

## INTEGRATING PRACTICAL MANAGERIAL SKILLS INTO THE BUSINESS CURRICULUM: IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING EDUCATORS

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### ABSTRACT

This study reports the results of a survey that investigated the perceptions of business practitioners and educators concerning the need for a course on practical managerial skills. Results of the study indicate contemporary business graduates do not have many of the practical managerial skills necessary to secure entry-level business positions. Business practitioners and educators agree business schools should consider adding a practical managerial skills course to their curricula.

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary business graduates require more than book knowledge to successfully compete in today's business world. A baccalaureate or graduate-level degree in business no longer is the quid pro quo that guarantees a student employment upon graduation as the caliber of student graduating from business schools has come under increased fire in recent years by corporate America (Mason 1992). A major criticism leveled at business schools is the failure to adequately prepare students for the "real world" of business, especially in "practical skills" areas, such as workplace issues, career planning and development, and job candidate skills (Kelley and Gaedeke 1990).

Competition among business schools is becoming more aggressive as they vie for a shrinking pool of students. The business schools that will succeed in the coming years will do so because they are market driven. In order to survive, academic institutions, while sensitive to student interests, must listen and respond to the changing needs of their customers; the businesses that provide employment to students upon graduation. Mason (1992) suggests that without a customer focus, students will not be able to get jobs, and without jobs, student enrollment will continue to decrease in business schools. Arora and Stoner (1992) state that graduates will be pursued by successful organizations only if universities ensure their graduates possess the training and skills required by prospective employers. In a recent poll conducted by the Angus Reid Group (Litchfield 1993), only 30% of the respondents felt that business schools were turning out a better-quality graduate compared to five years ago.

The purpose of this study is to examine two basic issues related to the preparation of business school graduates. First, the preparedness of today's business school graduates for entry into the business world relative to the possession of practical managerial skills will be evaluated. Second, the viability and content of a course that emphasizes practical managerial skills will be determined.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Corporate America's disillusionment with current business graduates has resulted in more companies pursuing internal education programs. Company executives are hiring professionals to instruct their employees on workplace issues, such as leadership skills, organizational transformation, and corporate culture. In response to this trend, reform of business school curricula is predicted only after business schools lose significant market share to corporate training programs (Deutschman 1991).

Corporate recruiters complain that students lack creativity, people skills, aptitude for teamwork, and the ability to speak and write with clarity and conciseness (Deutschman 1991). Kelley and Gaedeke (1990) discovered that prospective employers seek candidates who possess oral, written, interpersonal and leadership skills. Without effective communication, leadership, and teamwork skills, a business student is of little value to an organization (Mason 1992).

Business etiquette is another area which has been discovered as noticeably lacking in business graduates. Schaffer, Kelley and Goethe (1993) reported business students often lack such basic business skills as the ability to write a letter, talk on the telephone, conduct a meeting and introduce business associates.

The importance of business graduates being versed in workplace issues, career planning and development, and job candidate skills is receiving more attention in today's workplace. Not enough exposure to the "real world" is still a concern of company recruiters. Gaedeke, Tootelian and Schaffer (1983) reported a lack of work experience was cited by 12% of the manager respondents as being the greatest weakness of entry-level job-seekers. When asked how business schools

could improve the quality of their graduates, 46% stated through more co-operative and internship programs. Deutschman (1991) reported a large majority of recruiters responded that there needed to be more emphasis on teaching practical skills when asked what one improvement they would suggest to deans concerning their business programs.

What previous research reveals to business schools is that, aside from being well versed in the subject areas affecting the business climate, business students also need the practical skills to apply their knowledge. Emphasis needs to be placed not only on displaying knowledge of the content of the courses, but in ensuring students develop certain personal characteristics and problem solving, communication and technical skills that are required for an entry-level business position (Kelley and Gaedeke, 1990).

#### METHODOLOGY

A mail questionnaire was developed to obtain responses from business professionals and educators concerning the preparedness of business students for entry-level positions and the need for a practical managerial skills course.

##### Practitioner Sample

A sample of 300 business practitioners dispersed throughout the United States was divided into four major business disciplines: accounting, management, marketing and human resource management. Seventy-five questionnaires were sent to respondents in each of these disciplines. Respondents were selected using systematic random sampling from The Academy of Management 1993 Membership Directory, Who's Who in Finance and Industry, The 1993 Marketing News International Directory of the American Marketing Association, and The Marketing Yellow Pages.

Out of the 300 surveys mailed, 18 were returned undeliverable. Of the remaining 282 surveys delivered, 117 usable surveys were returned. The overall effective response rate was 41 percent. The following response rate of practitioner by discipline was: accounting 56%; human resource management 37%; marketing 32%; and management 32%.

##### Educator Sample

A sample of 300 business educators dispersed throughout the United States also were selected from the disciplines of accounting, management, marketing

and human resource management. Seventy-five questionnaires were sent to educators in each discipline. Respondents were drawn from The Academy of Management Membership Directory, Prentice Hall 1993 Accounting Faculty Directory, and The 1993 Marketing News International Directory of the American Marketing Association.

Out of the 300 surveys mailed, five were returned undelivered. Given the 295 surveys that were delivered, 107 usable surveys were returned, resulting in an effective response rate of 36 percent. The following response rate of educators by discipline was: accounting 29%; human resource management 29%; marketing 55%; and management 29%.

#### RESULTS

The majority of the respondents were male (71.6%), 66.4% were in the 36-55 age category, and 55.8% had an annual household income of over \$70,000. Middle and top management positions accounted for 79.4% of the respondents. Among educators, 44.8% were full professors and 65.7% taught at AACSB accredited institutions. Thirty-nine percent had between 10 and 19 years of teaching experience.

An open-ended question asked, "How do you think business school graduates are prepared for entry into the business world as compared to 10 years ago?" Only 32.5% of the respondents rated business school graduates as better prepared than those graduates of 10 years ago. The remainder of the respondents rated business school graduates as staying the same (41.9%) or getting worse (25.6%).

Next, respondents were asked to rate the importance of 23 items developed from the literature. Each item was evaluated on a five-point Likert-type scale with the endpoints anchored as 1 = not important and 5 = important. Table 1 reports the relative importance of nine skills that may be needed for a successful business career. The areas receiving the highest ratings were those of business communication skills, business presentation skills, and conflict resolution with over 90% of the responses being rated either important or very important. Health issues in the workplace were rated to be of little or no importance to a successful career in business.

A MANOVA was used to test for differences between educators and practitioners and the four business disciplines. The interaction and both main effects were insignificant.

Table 2 reports the relative importance of fourteen skills that are often listed as needed to secure an entry level business position. The areas receiving the highest ratings were those of interviewing skills, appropriate business attire and pre-interview preparation with over 90% of the responses being rated either important or very important. Salary negotiation was rated to be of little or no importance to job candidate skills in securing an entry-level position possibly because most graduates do not have a salary history.

A MANOVA was used to test for differences between the respondents' profession and business discipline. The interaction (Wilks  $\lambda = .7334$ ;  $\rho \leq 0.845$ ) and business discipline main effect (Wilks  $\lambda = 1.124$ ;  $\rho \leq 0.246$ ) were insignificant. There was a significant difference between educators and practitioners (Wilks  $\lambda = 2.097$ ;  $\rho \leq 0.004$ ). Differences existed on the items of interviewing skills ( $F = 10.987$ ;  $\rho \leq 0.001$ ), knowledge of interviewing company ( $F = 9.206$ ;  $\rho \leq 0.003$ ); and job search methods ( $F = 5.338$ ;  $\rho \leq 0.022$ ).

Given the responses to the first open-ended question indicated the respondents believed business school graduates were not well prepared to enter the business world, a second open-ended question asked whether they believed a course emphasizing practical managerial skills should become part of a business school's curriculum. A chi-square test determined that there was a relationship between how practitioners and educators responded to this question ( $\chi^2 = 22.42$ ;  $df 2$ ,  $\rho \leq 0.000$ ). Sixty-five percent of the practitioners answered yes compared to 44% of the educators.

Practitioners were asked if the business schools they attended (if applicable) offered such a course. A very small number of respondents (7.8%,  $n = 7$ ) indicated their schools offered such a course. Of those whose schools offered such a course, 83.3% ( $n=5$ ) took the course. When asked, "Was the course helpful in advancing your career," 80% ( $n = 4$ ) answered yes.

Educators were asked whether their business school offers a practical managerial skills course. Only 12.6% of the respondents indicated their school offered such a course. In addition, educators were asked the following question, "What problems/obstacles do you think might occur in adding this course to the business school's curriculum?" The primary concern was the lack of academic content. Another reason the number of courses already required to graduate. These concerns suggest the course might be included as a continuing education course that does not draw faculty and resources away from the existing curriculum.

TABLE 1

IMPORTANCE OF SKILLS/ISSUES FOR A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS CAREER

Item	Very Important	Little Importance	Unimportant
Business communication skills	96.9%	0.9%	2.2%
Business presentation skills	95.9%	0.9%	3.1%
Conflict resolution	90.2%	0.9%	9.0%
Business etiquette	76.9%	5.9%	17.2%
Organizational transformation	69.6%	6.3%	24.0%
Understanding workplace diversity	68.0%	9.5%	22.5%
Corporate culture	67.7%	7.2%	25.1%
Office politics	61.0%	7.6%	31.4%
Health issues	51.1%	14.8%	34.1%

DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous studies the results of the current study indicated a growing dissatisfaction of today's prospective employers with business school graduates. Academic institutions and business schools must start listening and responding to their market's needs by designing a business school curriculum that is more applicable to today's business environment. The respondents strongly supported (60%) the need for a practical managerial skills course.

The results have important implications for marketing educators. In an era of tight budgets it is unlikely that a separate course similar to the one suggested here could be established. Practically speaking it would make more sense to provide business students with multiple exposures to practical managerial skills. Marketing courses are well suited to include many of these skills with little change in the conduct of a course. For example, career planning could be incorporated in the basic marketing course as an assignment for students to write a marketing plan using themselves as the product. The capstone marketing course would be a place to include business etiquette and interviewing skills as seniors would be in the process of interviewing for entry-level positions. Oral and written communication skills, as well as presentation and leadership skills, can be honed in most marketing classes using class projects. The starting point is for educators to acknowledge practical managerial skills are important and need to be addressed somewhere in the curriculum.

TABLE 2

IMPORTANCE OF JOB CANDIDATE SKILLS IN  
SECURING AN ENTRY-LEVEL BUSINESS POSITION

Item	Very Important	Little Importance	Unimportant
Interviewing skills	94.6%	1.4%	4.0%
Appropriate business attire	91.9%	1.4%	6.7%
Pre-interview preparation	90.1%	0.9%	9.0%
Skills assessment	88.5	2.3%	9.2%
Establish career goals	87.4%	3.6%	9.0%
Resume preparation	86.9%	1.8%	11.3%
Job search methods	82.2%	2.3%	15.5%
Career marketing strategy	81.8%	3.7%	14.6%
Post-interview follow-up	80.0%	3.6%	16.4%
Knowledge of interviewing company	77.6%	4.0%	18.4%
Career evaluation	75.4%	5.6%	19.0%
Co-op/Internship experience	70.8%	4.5%	24.7%
Leadership skills	68.9%	4.5%	26.6%
Salary negotiation	45.4%	11.8%	42.7%

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