INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN: A TOOL FOR LINKING STRATEGY AND EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This exercise introduces Human Resource Management (HRM) students to Human-centered Design. This multiple-part exercise builds skills in empathizing with applicants and employees, defining a problem statement, and engaging in ideation to improve HRM practice. In doing so, students become more aware of tensions between Strategic and Employee-based Human Resource Management. Variations, resources, and suggestions are provided for interested faculty.

Keywords: Human-centered Design, Employee-centered HRM, Strategic HRM, Ideation, Internal Clients

INTRODUCTION

Design thinking with its focus on human-centered design is a methodology that addresses innovation through observation of what people want and need in products and services (Brown, 2008, Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011). Historically this technique has been used in new product development and other forms of organizational innovation. Increasingly, however, this methodology has received attention within Human Resource Management (Naiman, 2017; Sullivan, 2017). Given the increasing interest in the approach, this paper outlines an exercise that exposes students to the human-centered design methodology. In addition, this exercise helps to illustrate the tension between strategic and employee-centered HRM. Literature related to this debate is summarized in the next section. Next, an overview of design thinking and human-centered design is provided. The remaining sections of the paper outline the exercise as well as faculty options for its use.

Strategic versus Employee-Centered Human Resources

Over the past several decades, a number of authors have called for a strategic approach within the human resource field. This call is related to perceptions of traditional HRM not being focused on the organization’s strategic direction. Ulrich and Beatty (2001) characterize these traditional HRM approaches as being viewed as having either a polite (people-focused) or police (regulation-focused) role. On the other hand, strategic human resources has both a system-level approach as well as concern with the impact of human resources on overall organizational performance (Chadwick, 2005). While there have been calls for HRM to act as a strategic partner (e.g., Caldwell et al., 2011), not everyone agrees. An underlying issue captured in these critical articles is that HR is often perceived as fulfilling a role that conflicts with the strategic initiatives of the organization.

According to Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall (1988), initial attempts to link human resources to an organization's strategy took several approaches: matching managerial style with strategy, forecasting manpower requirements to meet strategic objectives, or integrating human resources into an effort to match strategy. Based on their review of these approaches, they proposed a typology that focused on human resources contributing to the development of strategy as well as strategic implementation. This idea is also emphasized by Ulrich and Beatty (2001) when they call for HR professionals to become players rather than just partners. They suggest the metaphor of players who contribute and add value to the organization.

Research endorsing strategic HRM suggests that HRM needs to be better aligned with the overall organization (Caldwell, et al., 2011). In addition, authors have outlined competencies for HRM professionals to better engage in strategic human resource management. These include: understanding the business context of the organization, being an innovator, and having credibility (Ulrich et al., 2013). Some authors have called for strategic human resources to be integrated into the human resource curriculum to better prepare future professionals (Chadwick, 2005) for this new role.

However, at the same time, there is a call for consideration of employee-centered approaches. This includes research on employee-organizational relationships (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007) as well as employee equity approaches (Cardy, et al., 2007). Some of this work focuses on the idea of employees as internal customers of the organization. A theme of much of this work is that the organization needs to consider the long-term value of organizations and activities associated with retention. Cardy et al. (2007) suggest that such approaches strengthen the organization—employee relationship. Piening et al. (2014) suggest that the gap between intended human resource practices and implemented practices is an important aspect of understanding how human resources links to overall organizational performance. This can include innovative approaches to HR problems that consider outcomes for employees. It is not that these articles call for a return to employee advocacy over strategy. What they suggest is that employee perceptions can help refine strategic initiatives. To this end, this exercise helps students understand the gap between strategy and implementation. A brief overview of design thinking and human-centered design is covered next to provide context for the exercise described in subsequent sections of the paper.

Design Thinking and Human-centered Design

In the popular press, design thinking is presented as a methodology that addresses innovation through observation of what people want and need in products (Brown, 2008). Design thinking has been suggested as a means to improve the educational process within business and engineering schools (Benson & Dresdow, 2014; Dunne & Martin, 2006; Dym et al., 2005; Glen et al., 2014; Welsh & Dehler, 2012). In an interview, Dunne and Martin (2006) suggested applying design thinking to management education was a way to confront criticisms of business schools. These criticisms included both relevance to business practice and teaching methods. To deal with these criticisms they suggest design thinking as a tool for managers. Managers trained in design thinking during the educational process would approach "management problems" in a way similar to how designers approach "design problems".

Welsh and Dehler (2013) discuss design thinking in the context of critical thinking. They suggest that there is an overlap between design thinking and integrative learning and suggest new ways to structure the educational experience. Benson and Dresdow (2014), suggest design thinking as part of a curricular assessment process.

Glen et al. (2014) also discuss the need for design thinking in business schools. Reinforcing positions offered in Dunne and Martin (2006), and Glen et al. (2014), provide an overview of criticisms of business schools' emphasis on the analytic paradigm found in the hard sciences. The authors state that an analytic approach in education is most appropriate for constrained and well-defined problems. However, problems facing modern managers are less clear. They also report that the analytic paradigm does not develop empathy for others.
As mentioned earlier, while design thinking was originally focused on product development, the process is now also being applied to services (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011). Stickdorn and Schneider (2011) define service design as "an emerging field focused on the creation of well thought through experiences…" (p. 30). These ideas have become more popular generally under the terms Human-centered Design. According to IDEO (2020), human-centered design involves problem-solving with empathy for the end-user while considering feasibility under the broader design thinking umbrella.

The idea of Human-centered design helps us consider the importance of employee-centered human resources. Even though there are articles discussing a variety of HR interventions or change processes, understanding what employees need is important. For example, before graduate school, the author worked at an organization known for progressive human resource practices. One of the vice presidents decided that hourly individuals in several departments would like a four-day week with a 10-hour day, or a 4-40 schedule. This is one variety of flexible work approaches that organizations adopt for strategic advantage. While the idea of a three-day weekend sounded attractive, it quickly became clear that individuals on the day shift were being confronted with some challenges that had not been considered when developing the new policy. The original shift had been scheduled from 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The new 10-hour workday required an earlier start time of 5:30 a.m. No one had asked the employees about the challenges that the change would bring about. A number of the day-shift employees had children who needed to be dropped off at school or at care providers -- none of which were available at 5:00 a.m. Some of these individuals were single parents. After several months, the day shift returned to a five-day workweek. The afternoon shift did not have a similar problem. Since their original workday ended after midnight, they already had off-hour backup plans for child care. This example shows how exploring the potential user experience can lead to more informed HR decisions. While flexible schedules make sense from a strategic HRM approach (attract and retain employees), the implementation of such efforts requires an understanding of employee needs.

THE EXERCISE

At the beginning of the exercise, students are provided with a project handout (see Appendix A). Before beginning the exercise, students have discussed Strategic HRM approaches in class. In addition, class materials related to Human-centered Design are provided to students. The exercise builds on previous course curricular work on constructing survey and interview questions and a brief lecture on qualitative methods of data collection such as Focus Groups. Appendix A provides one example of an HR challenge for the exercise. Additional challenges are listed in the Teaching Note.

Students are urged to identify a client as soon as possible. Depending on the prompt for the exercise during any certain term, they might need to locate a "new" employee (employed at a location less than a year), an employee nearing retirement, or someone who works at an employer with a wellness program. Suggestions for different prompts are found in the teaching note in Appendix B. Once the student has identified a client, they also are required to research information about the mission and vision of the organization. This information could be found on the organization's website or in news articles. In the unlikely case that there is no webpage, the client can be asked about the organization's mission and direction during the initial interview.

Students submit their initial interviews to the instructor for review. Depending on the information the student was able to secure, they might be ready to move to Step 2 of the project. This second step involves ideation where students use the information they have identified from publications as well as the interview data to generate six (6) ideas to present to their client at the next meeting. However, sometimes students do not probe sufficiently or have off-topic or vague data. In that case, they are directed to re-interview the client before ideation. In the case of insufficiently rich information, the instructor can provide some example questions based on the student's description of the client. In addition to questions related to the prompt challenge, the mission and vision information summary can provide context prior to ideation.

When moving to the ideation phase, students generate ideas and present them to the instructor before visiting the client. These ideas should reflect consideration of the strategic direction of the organization. Items to be shared with the client can be mockups (prototypes of apps or forms), drawings, or brief descriptions. Students are sometimes nervous about drawing or prototyping; however, some of the background information they receive suggests that using these tools can lead to creative insights and perhaps easier communication with the client. The instructor can also urge one-on-one meetings between the student and instructor during the ideation process. Reinforcing the cooperative nature of the next client meeting is important. The student should not unilaterally identify the best solution to the problem before meeting with the client.

At the final meeting with the client, the student shares the solutions generated in the ideation stage. At this time, the client and student jointly decide on the "best" idea or some combination of ideas to deal with the project prompt. Students find working with the client at this stage very interesting as the client can provide additional insights. After the meeting is completed, the student moves to the last stage of the project where they provide information about how the collaboration resulted in the selected option, as well as which parts of Human-centered Design they found hardest and easiest to use. Lastly, they discuss how Human-centered Design could help HR Professionals link HR strategy and Implementation.

CONCLUSION

Although this can be a relatively labor-intensive project for the professor, it provides students with experiences dealing with a client, ideating and proposing problem solutions. By working with a client, they develop empathy for employees in the context of strategic initiatives for employers.

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APPENDIX A

EXAMPLE OF HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN PROJECT FOR A HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT CLASS

Human-Centered Design Project

This project has several steps and is divided into three major parts. You will be turning in various aspects of the project as you proceed through the course. Each part will be worth a certain number of points (Part 1 is worth 20% of the total points; Part 2 is worth 20% of the total; Part 3 is worth 60% of the total}. This sequential approach keeps everyone on track and allows me to provide feedback throughout the process. Read these directions and pay attention to the identified due dates. Our Moodle page will also note the dates and what you have to do under that week's Activities tag.

The Challenge

According to Karrie Sullivan, guest blogger at the HRCI website (https://www.hrci.org/community/blogs-and-announcements/hr-leads-business-blog/hr-leads-business/2017/05/10/design-thinking-new-applications-for-hr), "…when building out HR practices, we don't always consider or build experiences that work very well for people in that organization." Another good reference is https://www.inc.com/linda-naiman/6-ways-hr-applies-design-thinking-to-deliver-engaging-employee-experiences.html?utm_source=sendinblue&utm_campaign=CAW_News&utm_medium=email. Therefore, we are going to get some practice with human-centered design and how we might use it in HR. I urge you to read the link. You can find additional help in this Human-Centered Design Toolkit found on our Moodle page.

It will be difficult if not impossible to complete this assignment without doing these readings.

For this project, we are considering the following HR challenge:

How can HR help redesign workspaces and make employees feel safe in a COVID-19 environment (Other possible challenges for this exercise are listed in the Teaching Note)?

According to Steelcase, COVID-19 presents an opportunity to redesign the office (https://www.steelcase.com/research/articles/topics/post-covid-workplace/designing-the-post-covid-workplace/). Many employees have been working remotely, and some currently remote employees are concerned about returning to onsite work (https://www.businessinsider.com/how-to-redesign-offices-to-reduce-coronavirus-spread-2020-5).

Essential workers have remained at work although some of those workspaces have been modified. Perhaps you've been to the grocery, the bank, or a doctor's office and have seen plexiglass barriers or signs encouraging social distancing.

You will need to identify someone who is working and remained working during our shelter-in-place order. This could be someone who worked remotely or someone who had to report to work at a location (an essential worker). This could be a neighbor, relative, or someone who attends your church or social group. You can work with them remotely (Google Meet, Zoom, etc.). Tell them about our project. I have attached a consent form that you can use (this can be done via email) to gain their participation. Explain that the project requires at least two and possibly three interactions with you. When they agree, make appointments for at least two interviews, but explain a third might be needed between the two already scheduled. Then move to the next step.

Part 1

Empathize! Now that you have a client (they signed the release), you must interview them. In this interview ask the following types of questions:

- Ask: Where, when, what about their pandemic work experience. Ask: Tell me about the last time you had a remote meeting (etc.). All of your questions should not be about remote meetings, I'm just giving you an example. Think about how your classes moved online and what challenges you had….that might give you insight into your client's experiences.
- Have them tell you a story about a good or bad experience related to working during the pandemic.
- Ask "Why?" several times to follow up on a comment.

DO NOT ask things like "Do you hate remote meetings (leading the client). Instead, ask things like "What types of challenges do or did you face attending a remote meeting?" Prepare your questions ahead of time. Read some articles about how people have been working. You could check the popular press or professional groups such as SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management).

In addition to the above questions, locate the mission and vision statement of your client's organization. If this is not available ask several specific questions related to the organization's HR strategy during the interview. Provide a summary of this information at the end of the interview document you submit.

Type up your interview and client description (generally describe your client. For example, Bob is an engineer who works in a design studio. He has been with his employer for 10 years. Upload the information to our Moodle site by (date). This is worth 10 points and gives me a chance to provide written feedback. If I don't think you have enough information to go to the next step, I will ask you to talk again with your client.

Part 2

*Define***!** Once you have my feedback, use that and insights from your interview to create a concise "problem statement" to guide your design.

Example: "Bob is a design engineer. He needs ______, ______ and ________ in order feel safe and be productive at work.

Ideate! Our readings/videos on Design Thinking help frame this. Watch/read them before proceeding to this step. Sketch/generate six ideas that meet the needs of your client. You can sketch and scan these (I find sketching rather than writing out an idea is helpful). You cannot just say something like "Bob needs a vaccine." Refer to the mission and vision statement (or client observations of these) that you identified in Step 1. Your ideas should consider the overall strategy of the organization. For example, if the project prompt was related to career development, what does the mission statement say about employee progression and growth? How do these help you refine your ideas? You can also meet with me before completing the ideation section for a consultation.

Scan or briefly explain your six ideas and upload in week 12. You can do this earlier if you like; I will give feedback quickly and the due date is (enter date). This part of the assignment is worth ten points. Sometimes students find that sketching allows them more insights. You don't have to be an excellent artist to do this.

Part 3

Contact your client again! Once you have my feedback, it is time to visit your client again. Get feedback from your client and move forward with the best idea to move to the next step. Ask your client how each option would help them. Through conversation, you might find that you can combine several of the ideas. Create your final design (to be included in the last step). This may be a prototype (you can take a photo of it and upload it in the last step, or you could make a website; you might have a drawing that you include; don't limit yourself).

Upload your final design and essay by (Date). The design can be an appendix to the essay. In the essay (approximately three, double-spaced pages) explain the following:

How you reached this final design.

Why you decided to go this way?

What the easiest and hardest part of the process was, and why?

Also, include a section on how Human-centered Design could help HR Professionals link HR Strategy and Implementation.

Use subtitles for each of the questions.

Be sure to use the references provided and other readings to make your points.

Include a reference page using APA or some other logical reference convention. The reference page is not part of the three-page limit.

The essay and design are worth 30 points. No late assignments will be accepted.

Consent Form Template

You should modify this based on your challenge. Make two copies and have the client keep one.

It can be completed via email.

Hello,

My name is (INSERT STUDENT NAME). I am a student from the (INSERT NAME OF THE UNIVERSITY) School of Business. I am enrolled in a human resources class and am completing an employee design project. The project involves employees' work experiences during COVID-19 (INSERT DESCRIPTION OF OTHER PROJECT IF APPLICABLE).

As a requirement of this project, I have been asked to interview working individuals about their experiences with COVID-19. I am asking you to be my interviewee. If you agree to be interviewed, with your permission, I would like to take notes, pictures, or videos during this interview. I may make sketches or ask that you help me sketch out some ideas. This documentation will help me complete the project and will only be shared with the course instructor, (INSERT INSTRUCTOR'S NAME HERE). Throughout the interview and process, we will assign you a pseudonym so that your actual identity will not be disclosed.

This interview is voluntary, and no incentives will be provided; however, we hope that you find the project and process interesting. If you have any questions about the project, please feel free to contact my professor (INSERT INSTRUCTOR'S NAME) at (INSERT INSTRUCTOR'S E-MAIL HERE).

Thank you!

I agree to participate: ____

Signature

APPENDIX B

FACULTY DIRECTIONS AND RESOURCES

This exercise was developed to give students a data collection experience that was different from survey and focus group techniques. In addition, the exercise provides students with a framework for understanding strategic versus employee-centered approaches. While this exercise has primarily been used within one of our senior-level HRM classes, it can also be used within a Master's Program in HRM.

Learning Objectives:

1. Students learn about the tension between strategic- and employee-centered HRM.
2. Students practice interviewing and ideation.
3. Students learn to work with a client who is not a direct report.
4. Students become familiar with the Human-centered Design Methodology.

Faculty Preparation:

Prior to assigning this exercise, it is useful to develop some familiarity with Human-centered Design. The active links found in the exercise in Appendix 1 are a good starting place. In addition, IDEO has a free Human-Centered Design Toolkit which can be accessed here: https://moodle.oakland.edu/pluginfile.php/6137801/mod_resource/content/1/IDEO.org_HCD_ToolKit_English-5fef26ba5fa5761a3b021057d1d4a851.pdf

IDEO, an internationally known design organization, https://www.ideo.com/, has several short (and free) articles and videos in addition to their training sessions. You might also consider viewing this older video that looks at the design and users for shopping carts: https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&reload=9&v=M66ZU2PCIcM

The exercise is both appropriate for a team or as an individual project. The author has only used this exercise as an individual project as it permitted one-on-one interaction with each student during the second stage of the project (students are encouraged to have a consulting appointment with the professor). In the one-on-one option, students interview one person. If the instructor has access to an organization (or organizations), it would be possible to tailor this project to an organizationally derived problem and use a student team where each team member would interview a different employee, and the team could ideate together. This project has been used in both an in-person and online class option. Because of COVID-19, students might use teleconferencing or the telephone to conduct interviews. In this case, students would have to email their ideas to the client before the second meeting.

Prior to starting the project, it is helpful to present a lecture on design methodology. I often post readings about Human-centered Design and show the video listed above. This is important because students may be unsure of how to generate interview questions that help move the project forward. Occasionally, a student will not generate information for ideation, and I require an additional visit with the client and provide some suggestions for developing better questions. Additionally, this is a new methodology for students. In our program, students are already familiar with how to interview an applicant or how to survey employees, but generally, they have not been exposed to this form of interactive data collection. You may need to discuss how to effectively interview/survey (e.g., do not use yes/no questions, ask follow-up questions). In addition, students must do some topic research ahead of time. Putting students into pairs to practice eliciting information during class can be helpful.

During preparation, you would also pick a topic for the project. The posted example uses the COVID-19 pandemic; however, I have also used other prompts:

1. Design a practice/intervention that would help employees have a better understanding of their performance at work.
2. Design a practice/intervention that that would help employees have a better understanding and commitment to organizational wellness efforts.

Regardless of the prompt, students are reminded to do research on the topic to better develop questions for the interview. The instructor can have students submit summary references prior to the client interview. On occasion, students ignore the prompt and ask off-target questions. Requiring the topic summary prior to conducting the interview can prevent this. Students are also reminded to find a client who is employed. Often students use a relative as a client, and this has had an added benefit for students as they have new conversations and learn about challenges this person has faced at work.

The project suggests students meet with the faculty member during the ideation phase of the project. While I have made this optional, I find that most students schedule a meeting with me. I find that some students have at that point generated one or two ideas and are somewhat tentative. I emphasize that their ideas should fit with the organization's strategy and also address client concerns.

After students submit their ideas for my formal review (before the final meeting with the client), I make suggestions about how to approach their final meeting. I indicate that at the end of the client meeting they should have one idea (or combination) that the client felt was the best fit for the situation. I also remind the students that the idea itself is only part of the grade as the essay is an important developmental reflection for them.

Grading:

I grade relatively leniently on the first parts of this project as this provides an opportunity for feedback. For example, students who complete a project-focused interview on time would receive full credit for that section. If a student asked yes/no questions or off-target questions they would receive partial credit and be directed to reinterview the client. I do provide them with ideas for that interview. Similarly, when evaluating the ideation phase, I look for ideas that are prompt-sensitive and relate to organizational concerns. I do not look for totally unique approaches. Students might believe that there is only one "correct" solution, but I point out that if they were actually doing this in an organization, they would have interviewed many individuals, as well as collected other data related to the issue. In addition, a solution that works for Organization X at

Time Y might not be the same as a solution for a different organization or time. This sets the stage for the essay portion they submit at the end of the project.

Most of the points for the project are found in the essay section of the last part of the assignment. The questions allow them to reflect on trying something new. The essay provides a point of reflection. Ideally, students come away from these discussions understanding the constraints faced by employees and the organization. With a changing workplace, HR professionals will be faced with new ways of managing and engaging employees. The final essay examines if the student can consider how the technique could be used in a variety of HRM situations, which also links to the development of critical thinking skills. If a student only discusses the current prompt and doesn't discuss how else the technique can be used, they will receive fewer points. Students who extend the lesson to a new situation earn more points.