

Case Studies in Community-Engaged Business Education

Tomorrow's Promise

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Abstract

In this active learning exercise, students collaborated in groups to develop a retention plan for a local business in Huntsville, TX. This semester long activity was scaffolded into three interdependent deliverables carefully overviewing the job design, recruitment strategies, and other human resource management recommendations to (a) engage; and (b) retain the existing employees at the client organizations. The findings were shared in the form of final presentations – all attended by the client. This activity was slightly revised between Fall of 2023 and Fall of 2024 based on the feedback received from the students and the client. In addition to experiencing enhanced exposure to real-world business issues, students reported developing a range of skillsets from this project.

1. Introduction

Tomorrow's Promise Montessori Schools (TPMS) has been offering childcare services in the city of Huntsville, Texas for over 25 years. Tomorrow's Promise currently operates at three locations in the area, providing childcare and education services to approximately 300 children. The schools focus on the overall developmental milestones of children through a series of well-planned and coordinated activities that promote children's acumen in arts and sciences along with social skills. The organization's mission is to provide a safe and nurturing environment where children can learn, grow, and thrive. The organization is committed to providing an environment conducive to children's emotional and physical development through a well-thought-out curriculum. TPMS is led by CEO Kaye Boehning.

2. The Business Problem

Turnover rates are generally high in the childcare industry. In 2022, childcare workers left their occupation at higher rates (14.9 percent), on

average, compared to the median occupation (9.1 percent). Moreover, more than 50 percent of childcare workers who left their jobs exited the labor force entirely (Fee, 2024). From the perspective of childcare centers, the situation looks similar, but also exhibits significant variability between centers. The 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education found that roughly one-third of centers had turnover rates of 20 percent or greater, while 44 percent of centers experienced no turnover at all (Amadon, Lin, & Padilla, 2023).

In 2022, TPMS had a turnover rate that significantly exceeded the industry average. Existing research provides clear evidence of an adverse effect of caregiver turnover on children's cognitive and behavioral outcomes (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Therefore, the schools' high turnover rates are a direct challenge to the organization's ability to pursue its mission. To meet this challenge, TPMS is seeking recommendations to formulate a comprehensive plan to recruit,

engage, and retain early childhood educators and caregivers.

Recruiting, engaging, and retaining high quality talent are interrelated constructs within organizations. A thorough analysis of local labor markets –including identification of any skills gaps— should be conducted to formulate a recruitment strategy tailored specifically to the jobs in question. However, the jobs in question should also be appropriately designed, taking into consideration the finding from the local labor market analysis. For this purpose, differentiating between general childcare workers, educators, and other staff, and clearly defining their respective job functions will allow for targeted recruitment and retention efforts.

While retaining high quality talent is often more cost effective than recruiting new employees, retention is determined in part by the quality of the match between the employee and the position and organization. Efforts to retain employees that are not a good match for the position or organization will be futile, and therefore good retention outcomes rely on a successful recruitment strategy. Supporting intrinsic motivation (e.g. through employee engagement) and extrinsic motivation (e.g. through compensation), as well as performance management can then play an important role in retaining high quality talent.

3. The class: Human Resource Management

The Human Resource Management class at Sam Houston State University's College of Business Administration overviews the fundamentals of human resource management functions within organizations. The course has an approximate size of 50 students per section. The course focuses on the role of personnel development in advancing organizational goals and objectives. Emphasis is placed on critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration to solve the evolving workplace issues.

The course has the following learning objectives:

1. Understand the fundamental role of HRM in the strategic context.
2. Analyze existing jobs and evaluate the effectiveness of job designs.
3. Apply HRM-related concepts to solve real world problems.

4. Engage with other students to critically examine the assigned work.
5. Improve written and verbal communication skills.

The course learning objectives directly align with the needs of Tomorrow's Promise Montessori Schools. Professor Huda Masood entered into a partnership with TPMS starting the Fall of 2023, wherein Masood's students would work in teams as consultants to client TPMS. The instructor provided a scaffolded three-part assignment (described below) to guide the students' work as they formulate a comprehensive plan to recruit, engage, and retain early childhood educators and caregivers at TPMS. Each team consisted of approximately 5 students, and each team had the same set of instructions. However, students had the autonomy to approach the organizational issues in a variety of ways. The projects culminated in a client-facing final presentation by each team. The project made up 25 percent of the students' performance expectation for the course.

Professor Masood provided a scaffolded three-part assignment as follows. The instructions below capture the Fall of 2024 guidelines, which were slightly modified based on the feedback obtained from the students and the client. For example, in its earlier iteration, the exercise below was open to all available vacancies at TPMS. Students picked the job category of their interest to devise retention strategies. The example below is confined to engaging and retaining the early childhood educators and caregivers due to the increased demand for these positions in alignment with TPMS' expansion to a third location. Adapted from the previously designed and developed experiential exercises in management education (see e.g., Lambert, 2020), instructions were scaffolded into job design, recruitment, and other HR functions to engage and retain workers.

Experiential Activity #1. Students conducted job analysis by using publicly available data such as O*Net, department and labor, and other online databases. Students further identified the industry standards and compared their recommendations to the available data. The following instructions were provided to the students.

1. Analyze the job of early childhood educators and/or early childhood caregivers. You can use

an online database such as O*Net: <https://www.onetonline.org/> or other sources of information. Identify the major behavioral and technical competencies, and the main attributes an individual would need to effectively perform the job. In essence, this part speaks to your ability to analyze this job.

2. Identify what the industry standard is and compare it to the client's requirements to recommend the best approach to designing this job. Support your approach with examples.
3. **Action-based learning:** Identify at least one example where a business in a comparable industry engaged in the recommended approach and generated successful outcomes.

Experiential Activity #2. Students helped with the community partner's recruitment needs through word-of-mouth, posts on social media, participating in a recruitment event). The following instructions were provided to the students:

1. Conduct your research to outline the labor needs (focus on the Huntsville market) and the skill gaps for the target job identified in part 1.
2. Analyze the current labor market and develop a recruitment strategy for the target job. Identify the tools, channels, and platforms required for effective recruitment.
3. Based on your research, recommend recruitment strategies for the target job. Support your recommendations.
4. **Action-based learning:** Implement at least one of the recommended strategies (e.g., use word-of-mouth, post on social media, participate in a recruitment event). This component needs prior approval from your professor and the client. You will then be advised on how to integrate that into your assignment submission.

Experiential Activity #3. Students prepared a retention plan. The following instructions were provided to the students:

1. Outline the best selection process for the target position (identified earlier in the project). Explain why you believe your recommended process to be effective within the context of the current workforce.

2. Recommend the most appropriate and effective HRM methods for performance management for this job. Identify any training needs.
3. Design the total rewards structure for this job.
4. Based on your evaluations above, recommend a retention plan for this job.

Final Presentation. Students present their semester-long work to the community partner at the end of the semester. They further engaged with each other's presentations and answered client's questions related to the project. The following instructions are given:

Each group is expected to present their work in class (unless stated otherwise). Your final presentation (see course outline for dates) should include all parts of your group assignment and will be presented by all members of the group. Each group will then comment and/or reflect on two other group projects.

4. Deliverables and Impact

As described in the detailed task instructions above, the project's key deliverables for students included a job design, recruitment strategy, and a retention plan based on other HR functions such as training, performance management, and total rewards structure for the target job. The students were required to implement their recommended recruitment strategy after securing the approval of the client. A variety of implementations were created by different groups, and the client monitored the effectiveness of each implementation.

The most common implementations included

1. Flyers (see example appended)
2. Participation in Community Fairs
3. Systemic word-of-mouth technique
4. Social Media recruitment outreach
5. Research-informed recommendations

The client evaluated the quality of all recommendations and provided feedback during the final presentation sessions.

Economic Impact

Economic impact for student consulting projects is commonly calculated by multiplying the time

spent by each student with the estimate hourly rate of volunteer work provided by The Do Good Institute of the University of Maryland. The 2023 rate for Texas is \$31.94.

114 Students participated in this activity across three semesters. Each student was required to work at least 25 hours on this project. Using this approach results in a total value of $114 * \$31.94 = \$91,029$.

5. Challenges: Given this project was implemented over a prolonged period, it posed several pedagogical challenges at both planning and execution phases. Below, I will present two of the most common challenges encountered:

- **Ambiguity aversion:** By virtue of exposing student groups to the real-world issues, certain students struggled with the overall ambiguity associated with problem-solving.
- **Collaborative challenges:** In general, teamwork on complex problems may pose challenges due to the evolving dynamics of undergraduate student body.

To overcome these challenges, I incorporated regular check-ins with the students. In addition, students were required to draft their group contracts to outline the “terms and conditions” of their group dynamics.

7. Reflections

An important component of active learning is reflection. Students were asked to reflect on their community engagement project. To gain insights into the authentic learning experience, participation in this activity was entirely optional. Student reflections are captured in the excerpts below:

“I was surprised to find a business that is doing so well is often in need of assistance somewhere. Whether they need a labor force, more money, or a fresh set of ideas, all businesses need outside assistance. I had never thought past the surface level of most of the jobs presented this semester. [...] This is the first class I have collaborated with an established company. It was a wonderful experience speaking with Kaye Boehning to hear what issues needed to be resolved to make Tomorrow’s Promise more efficient. It was a great experience to listen to my classmates and their

interpretation of each individual job, especially in a presentation form. I do not think I would have had an experience like this until I graduated and joined the workforce so thank you! My takeaway from this class is HR has a much more significant role in a business than I had initially thought, and it is way more expansive than I could have imagined.”

- Student from Spring 2024 cohort

“During this project, I was not surprised that our community partner Kaye needed help with maintaining her childcare business. I used to work in childcare and knew that there was a decrease in educators no matter where you are. What did surprise me though was the amount of money it takes to run a small business here in Huntsville. Despite these challenges, students in this course have many hands-on learning experiences to help a struggling business and get some real-world HR experience. This class taught many critical thinking skills as well as how to reach out to professionals. Professor Masood has been excellent at giving accurate Human Resource management skills and as a student, I appreciate how she gives the course material as well as letting us have enough time for quizzes and our project. I would tell someone succeeding in my position not to worry about the coursework and project, they will have all the resources they need for success. One thing to improve upon with the project could be allowing volunteer work for students at the community partner’s location to see in person what could be improved as well as getting insight in person. Students can also benefit from being exposed to the Huntsville community in general to see who their clientele is.”

- student from Fall 2023 cohort

Community Partner Reflection

The community partner was also given the opportunity to reflect on the partnership.

I am thrilled to reflect on the incredible partnership with Dr. Huda Masood’s Human Resource Management class at the College of Business Administration at Sam Houston State University. Having Tomorrow’s Promise, Inc. featured as a case study has been a rewarding experience, allowing me to provide students with real-world insights into how our businesses operate. The discussions and

exchanges with these bright, eager minds have brought me so much joy, and the fresh perspectives and ideas shared by the students have also benefited the schools, inspiring new approaches and improvements. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to their learning journey while growing my own.

- *Kaye Boehning, MEd, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Tomorrow's Promise.*

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