research and class discussion.

Special situations

Throughout the project students are provided unique scenarios which occur in their firms. Incidents may be a health or safety hazard, a scenario with possible sexual harassment, a crisis management scenario, a wage negotiation or a promotion decision among others. Students are required to provide appropriate documentation to address the issue including policies, reports or plans.

SOME ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

This project has been run twice and both times received strongly favorable evaluation comments by students focusing specifically on the practical applications of the material presented and the organization of the project. That organization is key to the lengthy project running smoothly. It is very important to have facilities which allow groups to mirror a company environment as much as possible. For example, the interviewing segment of this project is particularly well received and more so because the college's interview rooms are used. Because of the logistical issues such as sharing facilities(large numbers of recruiters on campus regularly may limit interview room availability), it is important that those interested in creating a similar project schedule well in advance to ensure facilities are available for the time periods needed.

It is also helpful to have human resource professionals in specialty areas come into the classroom to discuss their work. For example, when the compensation segment is covered in class, as preparation for the students' creation of a benefits pay package, a specialist in benefit creation and administration visits the classroom sharing information and best practices in the area and then makes herself available via email while students are completing their own packages.

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