**Portland State University**

**School of Business Administration**

**BA 301: Research and Analysis of Business Problems**

**Term: Spring 2011**

Business Problem Analysis Research Paper – Description and Instructions

Purpose

This term paper helps you gain skill in applying critical elements of the problem solving process. In addition, it enhances your understanding of real business problems and opportunities, and how you can benefit from using a systematic approach in solving them. While completing this project you’ll have the opportunity to choose a company that interests you, research that company in order to uncover and prioritize some of the strategic and tactical problems facing the management team, and use the PSU SBA process to develop some creative solutions to the chosen problem. You’ll also enhance your long-term perspective and understanding of corporate sustainability by recognizing how economic issues interact with social and/or environmental issues in real business settings.

Expectations

Although the final report is due at the end of the term, I would suggest that you not wait until the last minute to complete this assignment. As we review key elements of the problem-solving process throughout the term, you’ll probably want to immediately apply them to your project (you can see that I’m an optimistic guy). In this way, as you run into issues and concerns, you can discuss them with your group or with me. This is a research paper, and good research takes time. You will be required to provide a draft of your term paper to your group members at the end of the term for review. It always helps to let others review and critique your work. They can often see things that you can’t, sometimes just because you are too close to the material. Early on in the term you will be required to provide a draft problem statement for your paper as part of a homework assignment. You will also have a chance to review this with your group. This is a crucial part of the project. If the problem is defined poorly or too generally, it will adversely affect the rest of your paper – and your grade!

Problem Selection

I have purposely not selected the corporate problems for you, only a list of possible organizations for your research. Early in the course we will discuss Problem Definition as a key step in the problem-solving process. You can’t solve a problem if you can’t identify a problem. Too often in past terms students have defined a problem as a goal, or an objective, or an issue. A problem is either a gap between the real and the desired or a contradiction between principle and practice. We’ll talk more about this in class. You’ll need to do preliminary research on your chosen company in order to uncover some of the problems they face in today’s global business arena, and then pick one that you specifically wish to explore further in the context of the term paper.

Academic Honesty

The project is an individual project, and it is critical that you do your own work. Some of you may choose the same company. Although I would encourage you to discuss the project both inside and outside the class, the final work you submit must be your own. Trust me, I’ll know. And you will be penalized.

Final Report Structure

The final term paper requires a specific structure and format. You might think that this is restrictive. In a real business environment, you will often be faced with situations where you need to produce a work product that adheres to specific requirements. Get used to it! Express your creative energy in the content and quality of your thought process, critical thinking, research strategy and solutions. Plus, a fixed format helps me to grade consistently. The final paper should describe the problem you have addressed, the solution you propose, and the outcomes the organization can expect in implementing your solution. It follows the PSU SBA problem-solving process discussed throughout the term. In other words, there is a section for each portion of the process, and you should use the tools from the class to solve the problem.

Write the paper as if I am the audience. I will read and grade the paper with these questions in mind:

1.) Is the problem you describe actually a problem, is it supported by data that you have collected, and is it important to the organization?

2.) Have you exhaustively generated a creative set of possible solutions?

3.) Will the solution you propose effectively address the problem, and have you chosen that solution using effective and proven decision-making techniques?

4.) Have you made a convincing, evidence-based argument for you choice?

5.) Will an allocation of corporate resources achieve the benefits you describe?

Your report should convince the decision-maker that the solution you recommend can improve the firm’s multiple bottom line (we’ll discuss this in class if you’re not familiar with the phrase) and is worth pursuing. Here’s an overview of the required structure. You’ll also find a template on the course website. Please follow it.

**Title Page (no folders please!)**

Your name, date, course name, etc.

**Table of contents**

A table of contents page should list your reports section headings and their page numbers. Please use the headings listed below. Add subheadings as appropriate, and include them in your table of contents.

**Executive summary**

The report should begin with a 1-2 page executive summary that encapsulates all of the main points you wish to make in your report. It should include a clear statement of the problem and your recommended solution. And it should present clear and abbreviated arguments in support of your solution.

The summary is often used by decision makers as a basis for determining whether the project has merit and is worthy of further investment. At a minimum, it serves as an overview of your project that is used by the reader to determine whether or not to read the full report. I would suggest that you write the summary after you write the complete report.

**Position**

This section provides a context for your problem and an overview of the subject company, including mission, vision, values and key stakeholders. As mentioned in the course text, this context will lay the groundwork for determining which problems are worthy of managerial attention. Provide details from the information uncovered in your research.

**Sense**

You can’t solve problems if you haven’t identified and defined them properly and completely. Based on your research into the chosen company, use this section to list a number of current problems faced by the company, and then choose one that you wish to address in the remainder of the paper. Make sure that there is a clear problem statement, and that you have not confused symptoms, goals and issues with the actual problem. Use some of the tools from the class, such as root cause analysis, to gain a thorough understanding and a solid description.

**Uncover**

After gathering additional data in your research, this section should uncover more details about the problem, including more extensive causality analysis. Looking at possible causes can help uncover potential solutions. Using this information, provide a number of,(more than two) alternative solutions to the problem.

**Solve**

Based on acquired data, and using tools reviewed during the term, choose a solution from amongst those “uncovered” in the previous section of the paper. Convince me that your choice is the best choice.

**Build**

Use this section to prepare a cost/benefit and feasibility analysis of your solution, along with an ethical screen.

**Achieve**

To the extent possible, prepare a brief discussion of how your solution can be implemented. Describe the steps that will be required to put your solution into effect. If you are able to define the steps with sufficient clarity, you can also include a timeline and budget for the implementation – even if you have to make a few assumptions. I do understand that it is hard to get some of this information. I am most interested in seeing that you understand the process Develop a set of measures that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of your solution in delivering proposed benefits. Discuss when, how often, and how the solution should be evaluated.

**Bibliography page**

Using MLA style guidelines, prepare a bibliography page. At least ten sources are to be listed on this page, and at least two (2) of them must be from peer-reviewed sources (refereed). We will discuss “peer-reviewed” sources in class, but briefly, a peer-reviewed source is a scholarly periodical which requires that each article submitted for publication be judged by an independent panel of experts (scholarly or scientific peers). You may list sources that are not directly cited in the body of the paper.

**Appendices**

If you have detailed materials or data that are needed to support your recommendations, but might be too lengthy to include within the body of your report, include it in one or more appendices. If you use appendices, you must reference them in the body of your report.

**Formatting**

The PSU writing center offers in-person and on-line support for student research projects. Their web site is: [www.writingcenter.pdx.edu](http://www.writingcenter.pdx.edu). Please take advantage of these resources.

Your final report should be very carefully organized and formatted. Use subheadings and highlighting (italics, boldface etc.) as necessary to guide the reader through your work. Use bullet points and numbering to draw attention to lists of important items. Make sure that your formatting style, organizational approach, and level of detail are consistent throughout the report. Use a formal tone appropriate for business documents. Be consistent with use of tense and person. When presenting numerical data, use appropriate guidelines to present your data effectively. Use 12-point Times New Roman for body copy, and 14-point Arial Bold for major headings (see the template on the course website).

As for length, the term paper should be at least ten (10) pages long, not counting the Table of Contents, citation page or any necessary appendices. Use the font guidelines listed above, and make sure it’s **double-spaced and one-sided**. I know that it seems like a waste of paper, but single-sided is much easier to grade if I’m reading many papers at the end of the term. And you don’t want me to be cranky when I’m reading your paper.

You are expected to follow MLA style guidelines for all citations in the text and on your bibliography page. Be particularly careful when citing materials collected through PSU Library online databases, such as EBSCO Host. The MLA has a web site but does not publish its guidelines there. However, there are many other sources for citation examples, such as:

<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/library/researchguides.html>.

You can also find printed MLA style guidelines in the library and at the writing center.

**Final Thoughts**

The term paper is 35 percent of your final grade. It’s hard to get an A in this class if you don’t do well on this project. Start early, particularly the background research and problem definition. Outline your thoughts and update the outline as we cover the PSU SBA process in class. As mentioned on the first page, the problem definition is critical, so make sure you spend some time on it. Trust me, it will help the rest of the paper go more smoothly. If you’re having problems, come see me with your questions. I’m happy to help.

Lastly, good research is the backbone of the paper. And, as I will repeat in class, this means more than just a Google search. Google is a terrific resource, but the PSU Library website is a better one. Experts claim that Google and other common search engines only give you access to 1 percent of the data on the Internet. The rest of the information is in the “deep” Web. Corporate and other private databases make up much of this data, and the PSU Library will give you access to some of this. **And I had better not see Wikipedia as a source in your citation list.**