

Moving from Labor to Talent

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Abstract

This chapter is a report on a study-in-process conducted at an institution of higher learning in the western United States. The study examines the degree to which instructional assessment practices, such as the industry analysis paper, affect learning outcomes and student learning results in a graduate business program. Greater numbers of working professionals are in need of professional skills and competencies that will help them immediately excel in their careers. As a result, business faculty and instructional designers are therefore invited to create assessments that utilize industry relevant tools and techniques. Initial results from the study are included along with findings and discussion.

Overview

The chapter will provide an examination into the degree to which the business programs at an institution of higher education in the Northwest are sufficiently preparing learners to exemplify the needed business skills

and competencies that will ensure that they will excel in their careers and meet industry demand. Current instructional assessment practices, while historically effective, do not support the business learner with relevant industry tools to build professional skills and competencies with an immediate and direct effect.

There are several challenges, which include supporting both the employee and the employer. According to Kim and Mauborgne (2014), employees never planned to let their talent lapse, making them irrelevant to their field. The other challenge is that managers struggle with how to support these types of employees. How do you move the discontented, counterproductive, and negative employees toward engagement and finding contentment in their work? Part of the problem lies in poor training of both employees and managers. Both are not always clear on how to create talent within their workforce.

The authors contend that business programs can be part of the solution in creating talent. The key will be in identifying instructional assessment practices that connect learners, including those that are discontented, to a career that draws forth their talent and is connected to a growing industry. The chapter will include an evaluation of business program instructional assessment practices, such as the industry analysis paper, and the degree to which those assignments affect learning outcomes and student learning results in business programs.

Review of the Literature

The job market has become increasingly competitive. For example, recent MBA graduates are not only competing with one another, they are also competing against other college graduates and against experienced workers (Graduate Management Admission Council [GMAC], 2014). Recruiters look for specific job skills and competencies (Target Jobs, 2014). Further, employers expect job candidates to enter the workforce fully proficient in a wide range of skills and ready to work with software tools relevant to the industry. To be relevant, educational institutions must prepare students to utilize a wide variety of tools and competencies at their workplace (Warwick Institute of Employment Research, 2013). Industrial relevance is important at undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels. The gaps between the abilities of graduating students and those that

employers expect them to have can prevent the graduates from succeeding in their careers.

In a recent report from Anderson Economic group, 1.5 million project management-related jobs have been identified for every year for the next ten years (GMAC, 2014). This equals fifteen million jobs around the world. In North America this means around three hundred thousand jobs every year. If students are ready, this is good news, and graduates will qualify for these jobs. However, right now there are not enough talented project and program managers to fill the business needs that these organizations have. Additionally, GMAC (2015) noted that a greater number of working professionals are in need of business skills and competencies that will help them immediately excel in their careers. This means that workers need to be taught and immediately able to utilize industry-relevant tools and techniques.

The typical learner at the institution of higher education under investigation is adult. According to the literature, adults learn best when the material is directly connected to their work (Waight & Stewart, 2005). They noted that this is supported best if the material is identical to elements from the work environment. They also suggested that the material must be clearly explained and reinforced to be effectively learned.

Additionally, there are several major ideas and considerations surrounding the adult business learner. Knowles (1980) suggested use of the term *andragogy*, which he defines as the science of helping adults to learn. In his work he argues that adult learners are self-directed, motivated, goal-oriented, and have extensive life experiences. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) agreed with this perspective and further explain the notion of self-directed learning. They claim that adult learners are self-directed in that they take the primary initiative in planning for and carrying out their own learning. Adults also make efforts to evaluate their own experiences and are highly reflective. Delialioglu, Cakir, Bichelmeyer, Dennis, and Duffy (2010) agreed with these ideas about adult learners and additionally suggest that the factors of age and job status strongly influence the achievement that adult learners can experience. The authors claim that these factors influence adult learners, who have greater cognitive development and more life and academic experiences than younger learners and, as such, are likely to perform better.

Delialioglu et al. (2010) further suggested that motivation is a key factor for adult learners as well. Adult learners place a greater value on

learning and expect to learn from the material they are studying. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) also claimed that, “an adult education activity would have as its main purpose the desire to acquire some type of knowledge, information, or skill and that it would include some form of instruction (including self-instruction)” (p. 103). According to this definition, adult business learners fulfill the role of bringing knowledge, skills, tools, and expertise into whatever they do. For many adults, the context of these roles is the workplace.

As mentioned above, adult business learners tend to have clear goals in mind when enrolling in learning activities. They want to expand their skills and knowledge in an effort to grow professionally and to improve their organizations. Alshebou (2010) supported this notion in a study conducted in Kuwait on the value of continuing education, noting that learners enrolled in the continuing education courses created opportunities for social development and positively influencing their society. They enrolled in the courses for this purpose and were able to attain their educational and professional goals.

Finally, concern is voiced by some authors around creating and developing talent from both the employee and management perspective. According to Kim and Mauborgne (2014), “Most executives—not just those in America—recognize that one of their biggest challenges is closing the vast gulf between the potential and the realized talent and energy of the people they lead,” (p. 62).

So the question then becomes one of creating curriculum in business schools that truly supports learners to embody the skills and competencies they need to move from labor to talent in their own careers.

Integration into the Student Experience

Professional competencies are the skills, knowledge, and qualities gained through work, education, volunteer, and life experience. Currently, the MBA program has the following program-specific outcomes to ensure graduates’ excellent performance and fit within the selected industry after completion of their degree:

1. Leverage managerial effectiveness through recognition of individual strengths, values, and leadership strategies.

2. Plan, strategize, and capitalize on business trends and opportunities in a rapidly changing global environment.
3. Apply a broad range of comprehensive business theories, disciplines, and technology.
4. Critically use information and results to identify problems, solutions, and opportunities for continuous improvement.
5. Demonstrate clear, concise, and persuasive communication skills that enable them to lead, manage, and participate in diverse organizations.
6. Identify and develop positive personal traits and ethical awareness.
7. Envision, create, and implement strategies that promote and establish a strong social response and connection to a company, product, idea, or service.
8. Recognize the diversity in global business and cultural practices and respond in a socially appropriate manner.
9. Apply socially responsible and sustainable business practices to an organization.

Considering these skills and competencies, research revealed that employers seek recent graduates who are highly proficient in communication skills, specifically oral communication, followed by listening and writing skills (GMAC, 2014). On average, employers rank communications skills twice as important as managerial skills. The top four skills employers seek in new hires fall within the realm of communication: with oral communication and listening skills ranked first and second, followed by written communication and presentation skills. Ranked fifth was adaptability—a teamwork skill.

This hiring outlook for recent graduate business students is one of the key statistics reported in the Graduate Management Admission Council and its annual Corporate Recruiters Survey (GMAC, 2015). A total of 748 employers located in 47 countries worldwide, including 46 companies in the Fortune 100, responded to the survey in 2015, including adequate sample sizes large enough to report details for the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, and the United States (GMAC, 2015).

Desired skill sets for mid-level hires vary across industries. With the exception of manufacturing, employer respondents in each industry sector expect new hires to be highly proficient in communication skills (GMAC, 2014). Oral communication, listening skills, written communication

and presentation skills are ranked as the top four desired skills employers seek for mid-level hires. Recruiters in the finance and the accounting sector seek job candidates who are also highly proficient in technical skills, including both quantitative and qualitative analysis skills (GMAC, 2014). According to the GMAC survey in 2015, employers continue to set a high bar when choosing graduate business candidates to interview—nine in ten cite proven ability to perform, strong communication skills, and strong technical or quantitative skills as their top three criteria in their selection process.

ManpowerGroup surveyed more than 41,700 hiring managers in 42 countries to identify the proportion of employers having difficulty filling positions, which jobs are difficult to fill, and why (ManpowerGroup, 2015). The 2015 Talent Shortage Survey reflected on the fact that worldwide the percentage of employers who are experiencing difficulties filling job vacancies continues to rise (ManpowerGroup, 2015). Among employers who feel that talent shortages are affecting their ability to meet client needs, the most likely consequences are a reduction in the ability to serve clients (42 percent) and reduced competitiveness/productivity (42 percent).

The results reported in these surveys illustrate that employers more than ever are seeking and recruiting new talent that will be a solid match with their corporate culture and organizational needs. The increased hiring estimates for business students are linked to the value that employers place on the talent level of students and their strategic fit within the organizations (GMAC, 2015):

We are a Fortune 500 company with global operations and incredible complexity. We need diversity of background, including individuals with formal business training in order to ensure long-term success.
—US health-care employer

Our company is currently experiencing a transformation, and business students possess most of the skills and competencies required to enable it succeed. —Technology employer in Middle East/Africa

While business can and should invest in bridging the talent gap, it is clear that success will depend on adopting an approach that engages all the stakeholders, especially educators.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

The business programs at the university reviewed in this study went through a review process in which current instructional assessment practices were compared to industry needs based on relevance (as defined previously). Three local high-technology employers and nearly forty business students were surveyed. The survey asked employers to consider the requirements associated with jobs in their industry. The survey asked students to review the job market and reflect upon their academic qualifications to determine the degree to which the instructional assessments in their courses prepared them for the job market in the industry of their choosing.

Results indicated that although current practices were thought provoking and difficult in some cases, they were determined to be insufficient as they did not adequately connect learners to what they would be doing on the job. The research participants suggested that the business programs move toward the assessment of specific job-related skills and the inclusion of additional industry tools as listed below in Table 1.

Table 1:

Industry Tools

Project Management Course	Business Foundations Course
Responsibility Assignment Matrix (RACI) Network Diagrams	Capsim Business Strategy Simulation
Gantt Chart	Contribution Scorecard
Microsoft Project	Competitive Analysis

To address the limitations of the current instructional assessment practices and the talent shortage, the program has launched the Shells Review

project and faculty have created the *Skills and Tools* checklist for business programs. All of the MBA master shells have been modified in an effort to create consistency and instructional depth within the content of the shell itself for each business area discipline. The aim is to provide as much support and resources as possible to ensure instructional quality that is more industry relevant and engaging. Faculty members also believe that students will benefit from content that is offered, using a variety of delivery methods such as video, audio, and text.

The *Skills and Tools* checklist serves to guide students and program and enrollment staff. In particular, the checklist will help in advising and supporting students to understand what they will learn in each course with even more specifics. This checklist goes well beyond the course syllabus in detailing exact tools, skills, and theories that students will obtain in taking each course and completing the Business Program degree. It enables students to conduct self-assessment and track their progress. Overall, the *Skills and Tools* checklist is a tool for continuous development process.

Conclusion

The research is clear that current instructional assessment practices, while historically effective, can support the business learner with even more relevant industry tools to build professional skills and competencies with immediate and direct feedback. The Shells Review project and the *Skills and Tools* checklist have resulted in improved instructional quality and student engagement. Based on findings from the survey, faculty members have integrated additional technology tools such as Microsoft Project and Visio in the curriculum. Following this approach consistently will allow business students to move into a better position to possess the skills and competencies required to enable organizations to succeed and meet industry demands.

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