

ASSESSING HRM-SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

Due to a renewed emphasis on outcomes, business professors are expected to be more actively engaged in the assessment of knowledge and skills. The purpose of this paper is to assist in this endeavor by providing an e-mail in-basket exercise for the assessment of human resource management-specific knowledge. The study indicates that students in an upper-level undergraduate human resource management course significantly outperformed students in the introductory human resource management course. Other human resource management professors are free to adapt this exercise in order to assess the acquired knowledge of the students in their undergraduate human resource management programs.

INTRODUCTION

The academic responsibilities of the modern business professor have been expanded to include formal assessment of learning outcomes (Pringle & Michel, 2007). This drive for assessment stems from many sources, including: (1) institution-wide regional accrediting bodies such as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education; (2) specialized accrediting bodies, which in business include the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP), and the International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education (IACBE); and (3) discipline-specific organizations, which in business include the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the American Accounting Association (AAA).

The accrediting organizations and their visit teams will not accept course grades as proof that students are acquiring necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs), so other evidence of assurance of learning must be provided. AACSB (2008, pp. 65-66) offers three broad techniques to assure KSA acquisition by students: (1) selection, (2) course-embedded measurement, and (3) stand-alone testing. Selection involves recruitment of students who already possess necessary KSAs, which is often a problem in the context of undergraduate education because it can be an unreasonable expectation for students to possess a wide array of business-related knowledge before they have commenced their studies. Course-embedded measurement requires different faculty teaching the same courses to standardize their testing procedures in order to be able to track changes in student performance over time, and that is not always practical. Stand-alone testing is therefore an attractive assessment option because it gives students a chance to acquire KSAs before they are tested, and repeated administration of the same test allows student performance to be monitored from year to year.

Given that the core content of most business courses does not vary dramatically across the country, assessment creates exciting new research opportunities for the development and dissemination of assessment tools. Thus, if one group of professors has developed an assessment

device, their results are of interest to other professors who can be spared the time and trouble of developing their own assessment devices from scratch. This paper presents a stand-alone e-mail in-basket exercise for the assessment of human resource management-specific knowledge. “Management-specific knowledge” is the term chosen by AACSB (2008) to describe information that is necessary for success in a particular business-related field. Thus, a detailed understanding of the capital gains tax system might qualify as “management-specific” knowledge for an accounting major because the other business majors may need only a cursory understanding of this concept. Because of its specificity, this type of knowledge needs to be assessed separately for each business major (Marshall, 2007).

The test reported in this paper measures human resource management-specific knowledge, which refers to information that human resource management majors should acquire to be able to succeed in their chosen field after graduation. For example, since all managers participate in interviews, it would be nice if every business student understood the deficiencies of the unstructured interview. Not every business student can be required to learn about interviews, but human resource graduates should know that structured interviews are superior so that they can discourage the use of unstructured interviews with their future employers. Accordingly, one of the questions in the exercise (the fourteenth question, as shown in the Appendix) can only be answered correctly at above-chance rates by students who understand that structured interviews are much more valid than unstructured interviews (Judge, Cable, & Higgins, 2000).

THE HRM PROGRAM

SHRM (2008) has developed an HR Curriculum Guidebook and Templates. The human resource program at the university in this study is on the list of those that have been determined by SHRM (2009) to be in full alignment with its guidebook. By design, it follows a traditional model and includes a standard set of courses. When the program was designed six years ago, the curricula of a reference group of over thirty AACSB-accredited universities were surveyed and the five most commonly offered courses were required for the major. There is an introductory class, Management of Human Resources, which serves as a prerequisite to the other four mandatory courses: Management of Compensation, Legal Aspects of Human Resources, Recruitment and Selection, and Labor/Employee Relations. These areas are consistent with those found in a survey of human resource professionals who identified legal compliance, recruitment, selection, and compensation as being of the utmost importance in the undergraduate HR curriculum (Sincoff & Owen, 2004).

Despite the fact that the labor relations area was rated of relatively low importance as an element of the HR curriculum according to human resource managers in three separate studies (Johnson & King, 2002; Sincoff & Owen, 2004; Van Eynde & Tucker, 1997), it was included as a requirement for this major because the institution is in the fifth-most unionized state in the country, with a unionization rate that is almost double the national average (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). Upon completion of the introductory class, the other four required courses may be taken in any sequence. For assessment purposes, it would be better if there was a specialized HR capstone course for which all of the other human resource courses would serve as prerequisites. For curricular and logistical reasons this was not a viable approach.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE E-MAIL IN-BASKET EXERCISE

The co-authors of this paper were charged with developing a management-specific assessment device for the undergraduate human resource management program. Given that job-related exercises are more experiential and engaging than multiple-choice tests for human resource management students (Gruys & Stewart, 2007), an e-mail in-basket simulation was created. This is not the first time that such an exercise has been used within the context of business education. Barclay & York (1999) designed an e-mail in-basket simulation so that their human resource management students could develop their electronic communication skills. Eylon & Herman (1999) created an in-basket exercise so that students could appreciate the value of empowerment. Hindle (2002) used an in-basket exercise to simulate start-up and growth of a business. Greenberg & Rollag's (2005) e-mail in-basket exercise was designed to help students understand the role of the middle manager. The innovations of the exercise described in the present study are twofold: it is designed for assessment purposes rather than for instructional purposes, and its content was created from scratch by the authors.

In the simulation, the student is asked to read a scenario and twenty "e-mail messages." Every message was related to concepts that were discussed at least briefly in the introductory course. Five questions each were based on material that was subsequently reinforced in the four upper-level human resource management courses. For each message, three response choices are offered: a) respond immediately, indicating that you agree with the sender's message; b) respond immediately, indicating that you disagree with the sender's message; or c) don't respond immediately.

The exercise was pilot-tested for two semesters in the Recruitment and Selection course. The other advanced courses were taught only once per year, whereas Recruitment and Selection was taught every semester. Students in the Recruitment and Selection course had taken the introductory course within the previous one to three semesters. During the pilot test phase, questions that seemed to be confusing or misleading were modified. By the third semester, it appeared that the developed questions were acceptable. The complete exercise in final form can be found in the Appendix to this paper.

The big problem with respect to scoring the exercise was that the third response option, "don't respond immediately," was never the best answer. The chosen solution was to grade the "don't respond immediately" option as being incorrect only if the best answer was to "respond immediately, indicating that you disagree with the sender's message." If the e-mail message calls for a swift and negative response, it cannot be a good idea to ignore the message. However, if the e-mail message calls for a positive response, then a non-response could send an equivalent message of tacit approval. The sender knows that the message was sent; therefore the sender may feel empowered to proceed as planned after giving the recipient a reasonable amount of time to voice any objections.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF E-MAIL IN-BASKET EXERCISE SCORES

After the process of refining our exercise was completed, it was administered over one academic year in two sections of the introductory Management of Human Resources course

(n=40 students) and in two sections of the upper-level Recruitment and Selection course (n=21 students). If the e-mail in-basket exercise measures concepts that were reinforced in the upper-level courses, rather than simply assessing the students' comprehension of the material in the introductory course, the following hypothesis should be confirmed:

H1: For the e-mail in-basket human resource exercise, students in the upper-level course will outperform students in the introductory course.

The comparative analysis supported Hypothesis One. Specifically, the mean test score for the 21 students in the upper-level course was 14.38 (s.d. = 1.72) and the mean test score for the 40 students in the introductory course was 12.90 (s.d. = 2.65). This difference in means was significant at $p < .05$ ($t = 2.64$). With 20 questions, the chance success rate would have been 10.00. So the students seem to have taken this test seriously because their mean test scores greatly exceeded chance levels.

Could it be that the students in the upper-level course were more motivated than the students in the introductory course? It is certainly possible, because students in the upper-level course were human resource management majors and students in the introductory course were management majors. Therefore, students in the upper-level course may have been more interested in the material covered in any human resource management courses because they could more clearly see its relevance to their future professional careers. If so, the students in the upper-level course should also have earned higher average grades in the introductory course. To address this issue, the introductory course grades for the two groups of students were compared. Letter grades were converted to their numerical equivalent using the four point system, and introductory course grades ranged from A (4.0) to D (1.0). The mean introductory course grade for the 21 students in the upper-level course was 3.13 (s.d. = .68). The mean introductory course grade for the 40 students in the introductory course was 3.33 (s.d. = .67). This difference in means was not significant ($t = 1.08$). The superior performance of the students in the upper-level course appears to reflect content that was reinforced in the upper-level human resource courses, rather than a generally higher level of interest in the subject of human resource management.

CONCLUSION

Future research could validate this exercise in several different ways. The comparative analysis could be replicated in a larger educational institution in which multiple instructors teach each of the human resource management courses. The test could be administered in a repeated-measures design, where students take it in the introductory course and again in an upper-level course. Information about students' cognitive ability and academic performance could be integrated into the comparative analysis (that was not possible in this case, as this institution has many transfer students for whom SAT scores are unavailable and GPA's are not comparable).

The multiple-choice scoring system is a weakness of this exercise, because students are not given the opportunity to explain their answers and it is possible for them to guess some of the correct answers without actually understanding the course material. Another weakness is that the exercise does not cover the full spectrum of human resource management knowledge, as there are for example no questions about occupational safety and health. However, a positive aspect of

this exercise is that it appears to measure concepts that are reinforced in the upper-level human resource management courses. Also, the exercise is complete and may be found in its entirety in the Appendix. Thus, it is ready for other professors to adapt to their own needs. Much of the human resource core is consistent across the United States. For example, the tenth question can only be answered correctly at above-chance rates if students understand that commission-based salespeople are exempt from the Fair Labor Standards Act. This exemption applies in all fifty states. So there is no reason for professors at other universities to start from scratch when it comes to the development of an assessment device for human resource management-specific knowledge. This is particularly important nowadays because the alarm is being sounded that business schools are falling behind in their AACSB assessment obligations (Martell, 2007).

Three significant adaptations to the exercise may have to be made by other professors. First, it may not make a lot of sense to require a Labor Relations course in a state with very low union density such as North Carolina where less than one of every twenty-five workers is represented by unions. As discussed above, it is a good idea to require such a course in a state where more than one of every five workers enjoys union representation (as do the faculty, for whom state law grants collective bargaining rights). Professors in low-density states may wish to rewrite the first five questions to focus on topics other than labor relations, although they may still wish to conduct cross-institutional comparisons of test scores relating to the other fifteen questions.

Second, the correct answer to the ninth question, about unemployment insurance eligibility, varies from state to state. A question about state employment legislation is appropriate in this context because almost all of the students are in-state residents and because this state, like California and a few others, has a highly complex, unique, and constantly evolving set of applicable laws. Professors in universities that draw students from many states, as well as professors in states that adopt a lighter regulatory touch, may wish to rewrite this question to focus on federal law. Finally, the fifth question may become irrelevant if Congress passes and President Obama signs the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). This is because EFCA, if enacted, would virtually do away with union certification elections (Lafer, 2008). In that case, it will no longer be important for students to display knowledge about employer unfair labor practices during union election campaigns.

The assessment device is not administered online. Instead, students circle the correct answers on a form which is then scanned to provide almost instant results. There are several advantages to giving this test online, not the least of which is that it would become more realistic since it is after all an e-mail in-basket simulation. An online test would also be more environmentally friendly than the print version. One available feature of online testing should not be exploited, and that is the ability to offer instant feedback. If students learn the correct answers, they can tell their friends. Furthermore, feedback would make it impossible to validate the test by comparing the performance of introductory and upper-level students. Student feedback should be limited to test scores with no further discussion of responses to individual questions.

The AACSB assessment procedures can be used to close the research-teaching gap in human resource management (Dawson & Burke, 2008) by ensuring that students understand how to correctly apply the practical implications of current research. This represents a special

challenge for the topic of human resource management given business students' value systems, which tend to prioritize profit maximization over fair treatment of employees (Singh & Schick, 2007). This form of assessment device can be used by others in this field, with the ultimate goal of bringing about continuous improvement in teaching.

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APPENDIX: HRM IN-BASKET EXERCISE

You have just started a new job as Vice President of Human Resources. Some, but not all, of the company's facilities are unionized. You have just received the password to your email account and, upon logging in, you find that you already have twenty messages from company employees in your inbox. You have only thirty minutes before you need to catch a flight to a month-long executive wilderness retreat at which you will have no access to your email. You need to read the messages and, for each one, take one of the following actions:

- a) respond immediately, indicating that you agree with the sender's message;
- b) respond immediately, indicating that you disagree with the sender's message; or
- c) don't respond immediately.

The messages are as follows:

1. I'm conducting an investigation into possible employee theft at our unionized factory. I want to ask one of the employees if he is the thief, but he insists that he won't answer any of my questions unless a representative from the union is in the room. I am going to tell him that if he doesn't answer my questions he's fired, and that I'm not willing to have a union representative in the room when I ask my questions. OK?
2. I'm in the middle of labor contract negotiations with one of our unions. We want the workers to accept a pay cut. The union is threatening to file an unfair labor practice charge against me, accusing me of refusing to bargain in good faith. I've met the union every day for the last two weeks, and I'm not going to give in and agree to a pay raise. OK?
3. I'm the plant manager at one of our nonunion facilities. We have 100 employees. I just met a union official who showed me fifty signed authorization cards and told me that I had to begin labor contract negotiations with his union. I told him that I needed time to look at the authorization cards, and that in any case there isn't going to be a union here unless there's a certification election first. OK?
4. I've got a case that is coming up for arbitration at our unionized facility. The supervisors had been letting all the employees help themselves to one box of blank paper per week, but we put a stop to that by firing a guy for stealing a box of blank paper. I want to go ahead and hire a replacement because I don't see any way that the arbitrator is going to reinstate this employee. OK?

5. We have a certification election coming up next month, in May. I have learned that the workers are angry that we terminated their annual bonuses last December. I'd rather have the annual bonuses than the union, so I'm going to give them a big annual bonus and hope that this helps us win the certification election. OK?
6. I'm concerned about one of my supervisors. In violation of company policy, she gave all of her subordinates the highest possible rating. She won't return my calls and the bonuses are supposed to be sent out next week, so I'm going to let this slide and hope that she follows company policy next year. OK?
7. Our compensation system is based on the point method of job evaluation. I transferred one of my subordinates to a new job. She says that her new job is worth more to the organization than her old job so she deserves a pay raise. Both her new job and her old job are in the same pay grade, but the job evaluation results show that the new job received a higher total number of points than the old job. So I have to give her a raise. OK?
8. I have to decide whom I'm going to promote to the position of loading dock supervisor, and I have six candidates. I can't have someone calling in sick for this job, so I plan to review the six candidates' medical records and promote the one who has visited the doctor least frequently over the past year. OK?
9. I manage our facility in Glassboro, NJ. We fired an employee last month for laziness, and I found out that she is collecting unemployment insurance. I plan to call the unemployment insurance office to tell them to cut off her payments. OK?
10. One of our commission-based salespeople is threatening to sue because she didn't earn any commission last week. She says that she is entitled to the minimum wage for the hours that she worked last week, but I told her that the law is not on her side and that we owe her nothing. OK?
11. I have to decide whom I'm going to hire for the position of Director of Training. I plan to have each candidate deliver a training session to me, and then I'll hire the one who makes the most impressive presentation. I figure there's no better way to decide whom to hire. OK?
12. I am the plant manager of a small nonunion facility. When we need more employees, I invite our current employees to recommend friends and relatives who could work for us, because I trust them to refer good people. From now on, we're not going to allow people to apply for jobs unless they were recommended to us by current employees. OK?
13. I am hiring people. I have a candidate who speaks perfect English and showed me her driver's license and the lease for her apartment, but I'm not hiring her because she hasn't proven to my satisfaction that she's legally allowed to work in the U.S. OK?

14. I am interviewing salespeople. The old Vice President of Human Resources made me write out a list of questions in advance and ask them to every candidate. That was really boring for me, so I'm going to throw away the list and use a more improvisational style from now on in my interviews, asking whatever questions seem appropriate at the time. That way I'll be more alert and better able to judge the candidates. OK?
15. We are opening a facility in a new town, and we will need dozens of employees for all types of jobs. I plan to use physical strength tests to decide whom to hire, because I believe that a strong employee is a better employee no matter what the job entails. OK?
16. I put an ad in the newspaper seeking an accountant, but the ad did not ask candidates to provide references. I plan to speak to the candidates' former employers to see how they performed at their previous jobs, and then I'll decide who to interview. OK?
17. I have an employee who told me that he is a recovering alcoholic. I'm not going to wait for him to show up drunk to work one day, so I'm going to fire him now before he causes me any trouble. OK?
18. One of my subordinates told me that she had been repeatedly asked out on dates by a coworker who would not take no for an answer. She asked me if she should sue the company for sexual harassment. I told her that she couldn't sue because she had not tried to resolve the situation through our company's sexual harassment complaints procedures. OK?
19. Two male accountants have worked in our office for years, and we just hired a female accountant. She found out that the men are paid more than she is, and she says that she's going to sue us for violating the Equal Pay Act unless we raise her pay right away. I am worried that we have broken the law in this case, so I'm going to give in to her demands. OK?
20. Our facility sells products to the U.S. Army, so we must have an affirmative action program. Hispanics are underrepresented in our workforce. Our ongoing recruitment efforts aimed at the Hispanic population, such as advertising job opportunities in the local Spanish-language newspaper, have so far been unsuccessful. However, I believe that we are meeting the legal standard for federal contractors with respect to affirmative action law. OK?