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MANAGEMENT TEAM FORMATION FOR LARGE SCALE SIMULATIONS

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ABSTRACT

A survey of predominately large-scale business simulation administrators was conducted to determine how management teams are formed and the rationale for the methods reported.

Student-choice was the prevalent method used but other methods, instructor's choice, and random are also common. The researchers also found some unique techniques, zip codes and personnel managers that warrant consideration.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports the findings of a survey of forty mostly large scale (Alpert, 1993) simulation users in business schools across the United States. The purpose of the study was to ascertain how management teams are formed by simulation¹ administrators and the rationale for utilizing the various formation techniques. Large scale simulations, also known as "complex simulations" involve student teams of three or more players, a large number of decision variables and usually make up the majority if not nearly all of a semester's course (Burns, 1992).

Course objectives, course level (undergraduate/graduate), course type, and class size all have a bearing on how administrators choose to have their management teams formed. This study was primarily concerned with identifying the various methods used to form groups and briefly examining the rationale most often reported for each method.

PROCEDURE

A telephone survey of 40 colleges and universities was conducted. The surveyor asked the School (College) of Business receptionist who, if anyone, at their institution used simulations in their courses. If an instructor could be found at that institution who was identified as using simulations they were located and interviewed. If more than one

instructor was identified, the "lead" instructor or higher level course was determined and where possible that person is the respondent.

A total of forty interviews were conducted. Of those forty, 30 instructors used a simulation for undergraduate courses and 13 used a simulation in graduate classes. Three in the sample used simulations in both graduate and undergraduate classes.

Instructors were asked whether the course in which they used a simulation was graduate or undergraduate, the title of the course, the name of the simulation used, the number of groups formed each semester, the number of students per group, how groups were formed and the rationale used for forming groups.

FINDINGS

As noted above, the majority of instructors used simulations in undergraduate courses (75%). For purposes of reporting here, and because of the relatively small sample sizes, undergraduate and graduate respondents were combined.

Because the primary interest of this paper is in how groups are formed, the mix and variety of courses (there were 11 different courses reported) and the individual simulations utilized (there were 14 different simulations named) will not be considered.

Group Size

Table 1 shows the results of the question about group size

Table 1
Reported Team Size

Number per group	Number of Respondents
1-3	9
4-5	30
6-7	1

Clearly most simulation users in this sample have teams of 4 or 5 members with several reporting "3 and 4" or "never less than 3."

¹ Respondents were not asked to specify whether they used a basic or quite sophisticated simulation. The interviewer did make an effort to seek respondents who used a simulation for a large portion of the course

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Method of Forming Groups

Most of the responses fall into one of three categories: Students' choice (21); Instructors choice (7); or Random (4). However, 8 respondents reported variations in these "conventional" methods; sometimes using quite unique methods.

The rationale for allowing students to form their own groups (the most popular method, 53% of respondents) was usually that "If the students form their own groups, they cannot whine to professors about the members of the group." Often instructors who allow students to form their own groups caution their classes to be certain special needs are covered, financial expertise, for example.

Professors who choose to form the groups themselves usually do so to be certain each group has certain characteristics. For example, one respondent indicated a desire to be certain groups were culturally diverse, another wanted to be certain each group had at least one member with finance training, others choose to be certain that groups have a variety of majors and experience in their makeup.

Several respondents indicated that they vary the method of forming groups depending on class level, class size and course type.

"Other" Methods

Professor Frank Alpert teaches at a primarily commuter university in a large metropolitan area (St. Louis, Missouri). He uses zip codes and randomization, as the primary bases for forming groups. Group members can plan meetings more conveniently, given the special problems encountered by commuting students. Professor Alpert reports his method as being very effective for his classes.

Two instructors use a "personnel director" to choose the members of their respective groups. In one of these two instances the personnel directors' chose their entire group based on resumes (...) submitted by the students. Personnel directors may be selected by a vote of the class, or may be randomly selected.

In a small-scale, freshmen-sophomore level class the instructor forms groups based on the seating chart. Such a method clearly will result in less disruption of the class and also increases the likelihood group members knew one another before the simulation experience.

Another instructor uses a technique whereby the students present themselves and their skills then form their own groups.

Several instructors reported they will allow groups to "fire" a team member who is not performing satisfactorily. One instructor reportedly used periodic student evaluations to allow him to address difficulties and conflicts in a timely fashion.

SUMMARY

Forty business simulation administrators were interviewed to determine how they form simulation management teams and why they use the formation method reported.

A large majority of those reporting allow students to choose their own teams primarily to reduce intergroup friction. Furthermore, if the students "choose their own poison," they are less likely to complain about their groups' members. Even when the students form their own groups, faculty frequently advise them to include various types of experience and expertise in their selections. Instructors may also intervene by grouping commuters with commuters, on-campus with on-campus, etc.

Some respondents reported varying the ways they establish groups from class to class or semester to semester dependent on the type of class or the instructor's past experience.

Two quite unique methods were found, using zip codes to form groups and using a personnel director. In both of these cases the instructors find their method to be quite effective and appropriate for their simulations and course objectives.

The research reported here can and should be broadened to cover a much larger sample. ABSEL members no doubt constitute an excellent group to survey to see how the overall membership forms simulation groups, the types of simulations used, course objectives, etc. A larger sample would allow meaningful cross-tabulations and better data analysis.

REFERENCES

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