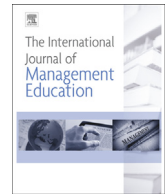


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Research Notes

Using the informational interview to get an insight into the profession of a manager



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ABSTRACT

An informational interview, also known as the exploratory meeting or networking interview, “is a chance to pick someone’s brain about a profession, business, or industry” (Decarie, 2010, p. 306). The purpose of the study was to explore whether, when modified, this assignment could benefit second-year management education students in understanding of the profession of a manager. This assignment provides students an opportunity to interact with a professional in a business setting on a variety of topics that help students understand what it is like to work in this industry, type of company, or a position. While informational interviews have been used in communication courses in management education programs, nothing is known about the use or usefulness of this assignment in other management courses. One hundred eleven students in a human resource management course were asked to complete a modified version of the informational interview assignment. Data were collected using a survey from 89 students. The results show that overall students learned more about the profession of a manager and got an insight into careers in the chosen industries and companies. Implications for teaching are provided along with the discussion of each main result.

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1. Introduction

Introductory management courses are foundation stones in undergraduate business curriculum (Thompson, Purdy, & Fandt, 1997). They aim at providing basic knowledge of the field while expertise in different areas of management is further developed in advanced management courses (Swenson, 2001). These courses serve to “heighten awareness of the complexity of what occurs when humans are engaged in the accomplishment of tasks in an organization” (Krell & Dobson, 1999, p. 44). These courses also communicate to students the idea that management as a field of practice is informed by theory (Wright & Gilmore, 2012). In other words, these courses include threshold concepts, which might be hard for students to grasp at first, but which are essential for their successful completion of other courses in the program.

One of the challenges that instructors in these introductory courses face is that traditional business and management education students usually have very little exposure to how organizations work. These students have little work experience (Finan, 2004) and struggle to connect theory with their own experiences within organizations (Miller, 1991). The more experience students have, the easier it becomes to understand course material, grasp concepts and theories, make connections among them, and make decisions. Not surprisingly, non-traditional students who come to get their business degrees

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after spending years working “seem to have almost an intuitive understanding of how business organizations work, who the ‘players’ are, and how individuals interact in business organizations” (Roth, 2001, p. 22).

“Management certainly applies science: managers have to use all the knowledge they can get, from the sciences and elsewhere. But management is more art, based on ‘insight’, ‘vision’, ‘intuition’” (Mintzberg, 2004, p. 10). Not surprisingly, management positions are difficult to fill (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2016). Over 60% of HR managers experience difficulties in hiring candidates for full-time managerial positions in general (SHRM, 2016), and 74% of HR managers experience difficulties in hiring recent graduates for these positions (SHRM, 2015a). Once hired as low-level or front-line managers, recent graduates work on the frontline of the organization “where the organization interacts with its customers and suppliers, and confronts the realities and challenges of competition” (Fleming, 2008, p. 128). They become responsible for the performance of a team (Austin, Regan, Gothard, & Carnochan, 2013; Hill, 1992), enacting organizational policies, providing organizational leadership for their teams, and coaching each individual team member (Kilroy & Dundon, 2015).

To enhance student learning, instructors have to utilize different techniques “that actively engage students in learning to think and *do*” in their courses (Hallinger & Bridges, 2007, p. 6). These techniques have to help students contextualize the knowledge they learn in the classroom, deepen and expand their prior knowledge, connect their prior experiences with the course concepts and theories, and prepare students to solve real-live problems on the job in the future (Finan, 2004). A number of teaching and/or curriculum techniques have been suggested in the recent past, including commercial movies (Roth, 2001), student-generated thought-provoking questions (Chaves, 2016), magic (Krell & Dobson, 1999), the flipped classroom model (Albert & Beatty, 2014), service-learning projects (Flannery & Pragman, 2010), concrescent conversations (Akan, 2005), and collage construction (Colakoglu & Littlefield, 2011), among others.

As an instructor of a human resource management course taught to a second-year traditional full-time undergraduate students in a management program, I have to teach the basic concepts of and approaches to people management to students who have little to no experience with organizations, work teams, managers, strategies, and complexities of the workplace. Most students have never worked, went through a selection process, reported to a manager, got evaluated, paid, terminated, or even written a resume. They take their first two-week internship required by the program after the completion of the course. To help students get a snapshot at a profession of a manager and an insight on the art of management (Mintzberg, 2004) from a manager, I decided to include an informational interview assignment. The informational interview, also known as the exploratory meeting or networking interview, “is a chance to pick someone’s brain about a profession, business, or industry” (Decarie, 2010, p. 306). This assignment provides students with an opportunity to interact with a professional in a business setting on a variety of topics that help students understand what it is like to work in this industry, type of company, or a position. Informational interviews were coined and popularized by Richard Bolles (1972) and have become a popular career development tool in the past 40 years. As a career development tool, informational interviews are also used by human resource development professionals to assist employees with the exploration of their possible career tracks in the organization (e.g., Author, 2011). In educational settings, informational interviews have been used by career counselors (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999). For example, informational interviews are used in a foster care system to help teens plan their educational and professional lives and, therefore, become ready to leave the system and successfully integrate into the society (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2004). In higher education, informational interviews are discussed primarily in the context of general communication and business communication classes, along with writing resumes and cover letters, networking, and mock interviews (e.g., Addams & Allred, 2015; Croft, 1995; Decarie, 2010; Mulvaney, 2003). While informational interviews have been used in communication courses in management education programs, nothing is known about the use or usefulness of this assignment in other management courses. If this assignment is so successful in business communication courses, should other instructors try to incorporate it in their courses? The purpose of the study was to explore whether, when modified, this assignment could benefit second-year management education students in understanding of the profession of a manager.

2. Informational interviews

2.1. *The purpose and the summary*

All interviews aim at gathering information. The type of information gathered depends on the type of interview chosen. Informational interview is a tool to find out more about a career in a company or an industry or in a position from somebody who has established themselves there (Scott, 2015). “Informational interviews are, very simply, opportunities for students to have conversations with people who can serve as models for the students’ futures, in this case business professionals” (Decarie, 2010, p. 306). During the 20–30-min interview, the student can ask a wide range of questions related to skills and demands of the chosen career field as well as duties and responsibilities (Croft, 1995). Being open-ended, informational interviews “provide a framework within which respondents can express *their own* understandings in their own terms” (Patton, 2002, p. 348). Therefore, students can receive first-hand information about the company, industry, or profession from experienced professionals as well as their perspectives on issues that arise in their professional practice. Bolles (2016) distinguishes three types of interviews in the context of a career exploration: practice, informational, and job interviews. During a practice interview, one learns to interview people by simply interviewing them about anything. Informational interview “involves interviewing workers who are doing work a person thinks they might be interested in doing, in order to discover if they are on the right tracks” (Bolles, 2016, p. 17). Informational interview should not be confused with a job interview. “The

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