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ATTRIBUTES GERMANE TO STUDENT/LIVE CASE SITUATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Live cases offer both advantages and disadvantages when compared to the traditional case approach. A significant difference lies in the fact that the businessman comes between the student and the case experience. Critical attributes associated with the businessman as an intervening variable were identified in a two phase research project. Eight aspects were found to be significant: communication capability, working relationships, mental attitude, qualifications, information situation, problem-orientation, availability, and time to build relationships.

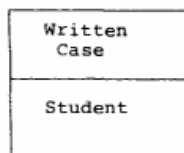
INTRODUCTION

Case experiences are seen as adding the needed dimensions of practicality and dynamics to the student's learning experience. All such situations involve a "third-party" factor which, through data-gathering and selectivity, separates the student from the case material. Whereas traditional case approaches put the student in immediate contact with the case through selected written material, in the live case, the business contacts themselves become an intervening variable which separates as well as connects the student with data relevant to the case experience. (Figure 1) The contact individual, as an intervening variable, then, becomes a most significant factor in the live case approach.

FIGURE 1

Student-Case Relationships

Traditional Case Approach



Live Case Approach



This study identified relevant attributes of the intervening variable as a step toward determining what influences affect the experience of the student examining the live case.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

For this study, live cases are student-selected small

businesses. The intervening variable is the small businessman. The students are secondyear MBA candidates with experience in acting in consulting roles. Student groups work with the small businesses in a manner similar to that of student consultants working in the Stall Business Institute Program (6; 11).

BACKGROUND

The body of literature dealing with live cases is limited, and has only appeared since 1975 (1,3,6,11,12,13,14). The emphasis of these writings has been primarily to identify who is doing what; to explain how the process is executed; and to generalize on the benefits to the student. Wier included the identification of areas which might be deduced to be learning objectives (12). Wren has suggested that live cases may be a substitute for on-the-job training (14).

If the live case approach is, in fact, growing in use; and if it is indeed of benefit to the student as the literature suggests; it then becomes essential to better understand the variables germane to the process. Knowledge these variables may improve the front-end work necessary in preparing the student to better deal with the experience of the live case.

METHODOLOGY

Two phases contributed to isolating attributes of the intervening variables in the live case approach. The first phase involved identifying a number of supposed attributes (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Initial Attribute Set

Build confidence, trust (relationship)
Motivation/Implementation
Problems discussed honestly
Admit gravity of situation
Information: easy to get, clear, reliable
Understands (jargon)
Meetings arranged (accessible, not too busy)
Student does not do all the work
Interest/Enthusiasm
Enough time to build rapport
Knows trade and industry
Seeks advice and change
Not temperamental
Criticism: constructive, tactful
Not defensive or protective
Good climate of communication
Open-minded

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Objectivity
Assistance
Cooperation
Company prepared properly
No language barrier
Good mental attitude
Makes all appointments
Work and solve problems together
Objectives, goals, and expectations stat&
Experience/Education/Background
Purpose known
Reporting procedures established
Personalities mix

provided space for any additional attributes which the student groups wished to score. Thirty-three student groups participating in similar live-case situations under a single faculty member were surveyed.

FINDINGS

The results of the survey are summarized in Figure 4. No additional attributes or comments were revealed. Measures of central tendency with values between 3 and 5 were categorized as "important," while those with values between 0 and 2 were categorized as "unimportant."

The initial list of attributes was based on factors found by reviewing consultants' experiences, student consultants' experiences, and readings on consulting (4,5,7,9,10). This list was narrowed by an informal jury to a set of defined factors (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Defined Attribute Set

CAPABILITY TO COMMUNICATE

(Some examples: Uses proper vocabulary; jargon of trade; fluent in speech; speaks same language; has writing and oral skills)

WORKING RELATIONSHIPS ESTABLISHED

(Some examples: Legality of as established; introduction made; consultant/small-businessman roles understood and agreed upon; trust and confidence instilled)

MENTAL ATTITUDE

(Some examples: Flexible; interested and responsive; has open mind; doesn't resist ideas; seeks opinions; does not tire; is alert and aggressive)

AVAILABILITY

(Some examples: Is available; makes and keeps appointments; can be reached; is not rushed; time is organized; many meetings possible)

TIME TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

(Some examples: Duration of relationship is adequate; enough time lapses to build rapport)

QUALIFICATIONS

(Some examples: Has previous training; is backgrounded in area; experienced in field; is experienced in same or related activity; understands situation; seen as qualified)

INFORMATION SITUATION

(Some examples: Knows of information sources; has an information system; is organized in approach to financial and business data; recognizes sources such as library, industry, peers, experts; has what is needed)

PROBLEM-ORIENTED

(Some examples: Motivated; sees problem; sees payoff in relationship; needs help, or needs to help; recognizes the need for a change, and seeks it) The second phase of this research involved surveying student-groups, following the completion of their live-case project. A Likert type scale was used for each of the attributes. A six factor scale, ranging from very important to not important, was used to avoid the no-opinion response. The questionnaire

FIGURE 4
Attribute Survey Results

Attribute	Mean	Median	Mode
Capability to communicate	4.2	4.5	5.0
Working Relationships Established	4.2	4.3	4.0
Mental Attitude	4.2	4.3	4.0
Qualifications	3.7	3.8	4.0
Information Situation	3.6	3.6	3.0
Problem-Oriented	3.9	3.9	4.0
Availability	4.0	4.1	4.0
Time to Build Relationships	3.7	3.8	4.0

All eight attributes were defined as "important" based on their means as supported by the median and mode calculations. All attributes fell well into the "important" range with means of 3.6 or more. Furthermore, cumulative frequency distributions show each attribute with at least 90 per cent of the ratings in the important categories. When the attributes are ranked based on the means, the order of importance is as follows:

1. Capability to communicate
2. Mental attitude
3. Working relationships established
4. Availability
5. Problem-oriented
6. Qualifications
7. Time to build relationships
8. Information situation

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Eight attributes are shown to be important factors germane to the intervening variable, i.e., the small businessman, in the live case situation. These attributes are believed to be a necessary set of guide-posts to assist those involved in live cases. The attributes, as dimensions of interests, are recommended to be fully considered as necessary in introductory training for the novice in live cases.

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The importance of the eight attributes may be further enhanced by relating them to a success rating of the small business. This is certainly a consideration for further research and analysis.

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¹ Preliminary statistical results support this contention. Results will be published at a future date.