ABSTRACT

Live cases offer both advantages and disadvantages when compared to the traditional case approach. A significant difference lies in the fact that the businessman comes between the student and the case experience. Critical attributes associated with the businessman as an intervening variable were identified in a two phase research project. Eight aspects were found to be significant: communication capability, working relationships, mental attitude, qualifications, information situation, problem-orientation, availability, and time to build relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Case experiences are seen as adding the needed dimensions of practicality and dynamics to the student's learning experience. All such situations involve a “third-party” factor which, through data-gathering and selectivity, separates the student from the case material. Whereas traditional case approaches put the student in immediate contact with the case through selected written material, in the live case, the business contacts themselves become an intervening variable which separates as well as connects the student with data relevant to the case experience. (Figure 1) The contact individual, as an intervening variable, then, becomes a most significant factor in the live case approach.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

For this study, live cases are student-selected small businesses. The intervening variable is the small businessman. The students are second-year MBA candidates with experience in acting in consulting roles. Student groups work with the small businesses in a manner similar to that of student consultants working in the Stall Business Institute Program (6; ll).

BACKGROUND

The body of literature dealing with live cases is limited, and has only appeared since 1975 (1,3,6,11,12,13,14). The emphasis of these writings has been primarily to identify who is doing what; to explain how the process is executed; and to generalize on the benefits to the student. Wier included the identification of areas which might be deduced to be learning objectives (12). Wren has suggested that live cases may be a substitute for on-the-job training (14).

If the live case approach is, in fact, growing in use; and if it is indeed of benefit to the student as the literature suggests; it then becomes essential to better understand the variables germane to the process. Knowledge these variables may improve the front-end work necessary in preparing the student to better deal with the experience of the live case.

METHODOLOGY

Two phases contributed to isolating attributes of the intervening variables in the live case approach. The first phase involved identifying a number of supposed attributes (Figure 2).
The initial list of attributes was based on factors found by reviewing consultants’ experiences, student consultants’ experiences, and readings on consulting (4, 5, 7, 9, 10). This list was narrowed by an informal jury to a set of defined factors (Figure 3).

The results of the survey are summarized in Figure 4. No additional attributes or comments were revealed. Measures of central tendency with values between 3 and 5 were categorized as “important,” while those with values between 0 and 2 were categorized as “unimportant.”

All eight attributes were defined as “important” based on their means as supported by the median and mode calculations. All attributes fell well into the “important” range with means of 3.6 or more. Furthermore, cumulative frequency distributions show each attribute with at least 90 per cent of the ratings in the important categories. When the attributes are ranked based on the means, the order of importance is as follows:

1. Capability to communicate
2. Mental attitude
3. Working relationships established
4. Availability
5. Problem-oriented
6. Qualifications
7. Time to build relationships
8. Information situation

Eight attributes are shown to be important factors germane to the intervening variable, i.e., the small businessman, in the live case situation. These attributes are believed to be a necessary set of guide-posts to assist those involved in live cases. The attributes, as dimensions of interest, are recommended to be fully considered as necessary in introductory training for the novice in live cases.
The importance of the eight attributes may be further enhanced by relating them to a success rating of the small business. This is certainly a consideration for further research and analysis.1

REFERENCES


1 Preliminary statistical results support this contention. Results will be published at a future date.