

COMPARING LIVE AND TRADITIONAL CASE STUDIES IN A DUAL-LEVEL COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS COURSE

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ABSTRACT

When compared with the traditional case study method, the live case method has been regarded as having greater realism (Burns, 1990; Markulis, 1985) and as being "...a more experientially-based pedagogy" (Markulis, 1985, p. 168). This paper establishes the groundwork for comparing and contrasting the use of both methods in a dual-level compensation and benefits course. Preliminary findings will be shared during the presentation, including pretest and posttest data, performance on the cases and in the course, and anecdotal feedback from the students and the client. Implications for course design and delivery, especially for human resource management professors, are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Inviting a business executive to the classroom to engage students in proposing solutions to a current business challenge is not new. In fact, researchers date this pedagogical tool at least to the early 1970s (Rashford & Neiva de Figueiredo, 2011). The live case method has been used by business professors in a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses across business areas, including advertising (Cannon & Alex, 1990), business policy (Markulis, 1985), ethics (McWilliams & Nahavandi, 2006), marketing research (Richardson & Raveed, 1980), and MBA capstone (Rashford & Neiva de Figueiredo, 2011), among others (see Burns, 1990). However, there is a dearth of literature on the use of live cases in human resource management courses; see Gundars Kaupins' work for some exceptions.

Feedback from the clients, instructors, and students who participate in live cases is generally positive. Hoover (1977) found student satisfaction with a course using a live case methodology to be significantly greater than satisfaction with other business courses. Rashford and Neiva de Figueiredo (2011) report that their live CEO intervention has met with approval at all levels, especially from the CEOs and the students.

The purpose of this paper is to lay the groundwork for a study comparing and contrasting the use of both traditional and live case methods in a compensation and benefits course that enrolls both undergraduate and graduate students. Preliminary findings will be shared

during the presentation, including pretest and posttest data, performance on the cases as well as overall course performance, and anecdotal feedback from the students and the client. Lastly, implications for course design and delivery are discussed, especially as they relate to human resource management professors.

THE COURSE

The target course is a dual-level compensation and benefits course at a state university in the southeast. Undergraduate and graduate students complete the same course with graduate students performing a more substantial research-based assignment. Two cases are incorporated into the course, and students complete the cases in groups ranging from two to five students. The compensation case is adapted from Burke's (2008) *Designing a Pay Structure*, available on the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) website. Students use fictitious, albeit realistic data to conduct job evaluations of benchmark jobs, create a market pay line, and establish pay ranges. The benefits case introduces the live case method in the course.

A small business in the region is solicited to participate as the client in the live case. The local human resource management association is utilized to identify a suitable organization. The owner or a senior executive is asked to commit to attending two class meetings, which are held one night per week during the semester, and to respond in a timely manner to questions via email. Once the client agrees, cursory documents and information are shared with the students to begin the initial research. The first class meeting involves the client introducing the students to the company and the challenges at hand. The questions to be answered by the case are identified and discussed for clarity. Students use the remaining weeks in the semester to research and propose solutions to the challenges and to develop a presentation for the client. Questions are submitted to the client in batches via email from the instructor. Responses are emailed to all students.

The second class meeting involves the students presenting their findings to the client and their classmates. Students are given complete autonomy to develop a deliverable to present their group's findings to the client and the instructor. All groups deliver a brief, formal presentation to summarize their recommendations and to answer any questions the client has.

DATA

In order to assess the effectiveness of the live case method in contrast with the traditional case method, several pieces of data will be collected and analyzed. Pretest and posttest data will be collected in order to measure any change in the students' general compensation and benefits knowledge during the course. Performance on the cases as well as overall course performance will be analyzed. Feedback from the students and the client will be analyzed for commonalities and differences. Preliminary findings will be shared during the presentation.

IMPLICATIONS

Using the live case method in human resource management courses is a worthwhile endeavor. As researchers and professors in other business disciplines have long held, this experiential learning approach is more motivating and realistic (Burns, 1990; Markulis, 1985). However, the traditional case approach may be an effective compliment to the live case method.

Human resource management professors, in particular, should be able to maintain extensive networks with local human resource practitioners who are willing participants in the live case. The Society for Human Resource Management includes area chapters in which many local businesses maintain membership. Local small business development centers and chambers of commerce may be additional sources of potential clients.

Student feedback from this live case experience is anticipated to include such themes as challenging but rewarding, learning application versus theory, and more valuable learning. The client is expected to be surprised by the creativity and innovation generated by the students and to feel that the return on the time investment was positive. The instructor is expected to suggest greater preparation for conducting live cases by reading more literature and through having more conversations with experienced faculty. Ultimately, the live case method is expected to stay a part of the course design, but improvements, including additional structuring, are expected.

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