

HOW GRADUATE STUDENTS IN MANAGEMENT DO PROJECTS WITH LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

Graduate students in the School of Business at The George Washington University often do group projects with local organizations – non-governmental organizations, businesses, and government agencies. This paper will describe several of these projects and offer some suggestions on how to make the best use of the resources provided by local area college students working as management consultants.

Why have students do group projects?

By doing group projects students experience the psychological sequence of working in a team – forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning. Students are able to apply what they have learned in the classroom. They gain experience with organizations and the problems they face. They learn not only to solve well-formulated textbook problems but also to identify ill-defined problems in an organizational setting. Students gain confidence in their ability to solve organizational problems.

Choosing a project

Students can be assigned a project by the instructor, they can choose a project from a list of possible projects, or they can find a project through their work place or through friends. In my classes students usually work with an organization where one student is employed. I also suggest possible student projects.

Depending in part on the class the students do a variety of projects, for example improving office procedures, creating a cross-cultural training program, revising personnel procedures, conducting a survey of customers or employees, building a website, or guiding a strategic planning process.

Working with the client

There is a sequence of events when working with a client as a management consultant. The steps can be defined as follows: 1) contact and entry, 2) contract formulation, 3) problem identification and diagnostic analysis, 4) goal setting and planning, 5) action taking and feedback, 6) contract completion, continuity and support.

In addition to businesses, government agencies, and associations my students have worked with several non-governmental organizations including Children's International Summer Villages, the Traveler's Aid Society, Greater DC Cares, the Medical Care for Children Partnership, and the Academy of Hope.

DC Government Projects

In the 1990s I wrote a letter to Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelley suggesting that my graduate students might be able to help improve processes within the DC government. She referred me to Productivity Management Services, the DC government's operations research office. This office solicited from DC government managers a list of projects and descriptions that management students could work on. In the succeeding years GW students, both in my class and in other classes, completed quite a few of these projects. My students worked on the Border Baby Referral System, the Turning Points Program, the Medicaid Pended Claims Process, Unemployment Insurance Durations, the DC Infant and Toddler Care Centers, the DC Public Schools Immunization Project, and a project for the DC Economic Development Department.

Reporting the results of the work

Students are required to present oral and written reports to both the client and the class. Furthermore the client fills out an evaluation form and faxes it to the instructor.

How the internet has changed group projects

We have discovered that the internet makes it possible to do group projects anywhere in the world. I shall describe four examples.

First, in the mid 1990s Pavel Makeyenko in Moscow and I had groups of students do projects together. Makeyenko had previously been a visiting professor at GWU. There was a Russian group of students in Moscow and an American group of students in Washington. They discussed via email several possible joint business ventures. The students learned how Russians and Americans conduct business and what kinds of business projects they envisage.

A second project with Makeyenko's students involved a search for an American company that made management training videos. The intent was to translate them into Russian and market them in Russia. But no

American company wanted to take the risk. They did not trust Russian enforcement of intellectual property rights.

A third project involved corruption in hiring practices in the banking industry in Ukraine. The husband of a former visiting professor at GWU was a computer scientist working for a bank in Ukraine. He was not being promoted, but others less capable were. So a GW student, who had formerly been a lawyer in Bulgaria, wrote a paper of legal advice on how to deal with corruption. The paper benefited from the website of Transparency International.

In a fourth project a group of students worked with Somali television. Somalia is a failed state. For several years it had no government, or more precisely the government leaders were in Kenya to avoid the chaos in Somalia. But many organizations continued to function, including Somali television. The owner lived in London. My students worked with the owner on two projects. First, they found a code of journalistic ethics, which was used in training the journalists in Somalia. Second, they obtained an organization chart for a television station in Washington, DC and sent it to the owner in London along with recommendations on how to organize the people working at the station in Somalia.

Lessons learned

We have learned that projects work better when the person desiring that the project be done is the same person the students work with. In the DC government projects we found that sometimes a superior wanted the project to be done, but the students worked with a person lower in the chain of command. In these cases the “client” often seemed to feel that the students were there to observe and to report to a higher level manager. This arrangement seemed to lead to non-cooperation, which interfered with completing the project in a timely fashion.

The work of the students is invariably rated very highly by the clients. What students are able to accomplish in one semester is quite impressive. The most frequent suggestion from clients is that students could contact them more often and work with them more closely.

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