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FORMING PARTICIPANT TEAMS IN SIMULATION GAMES

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ABSTRACT

Several options are available to administrators in forming participant teams in simulation gaming. These options include: (1) random selection, (2) participant selection, and (3) balanced-selection procedures. The key evaluation criteria in choosing a selection strategy include: (1) competitiveness, (2) peer relations, and (3) realism. This paper postulates that balanced-selection procedures yield significant advantages as compared to alternative methods.

INTRODUCTION

The options that an administrator has in forming teams include: (1) random selection, (2) participant selection, and (3) balanced-selection procedures. Random selection is accomplished by a variety of objective procedures for assigning individuals to specific teams. For example, the administrator could assign a number to each participant and then consult a table of random numbers for the formation of each team's participants. A second option available to the administrator is to instruct participants to form the teams among themselves. A third procedure or option in forming teams is to attempt to balance the composition of each team so that the teams are as nearly equal to each other as possible. Under the balanced-selection procedure the administrator first determines a set of criteria that are thought to be important in being successful in the simulation exercise. Teams of, say, four members each competing against all other teams in a business policy simulation might be regarded as balanced if all teams had a marketing major, a management major, a finance major, and an accounting major. In addition, secondary criteria such as grade point average, prior experience with other simulation games, the number of hours worked each week, and the like could be incorporated into the selection model in a stepwise fashion.

CURRENT SITUATION

A convenience sample of twelve administrators was interviewed to determine these administrators' practices regarding the formulation of simulation teams. Seven respondents reported that they followed the participant self-selection method. Four reported using some form of random or objective procedure. Only one administrator reported following a balanced-selection procedure.

CRITERIA

A number of criteria should be taken into consideration when evaluating the three basic options in assigning participants to simulation teams. Among these criteria are: (1) competitiveness, (2) peer relations, and (3) realism.

The first criterion, competitiveness, concerns the degree to which each team is able to compete effectively during the simulation exercise. A team made up of four highly-

motivated and successful participants competing against a team of four persons below average in talent and/or motivation will probably not be a fair match up.

Peer relations are a second important criterion. Hostile intragroup relations affect the group's ability to compete as a team; cohesive groups stand the best chance of working together harmoniously.

Likewise important is the degree of realism present in the exercise. Project groups are typically formed in industry and government by the administrator. Group members are assigned to projects and tasks by using such criteria as the areas of specialization required for the project, experience, past track record, availability for the project, and the ability to work with other designated group members.

EVALUATION

The three criteria defined above were used to evaluate the options available for assigning participants to the various teams in a simulation exercise. The first criteria, competitiveness of the teams in a simulation exercise, favors balanced-selection procedures. Participant self-selection is the worst possible option if the objective is equity in competition. This occurs because participants often know the relative strengths and weaknesses of various members in the group. Good talent is attracted to each other; poorly-prepared individuals likewise find themselves drawn together when group members are merely told to form their own groups. Random selection procedures fall in the middle with respect to the degree of competition likely present in the simulation.

Peer group relations favor participant selection. Random selection procedures have an unknown effect on group relations.

The realism criterion also favors balanced-selection procedures. Work or project groups are rarely, if ever, formed on a purely random basis. Likewise, self-selection of project teams is seldom found in industry or government.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Balanced-selection procedures are favored when competitiveness and realism are important dimensions of the simulation exercise. Peer relations are likely to be best when teams are allowed to form informally; however, good relations are likely to develop and continue during the course of the simulation when the teams are well balanced. Moreover, it is postulated herein that a balanced-selection procedure is the logical option for most simulation exercises. The current situation finds many administrators following participant-selection procedures that violate the evaluative criteria presented herein.