

USING EMAIL IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT GROUP PROJECTS

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Using Email in International Student Group Projects

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Abstract: The existence of the internet makes it possible for management students to do semester projects with clients or students in other countries. Two projects in the 1990s and several projects in recent years are compared to show how the use of the internet is changing. In the early 1990s students in the US and Russia worked together on two projects via email because their professors knew each other. In recent projects students work with clients overseas because they are in touch with these people themselves. Hence, the use of the internet has become such a natural part of people's lives, student projects with international clients are now no more difficult than projects with local clients.

Keywords: management education, service-learning, internet, joint ventures, student projects

The use of modern telecommunication technologies for educational purposes is currently developing quite rapidly. As these technologies spread around the world, new opportunities are emerging to internationalize educational activities. This paper describes several experiments to use email in management courses. The purpose of the early experiments in the 1990s was to determine how working on a common project with students in a different country might enhance the learning experiences of management students. Email was used as the medium of communication. All communication between Russian and American students was conducted in English. The American students who participated in these projects were enrolled in a course in Cross-Cultural Management. Students in this class were required to form into multi-cultural groups and to work together on a project. The projects were regarded as the laboratory part of the course. Because about half of the students enrolled in the MBA program at The George Washington University are from other countries, the term "American students" actually means a multinational group of students.

In the first experiment a group of American students and a group of Russian students volunteered to participate in a project which was aimed at creating one or more joint business ventures. In the second experiment, conducted a year later, a group of American students communicated with a Russian professor who proposed a specific business opportunity -- translating and then selling American management training videos in Russia.

The major educational goals of these two exercises were to give the students the opportunity to experience cross-cultural communication; to provide some initial training in establishing business contacts with foreign partners; and to acquaint the students with the use of email for regular communication.

Constraints

From the beginning of the first experiment in 1993 it was clear that the main constraint would be the limited access of the Russian group to email. The Russian students had to rely on a single email address which belonged to a research institution and which was also used by other researchers. There was no local computer network, so the only way to send or receive messages was to bring messages prepared in advance on a floppy disk. Time delays, which occurred because of this physical movement of files in Moscow, turned out to be the major obstacle to the success of the project. It took an average of about two weeks to exchange messages. Since both groups were involved in one semester courses, it became apparent very soon that substantial progress on defining one or more joint ventures would not be possible in such a short period of time.

One reason that time was limited was the different university schedules. For the Moscow Institute the semester runs from mid February to late June. For George Washington University the semester runs from mid January to early May. So there were less than three months overlap in the semesters.

Technical barriers were more significant than cultural ones. The American students made an interesting point. "Although we did not experience a true 'cultural gap,' we felt that the physical barriers could be considered cultural barriers because the infrastructure was viewed as critically poor from our subjective perspective." (Kim, *et al.*, 1993)

The First Experiment

The first project was not aimed at a predetermined goal. Instead, the goal was to conduct an exchange of ideas about business opportunities in Russia and the U.S. and to discuss joint venture possibilities. The students, about five on each side, sought to identify ventures with interest on both sides.

The U.S. side suggested several projects:

- The establishment of a "Who's Who in Russia" business directory;
- The start of an on-line research and consulting service;
- The installation of commercial food storage systems;
- The marketing of former Soviet sports memorabilia.

The Russian side suggested:

Producing and distributing "magician" toys;
Publishing a book on the Chernobyl disaster (some of the Russian students had been able to collect a lot of information);
Sales of American second-hand goods in Russia (primarily cars and clothes);
A joint project to organize tourism in Moscow and St. Petersburg for Americans who cannot afford to stay in expensive hotels.

The students from each side made a preliminary analysis of the market potential of these ideas and rejected some of them. For example, the American group rejected the memorabilia project because of logistical problems. "The brokering of memorabilia requires an expert appraiser and the supply of this type of item would be very sporadic." The idea of "magician" toys was turned down for cultural reasons. The American students expressed the view that American children are primarily interested in "Teen-age Mutant Ninja Turtles" or G.I. Joe dolls rather than toys that are intended to "develop thinking," as the Russian students put it.

When we started this exercise, we did not expect that the project would bring immediate practical results. However, the primary goal of experiencing cross-cultural business communication was achieved to a substantial degree. Several of the students continued to communicate after the end of the semester.

The Second Experiment

The second experiment was of a different kind. American students, conducting a group project for a course in cross-cultural management, communicated with a Russian professor who set as the goal of the project the search for a possible partner in the U.S. who would be interested in establishing a long term relationship with a Russian partner in order to translate and adapt U.S. educational videos for the emerging Russian market for training in business and management.

From the Russian side the students received information about the present situation regarding demand for such materials, economic constraints on such a project, possible business partners, and forms of cooperation with the US side. The Russian firm suggested that they would translate the tapes from English into Russian and dub the tapes or provide subtitles. The Russian firm would also change the technical standard from NTSC, used in the US, to SECAM, used in Europe. The Russian firm would become a distributor of these tapes in Russia and other former Soviet Union countries.

Based on this information, the American students wrote a business proposal for the US companies that produce educational videos. After receiving initial responses, the students contacted by telephone those companies who expressed interest and conducted preliminary negotiations. Throughout this process they regularly contacted the Russian professor by email to obtain additional information and to report on progress. As a result of these efforts they obtained the names and addresses of three US companies which expressed strong interest for further negotiations with the Russian side.

This project also did not result in a joint venture. The American copyright holders were concerned about the status of intellectual property legislation and enforcement in Russia and other Newly Independent States. Nevertheless the project was successful from an educational point of view.

1. The students were able to get first hand information about some aspects of business operations in Russia.
2. They practiced writing business proposals, including obtaining background information and defining the concerns and interests of both sides.
3. They obtained practical experience in starting business negotiations.
4. The American students learned about the social infrastructure required for certain kinds of business activities. For example, Russian customers (universities, business schools, private persons, etc.) were unable to pay the market price for American management videos. The reason was the lack of a market for such products due to the lack of experience in using videos in the educational process.

Obstacles to Joint Activities

Regarding the obstacles to establishing successful joint ventures, the two experiments revealed cultural, technical, and legal or economic difficulties. Some of the difficulties can be rather easily overcome. Some will be resolved only as new institutions or ways of doing business are developed.

1. Cultural difficulties

- a. The Americans assumed that business activities would involve an immediate exchange of goods or services for money while the Russian students assumed that the ventures would entail investments by Americans in Russia with positive returns perhaps only several years in the future.
- b. The Americans assumed that legal contracts could be relied upon to enforce agreements, while the Russians tended to rely much more on personal relationships.
- c. Establishing a new business can require establishing a new type of behavior, such as using videos in management training classes. It takes time to change long established patterns of behavior.

2. Technical difficulties

- a. The Russian side had limited access to communication technology and, though communication via email is the most reliable method, sometimes delays were too long.
- b. Different technical standards (in our case colored TV standards) sometimes produce additional problems for joint ventures.
- c. The overlap in semester schedules is not very long (less than three months) and as a result there is very little time to complete a project.

3. Legal and economic difficulties

- a. The high inflation rate and an uncertain price structure can make some deals appear very risky, especially in the short term and when new markets are just emerging.
- b. Laws which are enforced in the U.S., for example copyright ownership, have not yet been adopted or are not carefully enforced in other countries. Concerns about infringement of intellectual property rights causes American copyright owners to be reluctant to start joint ventures in countries with transition economies.

Not later than 1993 one hundred percent of US universities had campus computer networks. Email and its companion, file transfer, had become an everyday practice throughout higher education in the U.S. (Cotton, 1995) But widespread use of email was not as well developed in Russia. The greatest obstacle to the projects in the early 1990s was the limited access by Russian educators and students to communication facilities. Nevertheless, these experiments in international educational activities showed that email can be an effective tool in teaching courses with an international focus.

The American students were impressed that communication via email was much easier than via telephone or fax. Although there were other methods of communication available, email was the most convenient method because of the low cost of communication and because of existing access to the necessary equipment. Email was also the most convenient means of communicating because of the time difference (eight hours) between Russia and the U.S. Because it is available at all hours, email can be used at any time, unlike the telephone. And email is cheaper than communicating by fax. (Chen, *et al.*, 1994)

Recent Use of Email in Student Group Projects

In recent years the technical barriers to using email in student group projects have greatly diminished. The technology is now so widely used, both in the US and other countries, that students now do projects with clients in other countries without being encouraged to do so. Some more recent uses of the internet by students in management courses illustrate how completely the internet has become an essential tool in the academic and business worlds.

A group of students worked with Cyandi Electronics Corporation, a Korean firm with a plant in Mexico. The firm was having difficulty retaining Mexican laborers. The students decided to help the company find ways to keep skilled workers. They found that when the company decided to open a plant in Mexico, it focused on economic gains but not cultural differences. The students created surveys for the Korean managers and

Mexican workers and analyzed the results. Their recommendations included more knowledge of Spanish among Korean managers, job rotation, incentives for good attendance, and contracts between the company and workers. (Farman, *et al.*, 1999)

One project involved corruption in hiring practices in the banking industry in Ukraine. The husband of a former visiting professor at GWU is 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, worked with him via email to write a paper comparing hiring practices and anti-corruption measures in the US and Ukraine. The paper was based on interviews in the US and Ukraine and information from websites of organizations such as Transparency International. (Rousseva and Melnyk, 2002)

A group of students worked with the Somali Television Network. 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 and radio stations. One student knew a shareholder who lived in London. The students worked with the shareholder on three projects. First, they found in the US a code of journalistic ethics, which will be used in training the journalists in Somalia. Second, they obtained an organization chart for a television station in Washington, DC, and sent it along with recommendations on how to organize the people working at the stations in Somalia. Third, the students described how a quality improvement program could be established and conducted. (Boudjemaa, *et al.*, 2003)

Conclusions

Summarizing the results of the experiments we can say the following:

1. The early projects were a success from an educational point of view in that they provided a rare opportunity for the students to communicate directly with possible business partners in a different country.
2. Technical difficulties that existed in the early 1990s are no longer an issue in most countries.
3. Students at a multi-national university such as George Washington University have their own international contacts with whom they are in touch via email. It is not necessary for faculty members to arrange international projects. Students now sometimes arrange these themselves.

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