The Benefits Of The SBI Program: Perceptions Of Former Students

Gwen Fontenot
Ernst & Young
Michelle Haarhues
University of North Texas
Lynn Hoffman
University of Northern Colorado

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on an evaluation of former students' perceptions of the skills gained when serving as a consultant on an SBI case. The SBI course was compared to the capstone (Policy) course in an effort to determine the effectiveness of the SBI course in enhancing specific skills in the students.

By comparison, students found the Policy course to be more effective in developing analytical skills and to be more useful in their careers than the SBI course. On the other hand, the SBI course was perceived to be more effective in developing interpersonal skills and operational skills than the Policy course.

The SBI course was found to be effective in developing analytical skills, operational skills, and interpersonal skills. Students also recommended the SBI course for other business students and found the course to be useful to them in their careers.

INTRODUCTION

Employers are looking for skills in today's business graduates that seem to be lacking. There is a concern that college business graduates do not have the interpersonal, leadership, and problem-solving skills that employers require. Business owners and managers attribute the inadequacies of college graduates to the nature of most business curricula, wherein there is sometimes a lack of practical training where students can acquire actual business problem-solving experience. Today's employers want more than just technical training in the student's area of concentration (6). Employers are demanding employees with skills in leadership, problem solving, oral and written communication, along with attributes of motivation and assertiveness (5). Business people believe such skills can be developed in students through student internships and specialized courses (9). A feeling exists among the business community that educators need to do more to relate their curricula to the reality of the business world (4).

Through their business curricula, universities can assist students in developing the skills being required by employers. Harmon and Butaney suggest that class projects and internships should be used to develop analytical and problem-solving skills in students (3, 8, 10). The Small

Business Institute (SBI) program is another tool business schools can use to assist students in this endeavor. The SBI program is designed to provide students with experience in problem solving and critical thinking. It allows students to apply their theoretical and conceptual abilities to practical business problem-solving situations (1).

In project-oriented courses such as business policy and the SBI course, students utilize the case method of instruction to gain skills which will be used in the workplace. Studies have shown that when students are allowed to integrate theory with practice through real experience, such as actual consulting cases, the students' technical skills and interpersonal relationship skills are enhanced(7). The SBI course and the Policy course are both designed to provide such opportunities for students. The major difference between the SBI course and the Policy course is that actual businesses are assisted in the SBI course whereas textbook or written case studies are often utilized in other courses.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this research was to determine former students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the SBI class project. The business policy course was used as a basis of comparison in evaluating the skills developed and knowledge acquired in the SBI course.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was administered to 504 students of various majors, the majority being business majors, who had been enrolled in an SBI course at a participating school in the United States. A skills/usefulness scale, developed by Hoffman, Fontenot, and Viswanathan (2), was modified to include a comparison between SBI and the capstone course as well as additional demographics. The scale was used to measure the perceptions of skills and knowledge acquired in the SBI class as compared to those acquired in the capstone course.

T-tests were used to measure the differences in mean responses between the SBI and Policy students. The responses of the SBI students were factor analyzed to identify a set of skills the students perceived were developed in the SBI course. A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) and Univariate F-tests were then used to test the effect of six independent variables on the resulting factors.

Survey Instrument

The modified instrument presented the 20 original scale items twice. Respondents were first asked to respond to the statements as they pertained to their experience in the SBI program. Then, if the respondents had not conducted the SBI project in their capstone course, they were asked to answer the same 20 questions related to the capstone course. (See Appendix A for questionnaire).

SAMPLE

The sample for this study was drawn from students across the United States who had previously participated in the SBI program. A letter requesting the names and addresses of SBI student alumni was mailed to 502 SBI schools throughout the United States. From the results of this request, a data base of 504 SBI student alumni was created. A total of 15 questionnaires were returned due to an incorrect mailing address and 162 useable questionnaires were received. This is equivalent to a 32 percent response rate. The sample includes a representation of alumni who had attended schools in 22 different states and graduated between the years of 1974 to 1990. The

majority of respondents had worked on their SBI project while working towards a Bachelors degree. The number of members per team varied among respondents, the majority being groups of 2. (See Appendix B for demographics of respondents.)

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Comparison of Course Effectiveness

Students who had participated in the SBI program were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 20 statements beginning with the phrase "The SBI Project/Policies-Strategies course helped me develop skills/knowledge in this area." Students responded to the same scale separately for each of the two courses. A five-point Likert scale was used with a "1" being "strongly agree" and a "5" being "strongly disagree." The ratings of the SBI course and the Business Policy course were statistically compared by means of a t-test. The mean scores on each statement for the SBI and Policy courses are shown in Table 1. The scale items are categorized into four factors in the table: Analytical Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Operational Skills, and Career Usefulness. These four factors were generated in the original study of SBI effectiveness using the same scale (5). Responses of the SBI and Policy students were significantly different on 11 of the 20 statements. Significant differences were found in each of the four factor areas.

In the area of Analytical Skills, on the items in which there were significant differences between the responses of students in the two courses, the students felt that the Policy course was slightly more effective than the SBI course in developing these skills. The skills included were the ability to conduct a situation analysis, to conduct an industry analysis, and to identify the root of the problem as opposed to the symptoms of the problem. Although the policy course was rated higher on these items, the students agreed or strongly agreed that these skills were developed in both courses.

The SBI class was more effective in developing Interpersonal Skills than was the Policy course. There were significant differences between the responses of SBI and Policy students on all Interpersonal Skills items. The students' ratings on the Policy course were neutral on all four items while the students agreed that their Interpersonal Skills were developed or enhanced in the SBI course.

Students rated the SBI class as more effective in providing some of the Operational Skills necessary to run a business. The marketing and management skills appeared to be equally developed regardless of the course. However, entrepreneurial skills and personality traits needed to run a business were indicated as being present in the SBI course more so than in the Policy course.

Although there was a significant difference between the responses of the SBI and Policy students in the area of better understanding of the work environment, the students agreed that both the SBI class and the Policy class helped in this area. They indicated that the Policy class gave them a slightly better understanding of their work environment. The other significant difference among the items in the Career Usefulness area was whether the course should be a requirement for business majors. Students indicated more strongly that the Policy course should be a requirement than they did the SBI course. However, it should be noted that students agreed that the SBI course should also be required. Their recommendation of this requirement was not as strong for the SBI course. Also, many students noted that the policy course is already a requirement. This could account for the higher rating on this item.

Table 1. Comparisons of Skill Development in SBI Course and Business Policy Course

	Mean	Scores
Scale Items	SBI	Policy
Analytical Skills		
The SBI/Policy project helped me recognize and identify problem situations in a business.	1.81	1.65
The SBI/Policy project helped me conduct a situation analysis of the business under study.	1.95	1.78*
The SBI/Policy project helped me analyze the industry of the business under study.	2.16	1.81*
The SBI/Policy project helped me analyze the competitive situation of the client under study.	1.98	1.95
The SBI/Policy project helped me identify the root of the problem as opposed to the symptoms of the problem.	2.04	1.65*
The SBI/Policy project helped me search for relevant information from within and outside the business.	1.66	1.90
Sample Mean	1.93	1.79
Interpersonal Skills		
The SBI/Policy project helped me interact with client personnel.	1.86	3.08*
The SBI/Policy project helped me develop good rapport with the business owner/manager.	1.77	3.08*
The SBI/Policy project helped me deal with colleagues in the workplace.	2.08	2.84*
The SBI/Policy project helped me relate with individuals in the business world.	1.78	2.94*
Sample Mean	1.87	2.99

Table 1. Comparisons of Skill Development in SBI Course and Business Policy Course (Continued)

	Mear	1 Scores
Scale Items	SBI	Policy
Operational Skills		-
The SBI/Policy project helped me develop the entrepreneurial skills needed to run a business.	2.06	2.54*
The SBI/Policy project helped me develop the marketing skills necessary to run a business.	2.24	2.35
The SBI/Policy project helped me develop the management skills necessary to run a business.	2.23	2.24
The SBI/Policy project helped me develop the personality traits that may be necessary to run		
a business.	2.16	2.43*
Sample Mean	2.17	2.39
Career Usefulness		
This course helped me better prepare myself for the job market.	2.15	2.06
This course has helped me develop a better understanding of my work environment.	2.34	2.03*
I use many of the skills I acquired from this course on my current job.	2.77	2.63
I found this course to be extremely useful.	1.90	1.87
feel this course should be made a requirement for all business majors.	2.27	1.56*
will definitely recommend this course to other students.	1.68	1.73
Sample Mean	2.19	1.98

^{*}Indicates significant difference between groups at .05 level

SBI Course Evaluation

The students' responses of their perceptions of the SBI course were factor analyzed to determine if the same skills were developed by these students as were in the original pilot study conducted by Hoffman, Fontenot, and Viswanathan (5). Four factors emerged in the original study: Analytical Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Operational Skills, and Career Usefulness. All items in the current study loaded identically to the original study with the exception of two, which loaded on a separate factor. The additional factor was identified as Course Endorsement. The two items loading on this factor had originally loaded on the Career Usefulness factor. These two items included "I feel this course should be made a requirement for all business majors," and "I will definitely recommend this course to other students." The five factors and the items loading on each factor are shown in Table 2. A factor loading of .50 was utilized as a minimum loading.

Table 2. SBI Course Factor Analysis

Scale Items

Analytical Skills

The SBI project helped me recognize and identify problem situations in a business.

The SBI project helped me conduct a situation analysis of the business under study.

The SBI project helped me analyze the industry of the business under study.

The SBI project helped me analyze the competitive situation of the client under study.

The SBI project helped me identify the root of the problem as opposed to the symptoms of the problem.

The SBI project helped me search for relevant information from within and outside the business.

Interpersonal Skills

The SBI project helped me interact with client personnel.

The SBI project helped me develop good rapport with the business owner/manager.

The SBI project helped me deal with colleagues in the workplace.

The SBI project helped me relate with individuals in the business world.

Operational Skills

The SBI project helped me develop the entrepreneurial skills needed to run a business.

The SBI project helped me develop the marketing skills necessary to run a business.

Table 2. SBI Course Factor Analysis (Continued)

Scale Items

Operational Skills (Continued)

The SBI project helped me develop the management skills necessary to run a business.

The SBI project helped me develop the personality traits that may be necessary to run a business.

Career Usefulness

This course helped me better prepare myself for the job market.

This course has helped me develop a better understanding of my work environment.

I use many of the skills I acquired from this course on my current job.

I found this course to be extremely useful.

Course Endorsement

I feel this course should be made a requirement for all business majors.*

I will definitely recommend this course to other students.*

*Items loaded on different factor than on original scale.

Effect of Independent Variables on Factors

Six independent variables were analyzed separately to determine whether they had an effect on the five factors. A MANOVA and Univariate F-tests were used for this examination. The six independent variables included

- (1) the students' major
- (2) the degree (graduate or undergraduate) being sought when the SBI project was completed
- (3) the grade received in the course in which the SBI project was completed
- (4) the grade received on the SBI project
- (5) the course in which the SBI project was completed, and
- (6) the number of team members working on the SBI project.

A significant difference was found only in the major and the course grade. The average F-value and the p-values from the MANOVA and Univariate F-tests are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Analysis Of Independent Variables On Factors

	Major	Degree Level	Course Grade	Project Grade	Project Course	# Team Members
Analytical Skills	0.821	0.793	0.018*	0.118	0.449	0.155
Interpersonal Skills	0.009*	0.425	0.255	0.370	0.667	0.971
Operational Skills	0.243	0.275	0.376	0.384	0.349	0.502
Career Usefulness	0.036*	0.444	0.005*	0.052	0.510	0.400
Course Endorsement	0.251	0.868	0.274	0.595	0.822	0.520
Average F	0.009*	0.781	0.007*	0.166	0.806	0.672

^{*}Denotes significance at the .05 level.

The students' major and the course grade were further examined to determine where the differences were between responses of the SBI and Policy students. Nine categories were provided to describe the students' majors. The differences among majors were significant on the Interpersonal Skills and the Career Usefulness factors. Mean scores for the various majors on these two factors are shown in Table 4. On Interpersonal Skills, the mean score for the entire sample was 1.881. It appears that the major differences were with the Marketing, Non-Business, and General Business majors. The Marketing (1.417) and Non-Business (1.250) majors' mean scores indicate that they felt more strongly that the SBI course helped develop Interpersonal Skills. On the other hand, the General Business majors (2.200) felt less strongly that these skills were developed during the course.

Table 4. Analysis of Major on Interpersonal Skills and Career Usefulness

	Mean :	Scores
Major	Interpersonal Skills	Career Usefulness
Accounting	2.125	2.937
Computer Information Systems	1.875	1.938
Finance	2.111	2.722
Management	1.918	2.305
Marketing	1.417	2.000
Other Business	1.943	2.250
Non Business	1.250	2.875
Double Major	2.037	2.262
General Business	2.200	2.500
Sample Mean	1.881	2.306

The ratings of the Management majors (2.305), other Business majors (2.250), and those students with double majors (2.262) on the Career Usefulness factor were in line with the sample mean of 2.306. The Computer Information Systems (CIS) (1.938) and Marketing (2.000) majors indicated more strongly that the course was useful to them in their careers. The Accounting (2.937), Finance (2.722), Non-Business (2.875), and General Business (2.500) majors revealed that they did not perceive the SBI course to be as useful to them in their careers as did the entire sample. These findings are consistent with the findings of the original study, conducted by Hoffman, Fontenot, and Viswanathan, which indicated that the quantitatively-oriented students found the course less useful than the non-quantitatively-oriented majors (5).

All students sampled who had enrolled in an SBI class received a course grade of C or better. Table 5 provides the mean scores by course grade on the Analytical Skills and Career Usefulness factors. The differences between the groups (grades A, B, and C) appear to be in the C group. Students who earned a C in the course were neutral (2.667) in their response as to whether they developed Analytical Skills in the course. Unlike the entire group of respondents (2.304), students who received a C in the course did not feel that the SBI course was as helpful to them in their careers (3.5).

Table 5. Analysis of Course Grade on Analytical Skills and Career Usefulness

	Mean Scores		
Course Grade	Interpersonal Skills	Career Usefulness	
A	1.901	2.273	
В	1.983	2.267	
С	2.667	3.500	
Sample Mean	1.937	2.304	

DISCUSSION

Although SBI courses and consultations are sometimes approached differently among the participating schools, students who have participated in the program agree that they have benefitted from the experience. The shortcomings of the SBI program appear to be in the development of analytical skills and the usefulness of the experience in the students' current careers.

The respondents indicated that the SBI experience did not allow as great an opportunity for the development of analytical skills as did the Policy course. The approach used by some SBI programs could explain this finding. Students in the SBI program are often presented with a predetermined problem which is to be solved. This denies the students the opportunity to examine the situation from an unbiased perspective. The students' analytical skills could

possibly be better enhanced if they were presented with an overview of the company much like that in a written case and allowed to identify the symptoms and problems without the benefit of the SBI Directors' or business owners' prior influence.

The career paths of the respondents were not traced in this study. Consequently, no conclusions can be drawn as to the perception that the SBI course was less useful in the respondents' careers. One possibility is that the respondents may have been employed primarily by large corporations and had little use for the entrepreneurial skills developed through the SBI program. The types of cases analyzed in both Policy and SBI courses could have also impacted responses as to the usefulness of the SBI program. Many times SBI cases are extremely focused while many textbook cases are written to provide a broad perspective for analysis.

When examined more closely it was found that variation in responses existed between students of various majors as well as between students earning different grades in the SBI course. Analytical Skills and Operational Skills appeared to be developed equally as well among all majors. However, marketing majors and non-business majors found the SBI course especially beneficial in utilizing or developing their Interpersonal Skills. Computer Information Systems and Marketing majors found the SBI course to be more useful in their careers than did the other majors. Non-business majors and accounting majors found the course to provide the least amount of career usefulness.

The differences in responses could be due to the types of cases the students were assigned. Non-business majors may be employed in areas where none of the aforementioned skills are utilized. The accounting students may have worked on cases with problems other than accounting issues. Also, if they were assigned to accounting cases, many times those cases involve the organization and establishment of a recordkeeping or accounting system. If the accounting students are performing audits or providing tax assistance in their current accounting positions, the work done in the SBI course could have been very different from the work performed in their current jobs.

The grade the students earned in the course had an effect on their perceptions of Analytical Skills developed and Career Usefulness of the course. Those students earning a grade of C in the course did not feel that the course was as useful to them as did other students. The students who made a C also felt less strongly that they had developed Analytical Skills in the course. Considering that a C is the lowest grade earned by the students responding to this survey, these students may not have received the same benefits from the course as other students. This could be partly due to their lack of effort in working on the project. Perhaps the backgrounds of these students were not as strong as those who earned higher grades.

CONCLUSION

The students who enrolled in an SBI course felt that they developed Interpersonal Skills, Analytical Skills, and Operational Skills in the course. They also indicated that the course was helpful in their careers and they endorsed the course as part of the business curriculum.

The students enrolled in SBI courses felt they had enhanced their Interpersonal Skills and Operational Skills more so than in the Policy course. While students indicated strong agreement that Interpersonal Skills were gained through the SBI course, they were neutral in their opinions as to whether the same skills were gained in the Policy course.

SBI students perceived that the SBI course helped provide them with the operational skills needed to operate a business. They noted particularly that their entrepreneurial skills and personality traits were enhanced through the SBI course.

While students acknowledged that they learned Analytical Skills in the SBI course, they felt that those skills were developed more strongly through the Policy course. Overall, the students found the capstone course to be more useful in their careers than the SBI course.

In future studies the scale should be revised to examine the development of other skills such as communication skills. The analysis should be expanded to examine the effect of age, current job position, gender, school size, the clients' reaction to the students' report, and the year the students graduated. Also, by utilizing follow-up techniques, the response rate in this study could have been increased.

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APPENDIX A

SECTION #1A ALUMNI PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE SMALL BUSINESS INSTITUTE(SBI) PROJECT

Please fill out this section which has a few statements relating to some of your experiences working on a SBI Project. For each item, please indicate your extent of agreement with the following statement by circling the number which best corresponds to your answer.

"THE SBI PROJECT HELPED ME DEVELOP SKILLS/KNOWLEDGE IN THIS AREA"

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	How to identify the root of the problem as opposed to the symptoms of the problem	1	2	3	4	5
2.	How to recognize and identify problem situations in a small business	1	2	3	4	5
3.	How to conduct a Situation Analysis of the small business under study	1	2	3	4	5
4.	How to analyze the industry of the Small Business under study	1	2	3	4	5
5.	How to relate with individuals in the business world.	. 1	2	3	4	5
6.	How to search for relevant information from within and outside the small business	1	2	3	4	5
7.	How to analyze the competitive situation of the client under study	1	2	3	4	5
8.	How to develop good rapport with the client	1	2	3	4	5
9.	How to interact with client personnel	1	2	3	4	5
10.	How to deal with colleagues in the workplace	1	2	3	4	5
11.	The marketing skills necessary to run a small business	s 1	2	3	4	5
12.	The entrepreneurial skills needed to run a small business	1	2	3	4	5
13.	I use many of the skills I acquired from the SBI projecton my current job	t 1	2	3	4	5
14.	The management skills necessary to run a small business	1	2	3	4	5
15.	The personality traits that may be necessary to run a small business	1	2	3	4	5
16.	I feel a SBI project should be made a requirement for all business majors	1	2	3	4	5
17.	This project helped me better prepare myself for the job market	1	2	3	4	5
18.	This project has helped me develop a better understanding of my work environment	1	2	3	4	5
19.	I found the SBI project to be extremely useful	1	2	3	4	5
20.	I will definitely recommend the SBI project to other students	1	2	3	4	5

SECTION #1B BACKGROUND

1.	What is the name of the school where you worked on the SBI project?
	In which state is the school located?
	I worked on the SBI project in a: Policies class SBI class Small Business Management class Entrepreneurship class Other (Explain)
4.	Was this class required or an elective? Required Elective
5.	I worked on the SBI project while working towards my: Bachelors degree Masters degree Doctorate Other (explain) Not working toward a degree
6.	When did you graduate? (If you have graduated more than once since working on the SBI project, please give the graduation year closest to the time when you completed the SBI project)
7.	What was your major? Accounting Computer Information Systems Finance Management Marketing Other Business Major (specify) Non-Business Major (specify)
8.	What was your final, overall grade point average (GPA)
	What grade did you receive on the SBI project? A B C D F Don't Remember Other (specify)
10.	What grade did you receive in the course in which the SBI project was completed? A B C D F Don't Remember Other (specify)
11.	How many student team members, including yourself, worked on the SBI project? 1 2 3 5 or more
12.	What were the major issues in your SBI Project? (check more than one if applicable) Marketing Issues Computer Information Issues Management Issues Finance Issues Accounting Issues Other (specify)
13.	What is your current job title?
14.	Who is your employer (firm name)?
15.	How many years have you worked with this firm?
	SBI Project was done in your Business Policies/Strategies (capstone) course, please end here and mail our questionnaire. Otherwise, continue with the next two pages of the questionnaire.

SECTION #2A ALUMNI PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE BUSINESS POLICY/STRATEGY COURSE

This additional section is just for those alumni who had a Business Policy/Strategy course which did not include a SBI project. These statements relate <u>only</u> to your experiences in the Business Policy/Strategy (capstone) class. For each item, please indicate your extent of agreement with the following statement by circling the number which best corresponds to your answer.

"THE POLICIES/STRATEGIES COURSE HELPED ME DEVELOP SKILLS/KNOWLEDGE IN THIS AREA"

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	How to identify the root of the problem as opposed to the symptoms of the problem	1	2	3	4	5
2.	How to recognize and identify problem situations in a business	1	2	3	4	5
3.	How to conduct a Situation Analysis of the business under study	1	2	3	4	5
4.	How to analyze the industry of the business under study	1	2	3	4	5
5.	How to relate with individuals in the business world.	. 1	2	3	4	5
6.	How to search for relevant information from within and outside the business	1	2	3	4	5
7.	How to analyze the competitive situation of the client under study	1	2	3	4	5
8.	How to develop good rapport with the business owner/manager	1	2	3	4	5
9.	How to interact with client personnel	1	2	3	4	5
10.	How to deal with colleagues in the workplace	1	2	3	4	5
11.	The marketing skills necessary to run a business	1	2	3	4	5
12.	The entrepreneurial skills needed to run a business	1	2	3	4	5
13.	I use many of the skills I acquired from the capstone course on my current job	1	2	3	4	5
14.	The management skills necessary to run a business	1	2	3	4	5
15.	The personality traits that may be necessary to run a business	1	2	3	4	5
16.	I feel the capstone course should be made a requirement for all business majors	1	2	3	4	5
17.	This course helped me better prepare myself for the job market	1	2	3	4	5
18.	This course has helped me develop a better understanding of my work environment	1	2	3	4	5
19.	I found the capstone course to be extremely useful	1	2	3	4	5
20.	I will definitely recommend the capstone course to other students	1	2	3	4	5

SECTION #2B BACKGROUND

1.	Was this class required or an elective? Required Elective
2.	I worked on the Business Policy/Strategy project/case while working towards my: Bachelors degree Masters degree Doctorate Other (explain)
3.	When did you graduate? (If you have graduated more than once since working on the Business Policies/Strategies (capstone) project/case, please give the graduation year closest to the time when you completed the Policies/Strategies project/case)
4.	What grade did you receive in the Business Policy/Strategy course? A B C D D F Don't Remember Other (specify)
5.	How many student team members, including yourself, worked on your projects/cases? 1 2 3 4 5 or more

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR COOPERATION

APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHICS

The following questions were used to obtain demographics from the survey respondents. Their responses to the specific questions are provided below.

I worked on the SBI project while working towards my:

Degree	Percent
Bachelors	82.7
Masters	16.7
Not working towards a degree	0.6

When did you graduate?

Year	Percent
1974 to 1988	21.0
1989	35.0
1990	44.0

What was your major?

Major	Percent
Accounting	5.6
Computer Information Systems (CIS)	2.5
Finance	6.2
General Business	6.2
Management	35.2
Marketing	16.7
Other Business Major	13.6
Non-Business Major	1.9
Double Major	12.3

How many student team members, including yourself, worked on the SBI Project?

Number	Percent
1	17.3
2	45.1
3	21.6
4	11.1
5 or more	4.9