

The Joint Venture: Using a business simulation project at a graduate program for students and corporate personnel

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Abstract

To provide a "real" environment in which students are encouraged to communicate, it is sometimes necessary to look beyond the walls of the classroom. Applying for a job or interviewing job candidates are certainly "real" enough tasks that people working in business undertake. This paper reviews a joint project involving students from the Intensive International Executive Program (IIEP) and English for International Relations and Development (EIRD IV) at the International University of Japan (IUJ). By combining the two groups we were able to create a simulated environment to prepare them to be better communicators in the corporate world. Not only did they get the chance to problem-solve and connect with individuals outside of their own classes, they also got a chance to communicate with the broader community at IUJ as they interviewed six job candidates from five different countries. The benefits for everyone involved in this project proved to be tremendous since they could draw on each other's varied backgrounds, experiences and even varieties of English to gain insight into the job interview and corporate communications process.

Introduction

In today's world of multinational corporations, effective communication and problem-solving skills are important assets employees must possess. Training and education to meet these needs should ideally involve participants in challenging projects, stimulating assignments and group work involving cross-cultural elements and real world experiences.

Many universities offering non-degree programs to meet these needs tend to keep their courses separate from those in degree-programs. At the International University of Japan (IUJ), a two-year-graduate institution, we decided to involve corporate participants from the Intensive International Executive Program (IIEP) and M.A. candidates from the English for International Relations and Development (EIRD IV) course, in a "joint venture" to create a fictional, multinational company.

By combining students from the IIEP and EIRD IV, as well as outside participants, we were able to create a simulated "real world" environment in which students were challenged to use various communication styles, play different roles, problem-solve, draw from their rich and varied background of experience and knowledge, foster relationships and improve their communication strategies, styles and skills. The student-created company had to organize and carry out two activities real corporations perform on a frequent basis: interviewing job candidates and communicating with the media -- via a press conference.

Background of participants

The IIEP, an eight-week program, included five participants from: two oil companies, an iron and steel company and a prefectural government office (three Japanese and two Chinese, ages 24 - 40, all men). They have business and management experience and attended the IIEP to further develop their language and cross-culture skills in order to be successful in an overseas assignment (usually at some management level). Their overall English language levels are high beginner to intermediate.

The EIRD IV, offered during the winter term (10 weeks) consisted of three students: one female, two males; ages approximately 30 - 36; and all Japanese. They are company sponsored students from: a utility company, a prefectural government, and an auto parts manufacturer. Their English language level is intermediate to high intermediate.

Since this course is offered to second year students only, their needs are communication skills required for on-the-job performance when they return to their

respective organizations after graduating from IUJ in the 1996 Spring term. These students are also usually put into a management track and have been sent to IUJ to get their MA degree as part of their management development.

Job candidates were made up of actual IUJ students who are in the process of applying for full-time positions as well as internship opportunities both in and outside of Japan. There were a total of six candidates who applied for three positions. Their backgrounds were: two women and four men from America, Bangladesh, China, Ireland, and Turkey.

Journalists for the final press conference included one real journalist, and five outside faculty and staff members who asked challenging questions based on the information given during the simulation.

Rationale for combining the two groups

Both classes had small numbers of students with various backgrounds, experience and English language abilities. For example, one of the students in EIRD IV will be sent to China in the next two years after graduating from IUJ. By working together with the Chinese participants in IIEP, they could begin discussions by sharing common interests and needs.

During the different stages of the project all participants were allowed to speak in any language needed in order to complete their tasks. Sometimes English, Japanese and Chinese were used during the preparation sessions; but large group discussions were always held in English. Please note that the course curriculum for each class was different. This project was

a major component of the EIRD IV grading, which is why they had more responsibility; IIEP participants were not graded on this activity.

The tasks for the project were divided up in the following manner :

The EIRD IV students, based on their higher level of language skills had to:	The IIEP participants, based on their rich work experience were asked to:
1. create the company and company profile (See appendix A)	1. give feedback on the company profile
2. create three job descriptions (See appendix B)	2. give input on the job descriptions, including salary recommendations, benefits, job requirements, etc.
3. work on deciding interview questions and interviewer roles with IIEP (See appendix C)	3. identify ideal candidate qualifications with EIRD IV (See appendix D)
4. review resumes and cover letters	4. review resumes and cover letters
5. manage job interview schedule	
6. interview candidates along with the IIEP participants	5. interview candidates along with the EIRD IV students
7. create acceptance/rejection letters	
8. participate in the video feedback of the interviews	6. participate in the video feedback of the interviews
9. give feedback to interviewees one week later	
10. hire two candidates	
11. create press releases and submit answers for Case Study (See appendices F & G)	7. read press releases and pre-press conference notes
12. hold a press conference (See appendix G)	8. attend the press conference as outside journalists and ask questions

Project schedule

Students in both classes worked separately to prepare for their assignments/roles and then met in combined classes once a week over the course of seven weeks to work on the project.

During **Week 1** the participants met for the first time and had to complete a company profile and job descriptions; determine the roles they would play in their groups; and review

the schedule for the next few weeks. They also worked on developing and defining the characteristics of the ideal candidate for each position. The group focused on job expectations, what was realistic about the company profile (MSK Co. Ltd.) and job descriptions and what needed to be improved and changed (see appendices A & B)).

During **Week 2** they reviewed the final job descriptions, determined final interview roles, and worked together on brainstorming interview questions as well as trying to anticipate and identify hard questions from interviewees. We also discussed topics of cultural expectations in a corporate environment, job titles, responsibilities, and general corporate reporting structures, such as the differences between a COO, CEO and CFO. A general announcement calling for interview candidates was made during this week.

In **Week 3**, the interviewers worked in two groups to interview six candidates. Each interview team had three members and each team interviewed two candidates. Each session was video taped and took place in three classrooms (see appendix E). One classroom had one camera covering both interviewers and interviewees. The other classrooms had two video cameras: one filming the interviewers and another filming the interviewees.

After most of the interviews were finished the class began an initial feedback session by watching the first five minutes of each interview. At this time only the interviewers were present. Feedback for the candidates would take place the following week. Due to scheduling problems, one candidate had to be interviewed later in the day and feedback was included on a separate date.

In **Week 4**, the EIRD IV group gave feedback to the candidates individually. Another assignment given that week was a letter of introduction. They had to write a letter to the General Manager of their Singapore subsidiary, informing him that they had hired two new managers.

During **Weeks 5-6** EIRD IV students had to respond to a case study scenario (see appendix F) in which some problems came up one year later involving the two people they had hired.

They also had to prepare for a press conference in which they were to announce the opening of their Singapore subsidiary and, at the same time, field some tough questions on pollution and labor relations (see appendix G). In order to successfully manage this they had to prepare answers for potential questions from the Journalists and be ready to defend, clarify and represent their company in the best manner. IIEP students had to prepare for their roles as journalists and decide on what kinds of questions to ask, after reading the “news articles” about MSK Co. Ltd.

In **Weeks 7 - 8**, the press conference, lead by students in EIRD IV and attended by IIEP as well as outside faculty and staff, was video taped. After the 30 minute activity, feedback and critique of the press conference began. One week later (week 8) feedback and critique of the press conference continued for EIRD IV students.

The Culture of Job Interviews

It became clear as we moved through the seven weeks that we were presenting an American model of job interviews and communication styles. By identifying this early on, we were able to get the participants to consider their own culture's interview processes and decide how to manage interviews in a variety of cultures. Assuming that the corporate situation was the same, i.e. a corporate office of an auto parts manufacturing company, but set in different countries, we discussed both the similarities and differences which came up in the interview process. The only obvious similarity among all three cultures (U.S., Japan, China) was the appropriate choices of color for clothing (blue, brown, black) and hair styles (conservative). The differences included verbal and non-verbal communication, personality characteristics, proxemics, and punctuality.

Since the six job candidates came from different countries, the interviewers, all with different English language ability, had to adjust to five different accents and cultural backgrounds. The Japanese interviewers found the candidates from Bangladesh and Turkey the hardest to understand in terms of their speech patterns. And although they had a better time understanding the candidates from China, America and Ireland, if the person spoke at a faster speed (than their listening ability), they still experienced comprehension problems.

One of the clearest cultural differences was the use of non-verbal cues. While posture is important in interviews in the U.S. and China, it seemed more important to the Japanese. For example, the Japanese participants stated that one should never cross one's legs in an interview, and the hands should rest on the legs just above the knees. They favored interviewees who did this. Also the Japanese generally bow rather than shake hands. At least one interviewer felt awkward about shaking hands at the beginning and end of the

interviews. Facial expressions also varied, as the Japanese and Chinese smiled only after realizing they were “supposed” to, meaning that we (American instructors) value this.

Not only were non-verbal cues different, but personality characteristics varied from culture to culture as well. What Americans value in management is quite different from that of the Japanese and Chinese. Aggressiveness and willingness to ask questions or challenge authority did not emerge as positive characteristics to them. The use of humor in this situation was also valued differently. While the Japanese and Chinese participants mentioned that an interview was a serious occasion, they wanted to know whether it was appropriate, in an American setting. Of course, it always depends on the situation and the personalities of the people involved.

The topic of personality traits and what kinds of qualifications to put in a resume seemed to be additional interesting points for discussion. For example, the Japanese students who gave feedback to an interviewee recommended she add information to her resume including a statement about her good health, family background, her driver’s license and also a paragraph about her personal characteristics -- describing what kind of person she is, i.e., sincere, hard working, humorous, etc. Included in this discussion was what kinds of topics people could talk about, such as a person’s age, marital status, career goals and others, and in which countries these topics were considered “safe” to talk about.

The interviewers also appeared quite uncomfortable with introductions and conclusions in the interviews. They didn’t have a sense of how to use an “ice breaker” to put everyone at ease. One participant wanted to know how he could have made the interview seem less like an interrogation; he felt like a police officer grilling a suspect. This was partly

due to lack of experience but it also reflects differences in cultural expectations of what an interview should be like, what roles the interviewer and interviewee should take -- whether it is the interviewer's role to set the tone of the interview and how to lighten a serious matter, but not make it seem too casual. For example, if the interviewer began the session with a joke, what kind of impression would that give the interviewee? And does the interviewee have any responsibility to contribute to the "mood" of the interview?

There were also differences in proxemics. In one of the rooms the interviewers felt that our seating arrangement was too close (see appendix E), while in another the interviewers felt more comfortable, as the seating was arranged further apart. In discussing this arrangement we looked at this from both points of view - the interviewee and the interviewer. What seemed most apparent, in terms of comfort, was expectation and experience. Since the Japanese and Chinese students were comfortable with a setting in which the participants sit further apart, they became very uncomfortable when their expectations weren't met. They tried their best to overcome this closeness by either looking at their paper work when they weren't making eye contact with the interviewee, or actually sitting further and further back as the interview went on. From the interviewee's point of view, some of them would have preferred a distance of around 4-8 feet.

Finally, the Japanese found making people wait outside the interview room a few minutes (15) beyond their scheduled time very bothersome. Punctuality is highly valued in Japan, but we were much less concerned about this as Americans who view the interviewer's role as more powerful than the interviewees', since he/she obviously wants a job. The interviews did not take place until 15 minutes after a class session had started. So the students had this time to organize the room, set up the cameras and get their seats all set.

Actually, one of the instructors was specifically waiting to see what the students would do about this, watching out to see who would take an active role here to remedy this situation. In the end, one of the students, a more outspoken one, decided to take the lead and begin the interview. Interestingly enough, in the feedback session, he also seemed to be the most concerned about starting late.

Communicating with the outside

To challenge the students in EIRD IV, not only did they have to work with IIEP on the interview project, but they had to take this one step further. They were required to work on a case scenario -- what would they do, as managers, if the two people they hired for their Singapore office ran into problems a year later? In addition to this challenge, they had another problem on their hands -- an upcoming press conference in which they had to handle two things: (a) announce their Singapore operations, and (b) give answers for recent media stories about company problems with the environment and labor relations in China (see appendices G).

These two activities required them to take into consideration the communication principles they studied and to draw from their own experiences. Going from theory to pragmatics, they had to use their writing ability, problem-solving skills and oral competence to successfully handle these situations. Although they prepared for this session, it's always different when it happens. They had only two five-minute practice sessions, after which the instructor gave them some quick feedback on how to improve their presentation styles - eye contact, voice volume, clarity of speech, etc.

Summary

Early on, before the courses began, we knew we would have a small number of students (based on pre-registration figures). How to best challenge them and maximize their opportunity for working with other people was utmost on our minds. We wanted to get them to use all four skills -- listening, speaking, reading and writing -- in creative ways, and were looking to make their assignments "real". Although each program has a different focus, i.e. EIRD IV is part of a degree program and IIEP is a non-degree program, participants in both groups require English for business purposes. This helped us focus on the kinds of communication exercises and strategies we could provide them during the course of this project.

Within the first two weeks of the program, all students were asked to identify their weakest skills. Their answers included: giving presentations, taking a leadership role, listening to native speakers, and taking risks. To help them develop these skills, students were given: reading materials which covered management and communication basics; listening practice to help their aural skills; some models and modeling of tasks and assignments; and class periods in which to work together to practice and discuss relevant issues and questions as they came up.

By designing the project to involve the two classes and the IUJ community, including faculty, staff and students, the participants were able to go beyond their classroom walls and outside their programs to put their learned skills into practice. When asked which activities were the hardest to complete, one student said those where the answers were open, like Case Study (see appendix F). He did not know what he should say or write and wondered "how

could I believe (if the decisions made were wrong)?" This is true for most Japanese students in the IIEP program and at IUJ. In many cases they look for the safe and pat answers (taking little risk - remember their weakest points from earlier on?) and are puzzled when ambiguities exist. As is true in any case, there's usually more than one answer to a question. Sometimes it's a matter of finding the better or best choice to make. This is what we wanted them to experience and learn through this project. Another point we hoped to get across is that in the real world, a decision taken in one case may not always be a good one to use in another case -- depending on the situation and factors involved. There usually is no one cure-all answer. If they can develop some strategies for improving their interaction skills and finding better answers then they may be stronger managers and communicators, which is part of their overall goals.

The benefits for everyone involved in this project proved to be tremendous since they could draw on each other's varied backgrounds, experiences and even varieties of English to gain insight into the job interview and corporate communications process. The interviewees gained experience in interviewing not only in English, but all were able to practice some of their Japanese as well. They gained valuable feedback on how they performed from their peers who were not hesitant to give them some constructive criticism, i.e. not using too many hand gestures when interviewing with a Japanese company.

Outside faculty and staff had a chance to see student performance in terms of how they were able to communicate in the press conference. The feedback session also provided an opportunity for the students to discuss basic corporate communication principles and actual cases with outside professors.

Each group brought something different to this project. Although the IIEP group, as a whole, had a lower level of English, they had more work experience and business knowledge. On the other hand, while the EIRD IV group had a higher level of English and academic background, they had less corporate experience. They worked well and complimented each other in this project.

Although this program was too short in terms of time -- less than 10 weeks -- we feel the students benefited from this experience. Since this was a first time experience for both programs, we hope to rework this project again in the future. We will probably keep some of the activities the same, such as working on interviewing together. Other things could be improved, such as giving them more practice sessions or including computer mediated communication. Projections for next year include more students which means larger group sizes; this too would be taken into account when planning. Expanding and changing this project to make it "more real" will be part of our goal. Although no conclusive results can be drawn from this joint venture, we look forward to gathering more experience and examples of how students can be challenged to become better communicators in the corporate world.

Due to limited space, the appendices do not include complete versions of the various handouts for the project. For a complete copy you can send us a request via email or write to us at the following address:

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Appendix A (student work - this is the company profile they submitted)

Corporate Fact Sheet

Company Name

MSK CO., Ltd.

Headquarters

Niigata, Japan

Establishment

September, 1916

Sales

¥3.8 billion or \$40 million worldwide (FY95)

*Yen amounts have been translated at the rate of ¥95 = \$1, the approximate exchange rate on March 31, 1995, solely for the reader's convenience.

No. of Employees

18,000 worldwide

Main Products

Steering Gears products represent about 35% of the company's total worldwide sales. We produce four types of steering gears: rack and pinion type manual/power steering gears, and re-circulating-ball type manual/power steering gears.

Steering Columns products represents about 30% of the company's total worldwide sales. We offer steering columns with various options such as tilt, telescopic, collapsible, electrically-powered devices.

Seat belt products represent about 20% of the company's total worldwide sales. We have two types of seat belts: mechanical/electric trigger pyrotechnical pretensioner units.

Air Bag System products represent about 15% of the company's total worldwide sales and include driver/passenger module with inflator, sensor unit, bag and warning lamp.

Main Customers

Toyota, Nissan, Honda, GM, Ford, Chrysler, VW, Renault, Volvo, ARG, etc.

Market Position

MSK Co., Ltd. is the number one company in steering gears and columns with 30% and 26% of market share in the world respectively. In the seat belts market, it is the second largest next to Electrolux Autoliv. Although our market share of air bag systems is relatively low at the moment because of new products for us, it is steadily growing as our products hit the market.

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Appendix B (student work)

Job Announcement #1:

Job title : Labor Manager
Company Name : MSK Co., Ltd.
Street Address : Anajishinden 777
City : Yamatomachi
County : Minamiuonumagun
State/Province : Niigata-ken
Zip Code/Postal Code : 949-72
Contact Name : Kanako Ikari
Contact Email : 194018@iuj.ac.jp
Contact Phone : 0257-79-1111
Contact Fax : 0257-78-1180
Number of Employees: : 18,000
Line of Business: : MFG Precision Automotive Parts
Status: : Permanent
Salary : \$44k - \$48k
(plus: relocation, housing, health insurance, education package)
Location : Singapore
Starting Date of Job : April 1996

Description of Job:

Supervising Labor Dept. of our new Singapore Factory.
Number of subordinates will be around 15.
Reports directly to the factory GM.
Being responsible for Budget Control of the Dept.
Creation of monthly operating reports of the Dept., including Income Statement, Payroll and Payroll Tax Report.
Being responsible for Labor Control of the whole factory. Recruitment. Checking attendance.
Prevention of Absenteeism. Motivating line workers.
Being responsible for Safety at the factory. Prevention of injury. Ensuring local-labor-lawful operation of the factory.

Qualifications:

MA in Social Science
Leadership - 3 years Experience as a manager is desirable.
Excellent language skills both in Japanese and English - ability of articulation.
Coordinating Ability - practical common sense is a must.

Company Information:

Founded in 1916. The company manufactures automotive precision parts such as: Steering Gears, Steering Columns, Seat Belts, and Air Bag Systems. Annual Sales: \$40 m (FY'95)
The company shares 30% of world steering gear market.
New Singapore Assembly Line will be operational in 1997.
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Appendix C

Questions Asked During the Interviews

These are some of the questions the interviewers asked during the interviews:

1. Could you tell me why you become interested in this position?
 2. If you're hired what do you want to bring to our company?
 3. Have you ever lived in Singapore?
 4. Have you ever worked? Judging from your resume you don't have any work experience.
 5. I'm trying to find out how much do you know about Japanese management policy?
 6. Could you tell us about your personality strengths and weaknesses?
 7. Can you tell me what's your name means?
 8. May I ask you to tell us about yourself in two minutes?
 9. Can you tell me more about your personality - including your strengths and weaknesses?
 10. According to your resume, what was the worse problem in your present job and how did you solve the problem?
 11. How does MSK have an appeal for you?
 12. Please tell us why you apply?
 13. Please tell us about our company.
 14. Do you like to drive?
 15. What can you do for this company?
 16. Learning from your (graduate) background ... IR major... can you tell us why you didn't choose MBA?
 17. Do you have any confidence in the Japanese language?
 18. Talking about living in different countries, corporate culture may be different from yours.
 19. Are you not frustrated at handling different cultures, living in Singapore?
 20. What do you expect from our company?
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Appendix D

Characteristics of an Ideal Job Candidate

(students chose from this list to identify qualities in an ideal candidate for each position)

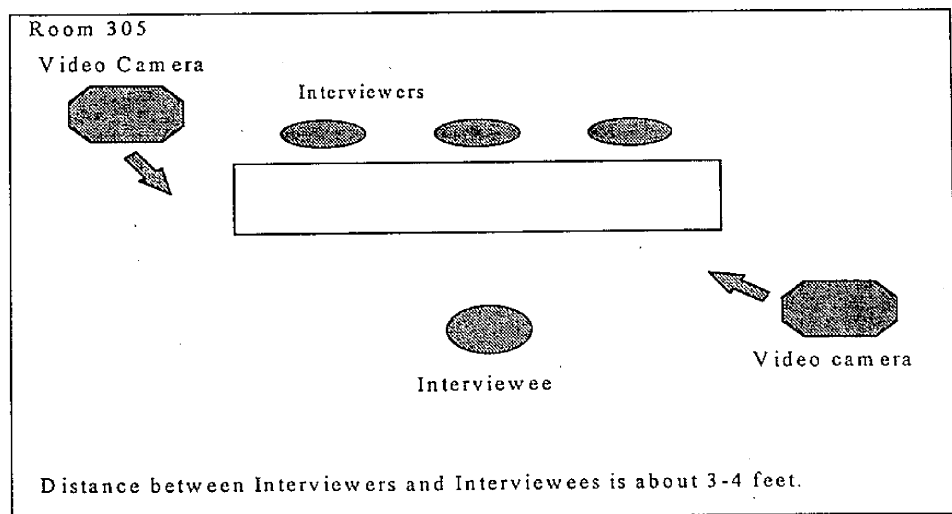
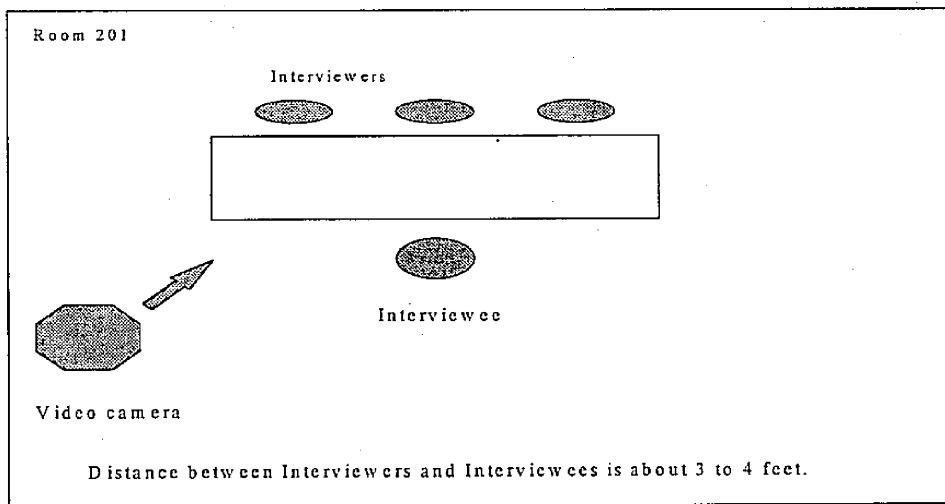
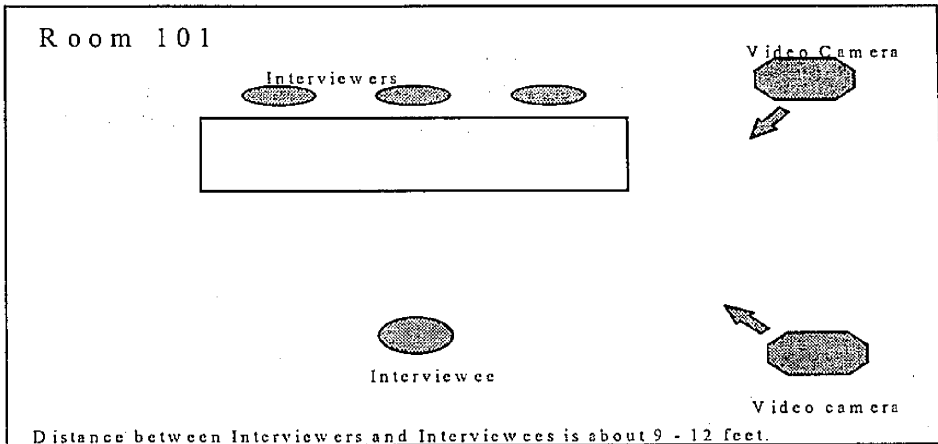
Interviewing a Job Candidate

What do you look for when you are interviewing a person for a job?

intelligence	resourcefulness	reliability
articulate	foresight	honesty
aggressiveness	ability to deal with stress	originality
self-confidence	common sense	
decisiveness	self-starter	
creativity	tolerance for routine tasks	
organized	character	
analytical ability	attention to detail	
ability to work with others	entrepreneurial	
flexibility	enthusiasm	
maturity	sense of humor	
judgment	energy	
thoroughness	motivation	
writing ability	assertiveness	

Appendix E

Seating Arrangements



It has been more than one year since you hired Nick Star* as Marketing Manager and Lisa Bright* as Accounting Manager, April 1, 1996, for your Singapore operations. During the year both people performed exceptionally well and you have no doubt that they will go far in the company.

The Situation

You are CEO, CFO or COO. Today's date is August 24, 1997. It is 10:00 a.m. and at 2:10 p.m. you have to leave for a trip to Venezuela. A new office is opening there and you'll be attending press conferences and handling the first month's business activities. You're excited about this because the Latin American economy is taking off after a nine-year slump. You have high hopes of expanding MSK's international market in this area. In addition, this assignment represents the future of the Americas territory and is the company's most exciting project of the year. If you do a good job, all your hard work will be amply rewarded.

Last week you received a phone call from Dale Cohen, the General Manager, that Nick has not been making his sales targets for the past 4 months. In fact, 3 workers have recently quit from his department. Dale is worried because he heard that Nick has been approached by your competitor and was offered a job. Nick helped to put in place a new marketing strategy and last year increased the company's name recognition and sales 50% beyond the expected numbers. If he leaves, he will take some of this valuable information and business with him. Also the September forecast and planning for year end is coming up and he will be a key player in this.

You told Dale you will look into the matter. You called Nick's office a couple of days ago and found that he wasn't there, but left a message to get back to you.

Today his assistant, Jill Cargile, called to tell you that Nick has been out handling a marketing campaign and won't be back to the office for another week - he's on vacation for two days. After talking with her for a while you learn that 2 of the 3 people who left were going to leave anyway, because of management problems and better salary offers from other companies (meaning that it wasn't Nick's fault they left).

She is currently busy interviewing candidates to fill the 3 empty positions and is sure that the sales numbers will be better in the next quarter. You decide to communicate directly with Nick about this.

At 11:00 a.m. you receive an urgent email message. Lisa has just resigned. She tells you in detail how she was sexually harassed by a co-worker. In the past two months he has been trying to convince her to go out with him for romantic reasons. Yesterday she was in the elevator alone with him and according to her he kissed her against her wishes. She has left the office and does not want to talk to anyone for the next few days.

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The representatives of MSK Co. Ltd. will hold a press conference on Wednesday, April 6, room 101, from 10:45 a.m. - 11:15 a.m. (this time may be extended for discussion, and Q&A until 12:00 noon). For this project you will have to produce the following:

1) 10 minutes to present items A and B:

A) Announcement of Singapore operations. Give an overview which may include:

- where your office will be established, what kinds of activities will be handled from this office, how many workers it will have
- any factories, manufacturing, how many workers will be hired to work in the factories, when the factories will be in place
- what kinds of products will be produced there and for import/export
- why the subsidiary is being established and how it relates to the parent company
- any indication of marketing, production and PR planned for this region

B) Announcement for handling a company crisis.

Your company has been accused of unfair labor practices and pollution violations in the factory located in China (you must decide the location of this factory - as was described in your company profile). The unfair labor practices include the following:

- 50 employees have complained of unfair wages and unsafe conditions
- 10 employees (of the 50) were injured while on the job
- the factory site has been issued 10 fines in the last three years for unsafe working conditions - sanitation, temperature control and hazardous physical conditions
- the factory site was issued 25 fines for pollution - 15 are serious and confirmed by your own sources (3 are rather minor accidents (less than 50 gallons of liquid waste were released into the water system)); 10 are pending investigation.

Attached are news stories to help you prepare for the press conference. Please note that all the attending journalists have copies of these.

After your presentation, you will have 20 minutes in which to answer questions from the attending press corps. So remember to have ready made answers and try to guess some hard questions you will be asked.

2) Produce 2 press releases (Due Monday 3/4 - this will go into press packets for participating journalists the day before your press conference). You must also include a company profile in this packet.

a) announcement of MSK Co. Ltd.'s intention to open up an office and factories in Singapore (must be 3-4 paragraphs long) - this is for "The Singapore Times" newspaper.

b) announcement of new Marketing and Accounting Manager - this is for "The Japan Times" newspaper.

(Due to limited space the complete version is not included in this copy)

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