
Communications and Business Curricular Needs of Agribusiness Employees

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Background

Agricultural businesses are plagued with intense competition and narrow profit margins set in a dynamic workplace environment (Harris, 1989). To remain solvent, many businesses have found they must increase efficiency. This situation has led to greater scrutiny of existing and potential employees. A typical university reaction to this trend is to increase the technical requirements of graduates so they appear better equipped to function in the marketplace. This action reduces the opportunity for students to take electives and supporting courses. Some theorize that students should specialize in their undergraduate programs to enhance their employability, others contend that students should seek a well-rounded education to develop the whole person. Theories abound, but little information is sought from employers regarding their needs for employees.

In 1976 a group of researchers sampled 450 business college graduates, looking at communication in particular. Communication skills ranked as most important to job success included: 1) listening, 2) persuading, 3) advising, 4) instructing, and 5) small group problem solving. Furthermore, these former students were asked what communication skills they wished they had been taught in college. In descending order they ranked listening, public/speaking, presentations of technical information, writing, small group leadership and problem solving communication, human relations and persuasion and attitude theory (DiSalvo, Larsen, & Seiler, 1976). In a 1983 study, Warren reviewed the skills indicated as important by the Midwest College Placement Association. He found the top four of 18 skills were 1) verbal communication, 2) responsibility, 3) initiative, and 4) interpersonal skills. More recently, some researchers tried to determine the most important communication skills needed when college students interview. Bjorkquist (1987) found that employers considered a candidate's oral communication skill as the most influential variable affecting recruitment. According to Zinn, Faustman and Riesen, (1993) a primary objective of undergraduate education in the college of agriculture should be to produce graduates with sufficient communication skills to

be successful in the workplace. Some believe that interpersonal skill development is as important as technical agricultural skills for job security and promotion. Dodge and Foster (1990) found that students could benefit from courses in interpersonal skill development.

In the last three decades, improvements in science, technology and communication caused remarkable changes to occur in agriculture. To keep pace with advances and to meet the new demands of the workplace, colleges and universities found it necessary to continually evaluate and revise their offerings and curricula. Intensity of competition along with advances in science caused those in charge of agricultural curricula to begin to reevaluate their courses with regard to business and communication. In this light it is clear that some businesses believe communication skills are important for their employees to possess, yet it is not apparent what agribusiness employers believe are important communication skills. Moreover, what specific types of communication skills should be taught at the university? In addition to technical content, what other skills should college graduates possess? How can universities improve the educational offering to meet the needs of the agribusiness community?

Although the literature is ripe with general suggestions for curriculum modifications, Krueger (1988) suggested any revision should start with a thorough overview of the needs of the targeted clientele group. In addition, Krueger identified the shortcoming of traditional survey research and suggested that valid data can only be obtained via open ended research techniques. He argued that these data gathering methods offer respondents ample opportunity to comment and to share and explain experiences. This technique is especially valuable because data about the "why" behind behavior is revealed best through group interactions (Lederman, 1990). Focus groups endeavor to secure information by seeking intersubject agreement among participants and result in better planning and participation for educational programs (Bruening, 1992).

Therefore, based on the review of literature dealing with programmatic revisions and appropriate data gathering techniques, the researchers applied the focus group technique to a curriculum revision model. This was an investigation regarding curricula revisions within the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at The Pennsylvania State University.

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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify appropriate business and communication curricula modifications and revisions to existing and potential courses offered by the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at The Pennsylvania State University. Objectives of the study were to: identify specific business and communication skills needed by agribusiness employees; and determine curricula revisions based on information gathered from focus group participants.

Methodology

Four focus group interviews were conducted in the spring of 1992 according to guidelines established by Krueger (1988). The participants were purposively selected according to their perceived ability to discuss agricultural business interests or because they currently serve on college advisory committees. Individuals in the focus groups represented a wide range of technical and business skills. Participants were identified by agricultural education and extension professionals from the geographical location where the focus group interviews were conducted. Two focus groups consisted of agribusiness individuals and the other two focus groups included representatives to advisory committees for the College of Agricultural Sciences at Penn State. The first focus group consisted of agribusiness people from southeast Pennsylvania, second focus group included agribusiness people from the western region of the commonwealth, the third focus group included representatives from the Advisory Council for the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education, and the fourth group included representatives from the Advisory Committee to the Dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences.

As suggested by Krueger (1988), one moderator led the focus group discussions using identical questions. The number of participants in each focus group ranged from eight to 15 individuals. A total of 42 individuals participated in the four focus group discussions which were each limited to 90 minutes. The discussion in each group was recorded on a cassette tape and later transcribed.

Questions were designed to elicit information regarding business and communication curricula needs for students in the College of Agricultural Sciences. The content validity of the questions was established by four faculty in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at Penn State. A pilot test was performed by asking graduate students the same set of questions. It was determined that this activity provided face validity.

Synchronic reliability was established in this study. This type of reliability involves examining observations within the same time period for similarities and consistency (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Synchronic reliability was judged acceptable by the investigators via comparison of data elicited from the four different focus group discussions.

Findings

A post observation analysis was performed by the research team consisting of a moderator and an assistant moderator. The analysis discerned patterns and trends developed among each of the group's participants as well as across focus groups. The team identified congruent statements and highlighted contrasting comments which were organized into categories by question using the "bins" approach suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984).

The participants' responses were grouped into four main categories: intellectual, management, communication competence and interpersonal skills. The participants' point of view regarding changes were gathered through questions related to general opinions on communication value and needs, business concepts needed by graduates, and specific changes needed in the curriculum.

Intellectual Skills

Understanding the importance of human relations as well as organizational structure and management behavior were attributes repeatedly suggested by participants as critical to the agricultural industry. A practical sense of economics, critical/analytical thinking, problem solving, and decision making were also identified as an individual's processing capacity that needs to be included in any business related curriculum. The following comments are representative of the remarks made by the focus group participants.

"Decision making. The process of analytical thinking and decision making all of the data in the world will not do a lot of good if the person cannot process it in their mind and find all of the options and make the decisions that are required."

"I think that is real critical to our business is getting people to know how to solve problems."

"I think a term of some of the things we are saying now would be "Organizational Management Behavior" type courses where you look at the different power structures in a company..."

"Just understanding organizational structure and how to function in an agribusiness."

"Probably need to throw in a management course, personnel management or managing people."

"Labor relations. First thing that comes to mind where you pick up the paper. You see a company somewhere is having a problem with union and management."

"I think it is important to have a general understanding of organizational behavior, human relations, and some experience in finance and marketing, production economics."

"I think that is real critical to our business setting — people to know how to solve problems."

Management

According to most of the focus groups' participants, students should be instructed in quality control, accountability, business cycle, planning, and time management concepts in order to be better qualified for the job market. The weight of the comments indicates that these employers believed graduates need to have a greater awareness regarding the responsibility for work that is produced. The following comments were made in the focus group interviews:

"I think maybe the business cycle is probably one of the more important things for students to understand."

"Quality control. Not necessarily that you are working in a manufacturing plant somewhere and you are responsible for so many widgets, but it is the whole idea that your contribution is important and the quality of your work, be it in manufacturing or in publications or marketing, really accounts for something and you should be accountable for your work in that respect also."

"I think the theory of business and why...The planning process. it is part of selling. I think understanding the role of business cycle."

"I would say time management. How to know how to go about doing the job and carrying it through and getting it done in a reasonable amount of time and also what to do first and how to plan that."

"I think the other one is the whole area of accountability. When you're working for someone else the importance of accountability and chain of command and why you need reports and what type of reports need to be made so that people know things are happening the way they're supposed to be happening. And how you have good accountability."

Communication Competence

Strong communication skills were mentioned most frequently by the focus groups' participants as the primary skill looked by employers when hiring new employees. The ability to write and speak in public were considered critical skills needed in a new employee. The capacity to choose the appropriate communication level and adapt to communicate both in oral and written forms were extensively discussed in the focus interviews. Listening and the ability to read people were frequently mentioned as critical skills employees need in today's work world. Typical response included:

"I would look for those people [who] have strong communication skills verbally and in written forms."

"...if they can't communicate and work in teams they are not going to make it in the business world..."

"I think writing has to be up there at the top of the list. If you can't write and communicate and do it in a brief format, you're not going to get anywhere. I think writ-

ing would be the top thing, at least the top thing I'd look at."

"I think flexibility in both oral and written communications is very important because depending on who you're trying to communicate with, you may need to bring yourself down to their level or you may need to be more technical..."

"Certainly the ability to communicate these days is probably the premier thing you are looking for."

"...being able to choose the right style is almost critical to a good communication process."

"I think no matter what field you are in, if you are going to be dealing with other people, you need to be a good listener."

"In plain words, is he intelligent enough to know how to come into a new business relationship and talk with his ear rather than his mouth first."

"I think that you have to be able to read people. [Know] exactly what they mean in what they say."

"I want a person who is willing to listen ..."

Interpersonal Skills

Team work, leadership and problem solving skills were identified as interpersonal skills sought in a potential employee. Some individuals interviewed perceived empathy skills, ability to understand and work with people as valuable attributes in a potential employee. Comments related to these skills included:

"... but the one consistent thing I am looking for in both ends. not only the back office in terms of that position but any position within the company is that of team work. The ability to work well with others and the ability to feel part of the team ... that is [are] consistent thing[s] I am looking for."

"... if they can't communicate and work in teams they are not going to make it in the business world or customer service industry and it doesn't matter how intelligent you are..."

"Communication skills are very important as well as knowing how to work as a team or with teams."

"... so I think [is] basic understanding who is that you are communicating with and what their perspective is."

"I would tend to see it in terms of leadership that is something certainly we want in people that we hire in the association."

Summary of Findings

The findings indicate selected employers in the agribusiness industry recognized the need for changes in the

curricula that would include thinking and reasoning skills. The business skills most mentioned as needed included human relations, organizational, managerial, and analytical thinking. Communication skills were considered by the four focus group participants as the most critical personal skill needed by an employee. From the standpoint of curricula design, the most challenging comments were those concerning the ability to listen intuitively, to think before speaking and to catch on to the more subtle nature of reading people. Participants in this study reported their eagerness for hiring individuals who have the ability to freely communicate both orally and in written form at a very high level, and to adapt their communication style according to the needs of the clientele. This finding supports Cobia's (1988) findings that indicated a graduates' inability to communicate was a key factor that hindered on the job performance.

Implications

The results of this study support a need for courses on human labor relations, business organizational structures, managerial theory, problem solving and critical thinking with an agribusiness emphasis in the College of Agricultural Sciences. Courses that focus on rote memorization and regurgitation provide little use for these employers. Not one individual mentioned the need for employees to have a higher level of technical skills coming out of the university.

In addition, the focus group technique confirmed that communication skills are critical for success in the agricultural industry, and that courses developing skills in commercial writing, public speaking and group processing are essential. Furthermore, participants suggested that students need to learn the more subtle communication skills, such as listening, being able to read people, and the ability to understand non-verbal signals. These findings corroborate the literature that indicated the critical importance of both oral and written communication skills of students in the workplace (Zinn et al., 1993; Bjorkquist, 1987; Cobia, 1986). It is apparent from these discussions that employers want the employee to demonstrate communication skills on the job in much the same way that they expect a specified technical skill level or quantification competencies to be demonstrated. Comments offered by the employers in these focus groups indicate that current graduates do not meet the employers' applied communication needs.

As suggested by Zinn et al. (1993), students need the opportunity to develop their communication skills in a variety of classes. For example, students need the opportunity to practice the craft of public presentations. This may mean that universities should increase the inter-curricula requirements for oral communications. Just as the university has developed writing intensive courses, courses should also be developed across the curriculum that enhance students' oral presentation skills. Further, intern programs should provide students with ample opportunities to practice a range of communication skills and to receive evaluation of their progress.

It is apparent that the ability to think and react and communicate in a clear and intelligent manner is in high demand by the agribusiness community. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the students and the university to develop courses and the commitment to enhance communication and business skills that undergraduates need in order to be effective in the highly competitive market place. Through integration of courses in public presentations and oral communication and the intern experience, students could have a better understanding of the needs and expectations they will face in a competitive agribusiness community.

The participants in these focus groups want employees to demonstrate communication skills on the job. Comments offered by the employers in these focus groups indicate that current graduates do not meet the employers' applied communication needs. This finding supports Zinn et al. (1993) in their contention that students need the opportunity to practice the craft of public presentations in courses and curricula offerings at the university. Therefore, universities should increase the inter-curricula requirements for oral communications. Through integration of courses in oral communication and business presentations, students could have a better understanding of the needs and expectations they will face in a competitive agribusiness community.

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