

Simulation Games and Experiential Learning in Action, Volume 2, 1975

BUSINESS AND SOCIETY: AN IN-BASKET SIMULATION THE NEED AND DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTEGRATIVE EXPERIENCE FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper shares the need for and development of an integrative in-basket exercise for use in management courses that focus on “business and society”. It indicates that the present scene and future projections reveal that more attention will be directed to this area within colleges of business administration. The paper shares the method by which the author researched and developed the exercise, including the selection of items, industry, etc. The objectives for the instructor and learner are specified, and a major portion of the paper provides examples and outlines of how the exercise can be integrated into courses. These range from using the exercise to form the sequence of your sessions, using the exercise as an examination, series of term reports, team exercise, or for selected units in other courses. The administration is discussed and participants will be given extracts from the Student Book for review. The methods for review and analysis of the in-basket are discussed, as well as the problems and direction for future research.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

This paper is designed to share with you the development of an in-basket exercise to be used in courses or programs that focus on business and its relationships to society. The National Affiliation of Concerned Business Students, a Chicago-based nonprofit organization, has surveyed colleges and universities and has catalogued approximately 250 courses about corporate social policy and social issues. It seems safe to say that most schools offer one or more courses in these areas. A recent report by Overman (4, p.12) of 101 Deans of Accreditation schools of business administration revealed that they projected curriculum increases in the areas of social responsibility of business and business ethics and morals.

The growth of the consumer and activist movements, affirmative action and a myriad of other significant issues has made this arena, sometimes called “corporate social responsibility”, an integral part of the daily life of a corporation and its management.

Business and Society was developed as the author was gathering materials for a graduate level course titled The Administrator in a Changing Society, which is a core requirement in our M.B.A. program.

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The published literature including textbooks, books of readings, cases and periodicals is overwhelming. To date, the author has identified more than 600 interest groups and more than seventy-five specialized magazines and newsletters that directly focus on issues involving “business and society”.

THE “IN-BASKET” AND OTHER PARTICIPATIVE APPROACHES

As one who has been committed to utilizing experiential materials of one type or another, the author was surprised to find that no such materials seemed to exist other than case studies or films. Much has been written about the “in-basket”. In addition, the concept of “the assessment center” has increased in popularity, and appears quite frequently in the literature. A comprehensive bibliography including the “in-basket” and “assessment center” is included in a catalog that is available from Development Dimensions, Inc. (3). Although this author has no major evidence to indicate that the “in-basket” is more useful in terms of learning outcomes, it is the author’s experience that this specific approach does meet the objectives for which it was intended. These will be discussed in the following sections.

SELECTION OF THE ISSUES AND INDUSTRY

The initial development of the “in-basket” required the identification of those issues that corporations faced today. The two most useful sources of information, in addition to many articles, were reports developed by the Committee for Economic Development (1) and The Conference Board (2).

After a review of the sources cited previously about the “in-basket” as an instructional approach, the author found that Zoll (5) provided excellent procedural information. The author then decided to place each participant in the role of a Company President rather than a staff position such as Corporate Social Responsibility Officer. This was done intentionally so that each participant could make the decisions and take the actions he or she thought were appropriate, and would have the authority to do so. It was also decided to create an actual company, rather than the “Widgit Manufacturing Company”, since the author felt that students needed a “real world” experience. The major focus of the in-basket is the issues rather than company issues. As a note, you may be interested in knowing that the Toy Manufacturers of America expressed great interest since now, for possibly the first time, some Individuals can “experience” what it is really like to be confronted with all the issues from both inside and outside the industry!

The following sections presented to you replicate the information that will be included in the Instructors Guide when it becomes available. The “in-basket” has been field-tested by 50 graduate students, and the modifications and changes that have occurred will be discussed at the end of this paper.

SAMPLE COURSE OUTLINE BUSINESS AND SOCIETY

<u>Session</u>	<u>Topic/Issues</u>	<u>Text/Readings</u>	<u>In-Basket Memos</u>
		(designate your own text chapters, readings, etc.)	(this section for faculty use only)

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OBJECTIVES AND USE OF THE BUSINESS AND SOCIETY IN-BASKET

The exercise can be used by graduate and undergraduate students in a variety of courses including Business and Society, Management, Business Policy, Business Law, and/or Human Resources Management. It can also be utilized by managers, supervisors, union representatives and members of consumer, activist and interest groups. In some cases it can be an integral part of an “assessment center” program.

OBJECTIVES IN TERMS OF THE LEARNER

As a result of completing the exercise and the review and analysis sections a learner should:

1. Develop an awareness of the variety of problems and issues that face a business executive in our contemporary society.
2. Decide on priorities concerning these problems and issues.
3. Decide on specific actions to be taken.
4. Analyze his/her decisions, values, and motives in making these decisions.
5. Share the analysis with others to compare different or similar actions taken.
6. Discover the number and potential impact of interest and activist groups both within and outside a company.
7. Research, and use current literature and resources (including people) in the decision-making process.

INTEGRATION OF THE EXERCISE WITH YOUR TEXTS AND READINGS

Although the exercise can be utilized as a “text” in itself, it was designed to be used as a companion to those materials that you use in your management courses. The September 1974 issue of MBA Magazine revealed a survey completed by the National Affiliation of Concerned Business Students that concluded that professors utilize a great variety of materials and do not limit themselves to a single text. This seems to also be true as evidenced by the great number of basic management texts that are available. The following sample course outline is provided to show you how the in-basket can be integrated into a specific course. The sample is a fifteen-session course of three hours each.

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<u>Session</u>	<u>Topic/Issues</u>	<u>Text/Readings</u>	<u>In-Basket Memos</u>
1	Course Requirements Use of In-Basket	_____	(see the Review and Analysis Section of the In-Basket-Analysis by Issues
2	Company and Society Goals Markets, Multi- National, Philosophy, etc.	_____	
3	Investors, Shareholders and Boards of Directors	_____	for specific memos in each area
4	Outside Interest Groups, Consumers, Religious Groups, etc.	_____	
5	Values and Ethics of You and Corporations	_____	
6	Measurement of Social Responsibilities, Human Resource Accounting, Social Audits	_____	
7	Employee Screening and Minority Employment	_____	
8	Special Employees, Handicapped, Veterans, Ex-offenders, etc.	_____	
9	Employee Welfare and Benefits, Privacy, Education, Safety	_____	
10	Government Related Issues-Politics, Unions, Pollution, etc.	_____	
11	Public Relations and Advertising	_____	
12	Urban and Community Issues	_____	
13-15	The Future, Reports, Panels, etc.	_____	

HOW YOU CAN USE THE EXERCISE

There are a number of options available to you depending upon your goals and objectives in one or more courses. The list which follows provides some examples of uses.

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1. Specific memos in the exercise can be used as term papers, reports, etc. The specific memos that lend themselves to this approach are:

Memo #2 Chairman of the Board's Priorities for Corporate Social Responsibility

Memo #10 Creation of a Social Audit for the Company

Memo #11 The Pros and Cons of Corporate Social Responsibility

Memo #20 A Script for a CBS-TV Roundtable Discussion about the Toy Industry (or other industry to be chosen by you)

Memo #23 Identification of Problems and Potential Problems in the Company

Memo #29 Affirmative Action and Special Employee Issues

2. The exercise can be used to introduce a course and as the basis for a series of discussions and analyses based upon how the students handled the memos (issues). The Analysis by Issues in the Review and Analysis Section reveals the issues cited in each memo. These issues can be the sequence of your course as shown in the sample course outline. This is the approach that this author has taken in his course.
3. The exercise can be completed (including the Review and Analysis section) with or without the use of outside information. During the field-testing, students were given the option of completing the exercise in these two manners. A series of folders were placed in the library which included position papers from the Toy Manufacturers of America and the Public Action Coalition on Toys (PACT), the major consumer group. In addition, a bibliography of some sources is provided in the student manuals. Permission is now being sought to reprint some of the sources and include them within the exercise.
4. The exercise can be completed as a "team" project with each team of 3-4 people representing one company. The "company reports" can be submitted, discussed and compared. It is this authors viewpoint that any experiential activity should include both individual and group decision-making. This approach could preclude the individual element.
5. The exercise can be used as an examination, possibly a final exam, to assure that the student has integrated and synthesized the material in your course.
6. Selected memos for the complete in-basket can be used in other courses. For example, many memos lend themselves to a course in Manpower or Personnel Management.

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7. The background and introduction to the complete in-basket can be made orally and then single memos can be distributed to each student in the class. They would be required to respond to the memo, then meet in small groups, then discuss the company in toto. This presently is being completed in an undergraduate course in Human Resources. This approach precludes the total impact on one individual, but may be useful for some of the students. This also could be done as the first step before each student does the complete in-basket.

Facilities for Completion of the Exercise

Any in-basket requires a place where the student can manipulate papers. A standard classroom arm chair does not meet this need. The exercise can be completed at home or in a cafeteria or classroom with large tables. Experience indicates that a student must feel that he or she is at an actual office and not in a classroom.

Time for Completion

The time required to complete the exercise excluding the review and analyses is about 2-3 hours. The specific time for completion of the review and analyses will be presented at the conference.

Student Instructions

You will be provided with an actual section of the books which includes the introduction, instructions, and a sampling of the forty-two memos that are included in the exercise. As you can see, each memo requires that the student indicate “What action they are taking” and “their motives for taking such action”. These will be used later in the review and analyses.

Review and Analysis Section

This section which is included in your materials is composed of five areas for review by the individual, and a group to be determined in the classroom. These include high and low priority memos, analysis of the people and organizations cited in the memo, analysis of each memo and analysis of memos by the issues. In addition, an overall evaluation of the exercise is included.

The use of this section by the faculty member is most crucial since the user really has little “risk” in doing this exercise. It is essential that he review, analyze and share his actions and motives with others in the course. It should be noted that the professor should emphasize that personal values are a significant input to strategies and should not be discarded to “play the game”. Depending upon the time allocated by you, you may require any or all of the analyses to be completed.

Problems and Potential Problems

The final version of the in-basket will incorporate many changes since its conception in January 1975. A number of items have already come to

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my attention that affect how the student perceives the exercise. After the introduction of the exercise on the first evening of the course, a number of students asked if the dates on the memos were correct. I indicated that they were correct and heard a simultaneous comment “Nobody works on January 1st (the date of the writing of most of the memos!)” Needless to say, that date will be changed to January 2nd. Another concern is the choice of an industry rather than a Widgeit Company. Any industrial application would require (other than the toy industry companies) a change of industry. In addition, the terminology may have to be clarified by inclusion of a glossary of terms; e.g. Social Audit, etc. The nature and quantity of memos included may need some revision. Some memos and the required responses may be something that students do not want to share with others. For example, Memo #29 includes issues that are infrequently talked about in society and corporations; e.g., homosexuality, the handicapped, etc. An analysis will be completed to determine which memos received low enough priority by all to possibly be excluded, since some issues are included in more than one memo. These will be discussed at the conference.

Future Research

There are a number of ways in which the data collected by students and/or managers can be analyzed. These include collection of background data on participants and the making of a number of comparisons. For example, “Do managers have different motives for corporate social responsibility than M.B.A. students?” “Do women differ from men in their decisions?” “Do consumer groups differ from managers and/or business students?” The potential and options will be reviewed during the summer months.

Personal Notes

This author is excited since the initial reactions of students have been quite favorable, although the initial reaction to any materials other than a text, book of readings or the typical term paper requirement is met with some anxiety. My suggestion to you is “Try it! you’ll like it.”

REFERENCES

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