

Managing the management consulting exercise: a manual for the programme instructor

Introduction

In today's competitive graduate job market, the benefit of an exercise in the 'real' business world for the student is critical. This presents management educators with a challenge. How can we allow the student to be exposed to the world of business outside the institution while retaining firm control of the learning experience and its outcomes? This is a challenge the management consulting exercise can help meet.

Management Consulting provides a detailed and comprehensive account of the skills necessary to undertake consulting projects successfully. It offers both conceptual understanding and practical advice. It deals in depth with the:

- *project management skills* needed to coordinate, organise and manage a high-level project in an effective manner;
- *analytical skills* needed to develop an understanding of the client business, the issues it faces, the opportunities available to it and to develop innovative approaches in dealing with them;
- *relationship skills* needed to work effectively with others, develop leadership potential, develop a good rapport with the client and communicate ideas in an effective and convincing way.

The book includes chapters on specialist consulting areas and an up-to-date review of the modern consulting sector and the opportunities it presents to the graduate.

Management consulting programmes

Although management consulting can be undertaken with any sort of venture, local small businesses are numerous and offer broad-based projects. Their limited resources mean that they are motivated to work with universities. The projects usually involve a small team of students (typically 4–6) working in conjunction with a local business. The undergraduates gain a real management experience in a supportive, controlled environment that offers them the chance to develop recognisable and transferable skills. The business gains access to a consulting project at little or no cost, which has outputs of real value to their business. This is particularly the case with small businesses that lack specialist internal management resources.

The students will also gain some invaluable developmental experience through working on a consulting project. They will learn to work with others in a team, delegate tasks, meet deadlines and articulate their findings and recommendations with confidence. Furthermore, completion of a successful management consulting project will provide an important CV item and interview topic.

The project is normally undertaken over a one-semester period and is subject to a formal assessment procedure. The students remain members of the university and do not become employees of the business over the period of the project.

The academic makes contact with the business community, creating a network of personal contacts that can be used to develop consulting and research links. The institution also positively develops its profile with the local business community.

Objectives of this manual

This manual specifically offers advice on:

- developing an effective teaching philosophy for a management consulting-based teaching programme;
- the overall design of the programme;
- specifying formal learning outcomes for the programme;
- guidance on programme content;
- suggested tutorial activities including discussion questions and case exercises at the end of each chapter and a longer case study that runs throughout the book;
- developing an assessment strategy which ensures that the students achieve the desired learning outcomes while the small business obtains a consulting exercise of value;
- defining specific objectives for the consulting exercise in association with the client small business manager;
- motivating the student to become committed to the project;
- managing the student group and dealing with team conflicts;
- attracting the right sort of business into the programme;
- dealing positively with problems raised by the client business' management.

The role of management consulting in business's education

Management depends on intuition and experience as well as formal knowledge. An ability to undertake analysis may enable the manager to see a way forward for the business but it also demands an ability to influence and build relationships with people.

Undertaking a consulting exercise on behalf of a business presents students with an opportunity to develop management skills that are valuable and relevant. Doing so while at a teaching institution means that they can develop those skills with definite and controlled learning outcomes in a safe and supportive environment.

The management consulting project, particularly with a small business, offers a learning experience which is usually better than long-term industrial placements (Table A.1).

Table A.1 Advantages of management consulting over placements

Management consulting	Placements
Learning outcomes and content can be controlled by academic staff	Academics easily lose control of the placement experience
Student performance can be monitored and assessed through formal criteria	Formal criteria are difficult to apply and monitor
The students undertake a 'high-level' project of real value	Students often finish up doing 'odd jobs' for the business
There is no need for a formal contract of employment	A formal contract is required; this is bureaucratic and demands a legal commitment from the employer
It opens up the possibility of using small businesses	Small businesses are numerous but resist short-term placements because they demand a commitment of valuable time and may be disruptive
It is cost effective and enables the progression of a large number of students; it utilises small team working and group teaching	It requires the management of individual placements

Developing a teaching philosophy

With the consulting project, the student is given the chance to develop real and transferable management skills. If the student is to take advantage of this opportunity in a meaningful way, he or she must take personal responsibility for delivering the project outcomes.

Students can be motivated to become involved in the programme (some practical tips for which are detailed below) but they must recognise that it is *they* who are responsible for capitalising on what it has to offer. This insight forms the basis of a teaching philosophy for the programme. The programme instructor–manager creates the opportunity for students to learn, but they must take advantage of that opportunity.

Programme instructor–managers cannot possibly deal with all the problems that students will encounter, nor should they. Addressing the management challenges presented by delivering the consulting project is a valuable part of the learning experience for the student. Mistakes are as much a part of the learning experience as successes. This does not mean that students should be left floundering or that they feel that they are out on their own. What it does mean is that the programme instructor–manager must offer support, guidance and counselling on how to solve the problem but not (in the first instance anyway) direct intervention to deal with routine problems.

The philosophy of the course must be that the educator–manager's role must be one of facilitating the project and not doing it on behalf of the student group.

A number of issues arise while working on programmes. Conflicts within the team and misunderstandings with the client are common. *Management Consulting* provides the student with practical guidance for dealing with issues like these. 'Team discussion points' included in the book encourage students to explore and develop strategies to deal with the problems they are likely to encounter.

The book makes clear the students' responsibility to their projects and the outcomes they agree to. The role of the educator is one of providing support, advice and encouragement, not project management resource.

Designing the programme

A small business management programme demands the same attention to design, learning outcome definition and content considerations as any teaching programme. The programme will have the following elements:

- Delivery of a conceptual knowledge base to the student.
- Progression of a well-defined project with a client business.
- Fulfilment of a programme of consulting activities.
- Engagement of the students with a small business manager.
- Support of the project by an academic supervisor.
- Delivery of project outcomes to the client.
- Final assessment of the exercise.

These elements must be fitted together in an integrated way that fits with the overall teaching schedule and meets with resource constraints. The students can be free to arrange meetings with the client business on their own terms. Regular meetings in the form of tutorials or 'surgeries' can be used to deliver necessary knowledge, gain feedback from the students and provide support and encouragement.

Defining learning outcomes

Learning outcomes concentrate the mind of the teacher and the student on the programme's key aims and objectives. They provide the 'selling points' for a programme of learning to the student and is a valuable way of motivating the student to become committed to the exercise.

As a result of successfully completing the programme, the student will:

- recognise the importance of sound analytical thinking when approaching business opportunities and challenges;
- recognise the need for a proactive approach to business opportunities and challenges;
- recognise the rewards for effective team working in a business situation;