

# ABSEL AWARENESS AMONG BUSINESS SCHOOL FACULTY

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## ABSTRACT

*An e-mail survey of 14,497 business faculty members across all business disciplines was undertaken to investigate business simulation game adoption and usage behavior. The survey produced 1085 responses. While many issues were addressed in this survey, the current paper examines only the awareness of ABSEL among business faculty members. The survey results indicated that the overall level of awareness of ABSEL was only 13.7% among the 1056 respondents who answered the Yes/No question "I am familiar with ABSEL". Among current simulation game users, 28.0% were aware of ABSEL, among former simulation game users, 22.9% were aware of ABSEL but, not surprisingly, only 2.5% of non-users of simulation games were aware of ABSEL. The survey results suggest that 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. 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 thirty 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 the levels we have traditionally had.

While ABSEL has been successful in that it has survived for thirty years, continuously attracting enough new membership to

replace lost membership, it has not thrived. Attendance at the most recent ABSEL meetings in Pensacola and Baltimore has not been much larger than the attendance at the first meeting in Oklahoma City.

Being a small organization with limited 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); and ABSEL has held meetings all across the U.S.

## PAST RESEARCH

Although the issue of how to increase ABSEL membership has been discussed at ABSEL Board meetings, has been addressed by the ABSEL Fellows, and is often discussed throughout ABSEL Conferences by interested members, little has been done with regard to examining awareness of ABSEL, a necessary starting point if ABSEL is to grow its membership. This paper reports on the first, large-scale examination of ABSEL awareness across an audience of nearly 14,500 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. While 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, a large 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.

**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%

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 the half-way point of 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? Seventeen years later, it is not clear whether any of these issues have yet been addressed.

**RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

While not really a theoretical paper, several research issues were addressed in our survey based on logical expectations. Users of simulations are 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. 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 organizations among former business game users is likely to be less than the awareness among current game users. 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 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.

**METHODOLOGY**

The data on ABSEL awareness were gathered from a sample of 14,497 business faculty through e-mail addresses compiled from the websites of AACSB member schools, the ISAGA membership list and the ABSEL membership list. While our sample was quite large, not all faculty at AACSB member schools were contacted. A small number of schools did not have an English language website and some schools did not publish e-mail addresses for their faculty.

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 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 University website using an identifier and a password that were provided in the contact e-mail invitation. The identifier and password were the same for all respondents and the site was

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“open” to anyone who had these passwords. The anonymity of respondents was guaranteed so there was some risk that a respondent could fill out multiple questionnaires if the individual so wished. The investigators felt that the risk of multiple responses outside of simple error was minimal given the nature of the audience. Once logged in, respondents were asked seven 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 seventeen questions, the former user questionnaire contained nine questions and the non-user questionnaire contained only seven 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. One respondent e-mailed the investigators and requested a “phone” administration of the survey. In this instance, the investigator read the survey questions to the respondent and the responses were entered into the online survey by the investigator rather than the respondent.

The respondents were targeted for contact three times. As all of the responses were completely anonymous to the investigators, follow-up e-mail contacts were sent to the entire mailing list with the exception of those individuals who requested removal from future contacts. In the second and third requests for participation, e-mail targeted contacts were told that it was a follow-up contact and to ignore this request if they had already responded. The three e-mail contacts were flighted in two ways. Firstly, the e-mail list was divided into nine groups ranging in size from 1000 to 2000 e-mail addresses and a different group was e-mailed the evening prior to each regular workday (Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday) until all of the groups had been contacted. A second round of contacts was begun after approximately three 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 14,497 compiled e-mail addresses resulting in the following: 1562 e-mails returned as undeliverable, 107 out of the office replies were received and 28 people requested that they be removed from the e-mail list. The second e-mailing was affected by an unexplained non-specific systems disruption which seemed to limit the number of emails sent out from each group. Although it was targeted to 14,469 e-mail addresses (the 28 remove from list requests were granted), the investigators are certain that less than this number was actually sent out but the true number of e-mails that were sent out is unknown. The results were as follows: 689 e-mails were returned as undeliverable, there were 59 out of the office replies and 36 remove from list requests were made. On the basis that

the number of returned e-mails was less than half of the first and third e-mailings, it could be estimated that only about half of the e-mails were successfully sent out but the investigators do not know which “half” it was. The third e-mailing went out to 14,433 e-mail addresses (the additional 36 remove from list requests from the second round were granted) and produced 1413 undeliverable emails, 134 out of the office replies and 79 remove from list requests. The final set of remove from list requests were not addressed since no further follow-up contacts were undertaken.

The result of the survey was a cumulative response rate of 1085 total responses from an original e-mail list of 14,497 or a 7.48% response rate. 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 7.48% 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 unaware of any business gaming research study that has reported on 1,085 total respondents. Thus, this is likely the largest survey of business game users, former users and non-users to be reported on.

### MEASURES OF RESPONSE BIAS

Response bias was measured by comparing early and late respondents to the questionnaire. The responses collected during round 1 (the first e-mailing) were compared to responses during rounds 2 and 3 with respect to classification data. A chi-square analysis was undertaken to determine if the differences in percentages responding at the different times were significant.

The findings shown in Tables 2 and 3 indicate that Marketing and Policy/Strategy instructors seemed to respond more quickly to the survey request than Accounting and Finance instructors. Management, Management Science and Other discipline instructors responded at about the same rate during all three rounds. Simulation users seemed to respond far more quickly to the survey than non-users, likely due to their interest in the subject matter. Based on the classification information, it would appear that there are differences between early and late respondents and hence the survey has response bias. It would appear from our analysis of responses by e-mail round that non-respondents are more likely to be non-users of business simulation games (approximately 2/3rds). This is not surprising given that non-users would be less interested in replying to a survey on a form of pedagogy which they do not employ.

As shown in Table 3, of the total of 1085 respondents to our survey, 30.6% are current simulation game users, 17.1% are former simulation game users, while 52.3% have never used a business simulation game. These findings are very consistent with those reported in a large mail survey of business faculty by Faria (1998).

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**TABLE 2: Response Time By Discipline Area**

Discipline	Response Time			
	Round 1 (N=621)	Round 2 (N=194)	Round 3 (N=261)	Total (N=1076)
Management	22.2% (138)	26.8% (52)	23.4% (61)	23.3% (251)
Marketing	23.7% (147)	17.0% (33)	15.3% (40)	20.4% (220)
Policy/Strategy	10.5% (65)	10.3% (20)	7.3% (19)	9.7% (104)
Management Science	16.4% (102)	21.6% (42)	18.0% (47)	17.8% (191)
Finance	7.6% (47)	6.7% (13)	9.2% (24)	7.8% (84)
Accounting	10.5% (65)	10.8% (21)	17.6% (46)	12.3% (132)
Other (Mainly Economics)	9.2% (57)	6.7% (13)	9.2% (24)	8.7% (94)

Chi-square Significance - .024\*

**TABLE 3: Response Time By Usage Classification**

	Response Time			
	Round 1 (N=625)	Round 2 (N=198)	Round 3 (N=262)	Total (N=1085)
User	37.1% (232)	24.2% (48)	19.8% (52)	30.6% (332)
Lapsed User	17.6% (110)	17.7% (35)	15.6% (41)	17.1% (186)
Non-User	45.3% (283)	58.1% (115)	64.5% (169)	52.3% (567)

Chi-square Significance - .000\*\*

**SURVEY FINDINGS**

The survey findings with regard to awareness of ABSEL are reported on in Tables 4 through 7. Table 4 shows that only 13.7% of all survey respondents are aware of ABSEL. This low awareness is consistent with opinions expressed in ABSEL conference papers and is consistent with the ongoing low membership in ABSEL. It is difficult to attract membership to an organization that people are not aware of.

**TABLE 4: Awareness of ABSEL by Simulation Game Usage**

<u>Aware of ABSEL</u>	<u>Users</u>	<u>Former Users</u>	<u>Non-users</u>	<u>Total</u>
Yes	28.0% (90)	22.9% (41)	2.5% (14)	13.7% (145)
No	72.0% (231)	77.1% (138)	97.5% (542)	86.3% (911)

Users vs Former Users vs Non-users	Chi-Square Sig	.000
Users vs Former Users	Chi-Square Sig	.211
Users vs Non-users	Chi-Square Sig	.000
Former Users vs Non-users	Chi-Square Sig	.000

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**TABLE 5: ABSEL Awareness by Academic Discipline**

Academic Discipline	ABSEL <u>Aware</u>		ABSEL <u>Unaware</u>	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Accounting	2	1.5%	128	98.5%
Finance	1	1.2%	82	98.8%
Management	55	22.4%	191	77.6%
Management Science	23	12.3%	164	87.7%
Marketing	30	14.0%	184	86.0%
Business Policy	27	25.7%	75	74.3%
Other	7	7.9%	82	92.1%

Chi-Square Significance = .000

**TABLE 6: Where ABSEL Aware and Unaware Respondents Have Received Information on Business Games**

Information Source	ABSEL Aware	ABSEL Unaware
Have Seen Ads for Simulation Games	73.9%	49.8%
Have Seen Simulation Games Displayed At Conferences	28.6%	24.2%
Colleagues Provide Information on Business Games	40.9%	27.2%
Have Received Direct Mail Ads For Business Games	64.6%	42.4%
Publisher Reps Have Provided Information On Business Games	21.7%	10.4%

**TABLE 7: Where ABSEL Aware an Unaware Respondents Would Search for Information on New Business Games**

Where Do You Look When Searching for New Simulations?	ABSEL Aware	ABSEL Unaware
Consult Publishers	31.1%	27.7%
Search the Web	33.3%	32.5%
Confer with Colleagues	18.9%	16.0%
At Conferences	12.2%	8.7%
Consult Professional Organization	15.6%	3.0%
Write My Own	7.8%	2.6%
Publisher's Advertising	5.6%	6.1%
Consult Books/Journals	6.7%	6.9%
Not Looking	8.9%	18.2%
Don't Know	0.0%	1.3%

The findings shown in Table 4 support the acceptance of H1 and H3 while H2 is 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. The acceptance of H1 and H3 is not surprising but the ABSEL level of awareness of only 2.5% among non-users is “shockingly” low while the overall level of awareness of ABSEL among current simulation game users at 28% is also low (albeit it is 10 times the level of

non-users). The finding that users and former users are not significantly different in awareness of ABSEL provides evidence that the two groups are very similar in terms of simulation experiences. In essence, former simulation users are more akin to current simulation users than they are to non-users.

The data in Table 5 indicates that there are significant differences in awareness of ABSEL across disciplines. Awareness of ABSEL is highest among Management, Business Policy and Marketing instructors. Awareness is lowest in the Accounting and Finance areas. These findings are consistent with the availability of business games (most are Management,

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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 6 indicate that ABSEL aware respondents come in contact with simulation information in greater numbers from all information sources than ABSEL unaware respondents. This is logical in 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. It is surprising, though, that 73.9% of ABSEL aware respondents claim to have seen simulation advertisements and 64.6% claim to have received direct mail pieces on simulation games. Given the small amount of promotions devoted to business games by publishers, these are high numbers. It is not surprising to see the very small percentages of respondents (21.7% of ABSEL aware and 10.4% of ABSEL unaware) who indicate that they have received information on simulation games from publishers' representatives.

There are very few differences in 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 7. The number one source for both groups is the web and the second most likely source for both groups would be to consult a publisher. The one major difference between the two groups 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 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 13.7% of our survey respondents reporting awareness of the organization. The most basic hierarchy of effects model for promotion is the AIDA model (Belch, Belch and Guolla, 2003, p. 88). In the AIDA model, Awareness comes before Interest which leads to Desire which leads to Action. With respect to ABSEL, awareness of the organization should lead to interest which should lead to a desire to investigate the organization and come to a conference which, hopefully, will lead to the action of joining the organization. Thus, the immediate challenge for ABSEL is raise the awareness of the organization.

The results shown in Table 7 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. These sources must be explored with regard to providing information about ABSEL. For example, might ABSEL team with some publishers of simulation games to have links on the publishers' websites leading the individual searching for information on business games to the ABSEL website? Can ABSEL work with publishers to get simulation games more prominently displayed at conferences? How might ABSEL work to get publishers' sales representatives to provide more information on business games when in contact with faculty?

The issue for ABSEL is how to increase awareness of the organization on a severely limited promotional budget. The results shown in Table 6 suggest the kinds of communication sources where business faculty currently receive information about business simulation games. Advertising and direct mail are noted as the two most frequent sources of communication on simulations. The third most noted source is interpersonal communication with colleagues. The results in Table 7 indicate that when simulation users search for information on simulations that the most common place they look is on the web and then they confer with publishers representatives and then with colleagues.

The implications of the findings on communications sources for an ABSEL promotional campaign to raise awareness bring forth the following recommendations. Firstly, owing to budgetary constraints, a paid advertising campaign is rejected out of hand. ABSEL needs to resort to an alternative means of communication which is within the resource means of the organization. It is proposed that electronic communication via the internet be used since it is highly accessible to academics and virtually free.

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 it to their colleagues so that a combined "direct" e-mail campaign is undertaken which also represents colleague referral. The ABSEL list file who are 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 them ABSEL paper calls would increase awareness and interest in the organization.

Finally, let's make greater use of the ABSEL membership. Some of us already take ABSEL brochures and ABSEL paper calls to other conferences that we attend to distribute. Let's make sure that more ABSEL members do this by providing this material to all members who will be attending other conferences.

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