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# Applying Managers' Views on Group Work in Organisations to Group Assignments in Universities

*Dr Caroline Kamau and Abigail Spong.*

**A**bstract: *Universities face the challenge of adequately preparing graduates for group-work in organisations. Structured interviews of managers were analysed to deduce implications for the design of group assignments in universities. Participants were 10 managers from 10 organisations, 7 of which rank in the Times top 100 UK graduate employers. Themes that emerged included the idea that tight deadlines necessitate group-work, that communication within and between groups is essential, that group identity is important, and that leadership has important implications. These themes could be applied by giving university group assignments tighter deadlines than individual assignments, by providing tools to encourage communication within student groups (e.g. online information-sharing tools, and group logs to record details of meetings), encouraging student groups to develop a collective identity, and by encouraging student groups to choose a leader. It was concluded that group assignments in universities could be designed to better mirror conditions in real organisations*

There is a large body of psychological literature reporting experiments (eg. Latane, Williams and Harkins, 1974), field/case studies (e.g. Janis & Mann, 1979) and meta-analyses (e.g. Karau & Williams, 1993) on the causes, symptoms and remedies for group productivity deficits (see Kamau & Harorimana, 2008, for a literature review). A group productivity deficit is the difference between the actual performance of a group and their potential performance (Steiner, 1972). There is a lot of empirical evidence that groups almost always suffer productivity deficits (Brown, 2000). Despite all this knowledge about the pitfalls of assigning tasks to groups, group-work remains a popular *modus operandi* in organisations. Universities therefore do well in including group assignments, but these can be adapted in ways that better mirror real conditions in employment settings. This paper reports thematic analysis of transcripts obtained from interviewing managers from a variety of organisations. After summarising the method, the results will report each theme identified and provide examples of verbatim quotes from the interview transcripts. Alongside each theme will be a discussion

of how each point can be applied in the designing of group assignments within university settings.

## Method

*Participants:* Participants were 10 managers in 10 different organisations in Southampton, UK. Seven of the organisations were selected from the Times list of the top 100 graduate employers: BBC, Boots, Deloitte, Oxfam, Tesco, and 2 organisations whose managers requested anonymity. The remaining 3 organisations were selected because they are large employers in the local area, Southampton: British Gas, Carnival UK and Graduate Jobs South. Prospective participants were approached via a letter sent by post or e-mail; interviews were scheduled with those who responded.

*Materials/Procedure:* Materials consisted of an information sheet, a sheet of 10 questions (for use by the researcher), a debrief sheet and an mp3 audio recorder. After the manager signed a consent form, the researcher switched on an mp3 recorder and asked 10 questions in randomized order. These included questions such as: ‘What can be done to prepare undergraduates for good team working skills in the workplace?’ ‘What kind of team work, if any, is required of new graduate employees?’ and ‘What would you say are the things that cause teams to underperform?’ Where necessary, neutral prompts were used, such as ‘please explain more about that’, ‘do you have any examples’, and so on. At the end of the study, the manager was thanked and debriefed.

## Results

Each mp3 audio recording was transcribed. Each manager’s transcript was given a code name (e.g. “Manager X”, “Manager V”) not corresponding alphabetically or otherwise to the name of their organisation, to maintain both the managers’ and the organisations’ anonymity and confidentiality. Thematic analysis of the transcripts was then conducted. Thematic analysis (see Smith, 2003, for an overview) was chosen because it is an effective way of analysing common occurring topics within qualitative data.

### Theme 1: Urgency makes group-work a necessity in organisations.

A general consensus was that teamwork is a necessity and that it enables organisations to meet tight deadlines posed by market or client needs, as Manager X explained:

*“...Ultimately without teamwork we wouldn’t be able to get the output. We have a whole team that sift the results...” (Manager X, Line 38), “...If we were not to deliver the results that day the stock exchange might think that there is something wrong..”*

## DIALOGUE

(Line 42) “...It is important we deliver that day and to do that requires a huge amount of organisation” (Line 46.)

This suggests that organisations needing to serve clients within a tight deadline have no choice but to rely on teamwork. Manager V echoed the idea that time pressure makes it unfeasible to give the task to individuals: “Working in a team everybody pitches in when (a deadline is) coming up we need lots of all hands on deck.” (Manager V, Line 38-39).

That every group member ‘pitches in’ out of necessity when a deadline is looming is something which can be applied to assignments to increase task importance (see Karau & Williams, 1993). If students usually have, say, 3 weeks to complete a group assignment, this may not be as high in external realism as giving them 5 working days. These sorts of deadlines are the reality of many organisations. To simulate such tasks, groups of students could be given small tasks to complete within a very restricted timeframe as part of ordinary learning. For instance, students could be divided into groups and each group given a reading list and 20-minutes to dash to the library and find/collect the books and articles on the reading list from various floors within the library. By creating a sense of urgency, making the deadline for a group assignment much tighter than for an individual assignment, group assignments in universities can simulate real conditions in organisations.

### Theme 2: Effective communication within groups in organisations is vital

The idea that employees are expected to possess good communication skills is not surprising but what is notable is how the managers applied this to group-work. Information sharing is an important way of maximising group productivity (e.g. Stasser & Titus, 1985). Listening skills were seen as essential for employees to find out what the group task is:

*“They need to listen to clients. We often find people are very good at talking and not very good at listening, and listening is the most important part of communication”* (Manager X, Line 92-94).

*“Knowing what your role is and what the team does and what it’s trying to achieve and what the objectives are and being aware of the bigger picture.”* (Manager V, Line 189)

These ideas could be applied in university settings by formatively assessing students’ understanding of a group assignment brief, and then giving them feedback on how well they understand what tasks are involved in the group assignment. It was also implied that the listening aspect of communication enables groups (or departments) in organisations to gain an understanding of each other:

## DIALOGUE

*“..Understanding the other departments around you.. everyone works as a team and understand whatever they do has an impact on others... We have 3 main departments on board that is the hotel, the deck side and the technical engine room and you have to work quite hard to get those 3 units working together. They all have to come together, because the technical side will support the hotel side when the light bulbs go or when plugs don't work, that gets reported a service issue and the technical staff have to understand that if the light bulbs don't work then that leads to a dissatisfied customer. So those sorts of things come together” (Manager R, Lines 144-155).*

This idea of communication at a macro level could be applied to university group assignments by encouraging communication with external groups providing information, goods or services needed, such as by scheduling meetings with library personnel, IT personnel and technical personnel.

Additionally, good communication was defined by one manager as something essential to meet deadlines.

*“I think communication's key. Being able to both talk ...and being able to listen ... often people who you wouldn't get on with socially ...especially in a quite high-pressured environment in which we work.... Because ultimately everything is a deadline here... you'll never meet those deadlines if you can't communicate properly. If people can't communicate they will struggle in this business...” (Manager W, Lines 39-51).*

Undergraduates doing group-could be randomly assigned to groups, thus exposing them to group members that they might not like. Low cohesion within a group can actually benefit group productivity (Hogg & Hains, 1998). The interactions themselves can be encouraged by emphasising the importance of meetings, supplemented by e-mail, telephone and web conversations. Some managers tied social skills with communication skills:

*“To be able to have the social skills” (Appendix B, Line 36), “Just requires communication skills” (Manager Z, Line 12).*

*“We like to see people who are good communicators..... We are quite interested in how they interact, how they communicate, what they say and actually what they don't say” (Manager X, Line 220-223)*

It may therefore be useful for tutors to give student groups the opportunity to conduct one of their meetings during class time, and for the tutors to then observe how members of each group interact with each other. The tutor can then provide informal feedback, noting both positive communication behaviours (e.g. turn-taking, politeness) and negative communication

behaviours (e.g. rudeness, abrasiveness). The tutor can mention how each behaviour observed helped or hindered the completion of the group task. Universities can also help student group members learn how to communicate with each other by providing web tools (such as blogs, wikis and discussion forums) with password-restricted access for each student group.

The other element of communication within groups is that which involves sharing information on what the task is, what is needed to complete the task, what has been done about the task, and so on. One manager suggested that graduate employees tend to share and gather information more effectively, because their degrees gave them that sort of experience: *“(graduates are)...more open in sharing their knowledge...”* (Manager Z, Line 91). Nevertheless, this should not be taken for granted. The skills can be further enhanced by giving students web platforms that enable them to share their work online. Additionally, the background information that contributes to this work could be collated in a manner accessible to all group members, such as showing students how to make their searches on bibliographic databases viewable by their fellow members’ when they log-in.

### Theme 3: Social identity as essential in organisations

Many managers spoke about group identity. One manager referred to the organisation as *“our world”* (Manager R, Line 23 and 43), and other managers referred to *“togetherness”* in ways such as this: *“We need to come up with a collective ...”* (Manager E, Lines 215-216) and *“... no matter what grade you’re on and what piece of work you’re working on, there’s a togetherness of what you are trying to achieve”* (Manager V, Lines 192-195). Another manager implied that employees were expected to safeguard their organisations’ identity:

*“We don’t want people who don’t do the right thing, more than anything else; our reputation matters to us. If we lost our reputation we would lose our business. It would be a disaster. So we want people who do the right thing.”* (Manager X, Lines 68-71).

Another manager summed up the notion of team identity in a temporal sense, implying that employees ought to view themselves as contributing to the future of their organisation:

*“If you have got a really good team that understands where they need to be, where they have come from and how they have got from where they were, then often that’s a great way to build and to keep up the momentum”* (Manager T, Lines 163-171)

In a university setting, group identity could be harnessed by encouraging each student group given an assignment to formulate their own collective identity by choosing a group name, create a group logo and thinking of themselves as a ‘brand’ or having a collective reputation

to preserve (see Self-Categorization theory, Turner et al, 1997). Where possible, ‘tangible’ space could also be given to each student group online or in a physical location:

*“They all have their own little areas downstairs and they own their own area so they have their own little worlds...they take pride in it... They all own this store” (Manager E, Lines 243-247, 228, 229-230).*

Team identity is also something that contributes to the well-being of group members: *“For successful team working I would say looking out for everyone else in your team” (Manager Y, Line 25)* and *“People who work for us should be happy and if people are happy they will do better work” (Manager X, Lines 85-86)*. This may mean that, in university settings, students’ enjoyment of group-work should be given more importance, and their group identity can be used to harness their satisfaction with the group.

#### Theme 4: The leader as pivotal to the group’s performance

Many managers recognised the impact that leadership can have on group performance, something also emphasised in previous research (see e.g. Peterson, 1997):

*“A successful team is about the leader of that team, it comes from how they are led” (Manager W, Line 238)* and *“Teams don’t underperform if the leadership of that team is spot on. There may be elements/individuals within those teams that under perform but a team will not under perform if the leadership is right”. (Lines 203-205).*

*“...Successful team-working is about having a strong leader who is sharing knowledge ...” (Manager Z, Line 140-143)*

*“Lack of direction from the manager, or the line manager. That’s probably one of the causes (of group productivity deficits) ...” (Manager V, Lines 252-254).*

A group leader can also increase a group’s performance by providing feedback, as one manager implied:

*“If they ...do it exceptionally well, tell them. If they don’t do it then you tell them so whichever way round it is recognising a really good piece of work is equally important as recognising poor work...” (Manager, Lines 116-119)*

Other characteristics of good leadership mentioned included a characteristic such as being trustworthy: *“(a good leader needs)..some back bone, they need to have lots of moral*

courage” (Manager T, Line 179). A leader was also said to be someone inspiring:

*“(A good leader)..inspires the rest of the team to meet that objective... the leader inspires people to get to that objective and cultivates an environment in which they lead from the front and they are clearly seen to be living the dream; they make it very clear what they want. A leader is also someone who will stand up and be counted and put their hands up when something goes wrong and not blame others around them”* (Manager W, Lines 185-211).

In the case of university group-work, a tutor has the capacity to model good leadership behaviour, such as by being willing to mediate amongst group. Alternatively (or concurrently), student groups can be encouraged to choose a leader, and so students would develop leadership skills.

## Conclusion

In summary, universities could enhance the realism of group assignments by making the deadlines as tight as possible. Group communication skills can be encouraged in university settings by asking students to keep a log of their meetings, by having tutors provide informal feedback after unobtrusively sitting-in on a meeting, and by encouraging information sharing through online tools (e.g. blogs, wikis, forums). The notion of group identity can simulated in universities by encouraging students doing a group assignment to develop a unique identity, such as by choosing a name and logo, and by being allocated physical or online space. To experience the impact of leadership on group performance, each student group could be encouraged to choose a leader and this way students would develop their leadership skills. In summary, this report analysed managers’ views on group-work in organisations, and the report then discussed practical ways in which group-work skills can be harnessed through university degrees.

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## Key Words

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