



Research Report

**Insights from an Evaluation of a Workplace-based Course in Business
for Tourism and Hospitality Students in Australia**

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Workplace-based courses are becoming increasingly common in Australian higher education. These courses are generally delivered at a distance, whether by print or on-line, and are distinguished by their focus specifically upon the workplace-based learning needs of the students. They also usually involve a partnership between an employer and a university. An evaluation of one such course, a Diploma of Business Management program undertaken by employees of the Ansett Australia airline, provides an insight to elements of success in these courses. The evaluation also presents an example of how workplace-based courses can be comprehensively appraised (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2001, 2(2), 1-11).

Keywords: workplace-based education; educational evaluation; business studies; tourism studies

In 1995, Ansett Australia, one of the two major Australian airlines, with a workforce of approximately 14,000 employees worldwide, formed a partnership with Southern Cross University to develop a workplace-based Diploma of Business Management course for middle-managers from Ansett. The purpose of the course was to develop skills and attitudes that would result in better workplace practices. A Centre for Business Education, comprising executives from Ansett and academic staff from the University's School of Tourism and Hospitality Studies, was established to oversee the initiative. Ansett's National Manager of Training chaired the Centre's advisory board.

The first enrolments were in July 1995. The course required students to complete eight units of study on a part-time basis over four semesters. The first-year level units were *Personal Communication for Tourism, Travel Sales and Marketing, Human Resource Management in the Tourism and the Hospitality Industry* and *Financial Analysis for the Travel Industry*. The second-year level units were *Elements of Business Law in the Travel and Tourism Industry, Project Management, Travel Services Management* and the *Ansett Project*. The Ansett Project, in many ways the culminating point of the course, required students to complete a research project in which they linked course content with workplace interests and responsibilities.

Within all units, students were encouraged to draw upon their current work experiences. Assessment tasks were designed to allow studies to be tailored to meet individual workplace needs. By 2001, there had been over 160 enrolments.

In 1996, the advisory board of the Centre for Business Education invited a comprehensive and independent evaluation of the course. The evaluation was intended to address the extent to which the course was having a "value-added" impact on workplace practice. Of interest also was the extent to which the course was contributing to the personal and professional development of employees enrolled in it.

In this paper, we report on the evaluation. The results of the evaluation are of interest for the light they throw on an understanding of the elements of success in a workplace-based educational program. The evaluation also provides an example of how a training program of this nature can be comprehensively evaluated.

There are numerous models for the evaluation of staff training programs in the literature (Bramley & Kitson, 1994; Leimbach, 1994; Pulley, 1994; Rabey 1990; Robinson & Robinson, 1989). To many observers, however, too few resources are invested in the evaluation of staff training programs (see, e.g., Brandenburg, 1982;

Cafferella, 1988; DeSimone and Harris, 1998; Goldstein, 1980; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Latham, 1988; Phillips, 1991; Rothwell & Kazanas, 1994; Wexley, 1984). In Australia, a national survey of training programs (Collins & Hackman, 1991) drew particular attention to the extent of the problem. The majority of respondents did no more than obtain end-of-program feedback, and some conducted no evaluation whatsoever. The report concluded:

The pre-eminent risk to this area [evaluation] is that we fail to justify the enormous investments being made in training and development by not establishing the effectiveness of our programs and their impact on workforce skills and productivity. (Collins & Hackman, 1991, p. 18)

Much the same conclusion was reached from a similar survey conducted earlier in the United States (Saari, Johnson, McLaughlin, & Zimmerle, 1988).

It would appear that there is a general reluctance by training program providers to risk criticism of their programs. Certain rationalisations are provided, including the view that workplace outcomes are affected more by external factors (for example, the economy, equipment, policies and other human resource management initiatives) than by the training programs themselves. It would also appear that there is a widespread lack of skill in conducting evaluations of training programs.

Design and Method

The conceptual model employed in this evaluation was Kirkpatrick's (1994) outcome-oriented model of program evaluation, described as "the most popular and influential model of training evaluation" (DeSimone & Harris, 1998, p. 176). This model advocates assessing the impact of a training program at four levels. The first concerns *reactions* - assessing what trainees think of a particular program. The second concerns *learning* - assessing the extent to which intended learning outcomes have been achieved. The third concerns *behaviour application* - assessing the extent to which job performance has been affected by the training. The fourth concerns *results* - assessing the extent to which the organisation is achieving improved results as a consequence of the training. In the context of the present evaluation, the model was valuable because it pointed to different areas of course outcomes that were important to investigate. A focus on behaviour application and results was especially relevant, given Ansett's particular interest in the "value-added" impact of the course on workplace practice.

The evaluation was implemented in three stages. The first involved interviews in July/August 1996 with a random sample of 14 (out of 59) currently enrolled students. These students worked in a variety of settings, including reservations, international travel, personnel, catering, engineering, administration, commercial sales and customer service. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students in their workplaces. The interviews were intended to elicit student reactions to the four first-year level units in the course. Of interest were perceptions of the

relevance of the course to workplace responsibilities, the impact of the course on workplace practices, the extent of enjoyment of the course and any suggestions for ways in which the course might be improved. In terms of the Kirkpatrick model, these questions were intended to find out about "reactions" to the course, perceptions of the extent to which "learning" was being achieved, and perceptions about the extent to which job performance (i.e., "behaviour application") was being affected.

The second stage involved interviews in October 1997 with all 13 members of the first cohort of graduates. The focus of this stage was primarily upon collecting information relevant to the fourth level of the Kirkpatrick model, that is, *results*. To this end, the graduates were invited to report especially on the extent to which the course had contributed to improved workplace practices. It was, of course, too soon to document the long-term impact of the course, but interviews were expected to provide information about the course's potential longer-term impact. Only two of the graduates had been interviewed in the first stage of the evaluation.

The third stage involved a questionnaire-based survey of all 66 students enrolled in the course in November 1997. The aim was to gather information from a wide cross-section of students with a view to verifying themes identified from the interviews conducted in the first and second stages of the evaluation. The students were asked about their satisfaction with the Diploma course, their reactions to each of the units, and their perceptions of the personal and organisational benefits of the course. Questions were also asked about their background (age, years of employment with Ansett), their motivation to succeed and their perceived level of support from their families, their colleagues and from their employer, Ansett Australia. The questionnaire employed scaled categorical and interval items only. Wherever possible, a ten-point rating scale was employed (to maximise potential variation in the responses). The questionnaire was pilot-tested with some of the students interviewed in the first and second stages.

It should be noted that, throughout the three stages of data collection, there was ongoing discussion about the course with University staff responsible for its delivery, as well as with the Ansett Training and Development Services staff responsible for its continuing financial viability. All the same, the focus of the evaluation was upon a student perspective, and so the results of the evaluation, particularly concerning the extent to which the organisation is achieving improved results as a consequence of the training, must be regarded as preliminary at this stage.

Results

The results reported here represent a summary of responses to the questionnaire given to students in the third stage of the data collection. The results of the first two stages of data collection are not reported in this paper, though some quotes from the interviews conducted in these stages are reported for the purposes of illustrating key points.

Table 1
Commitment to and motivation to complete the course

<i>In order to complete the Diploma:</i>			
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Dev</i>	<i>n</i>
I am prepared to give up my annual leave	6.09	2.99	34
I am prepared to do whatever is required	7.50	2.45	34
I am prepared to forsake relaxation time	7.53	1.52	34
I am prepared to spend less time socialising	7.68	1.79	34
I commit myself fully to my studies	7.97	1.34	34
I am prepared to study on days off and weekends	8.68	1.30	34
I try to learn as much as I can	8.91	1.29	34
I try to achieve the best results I can	9.06	1.15	34
<i>It is important for me to complete the Diploma:</i>			
For my own intrinsic interest	7.32	2.43	34
To obtain a tertiary qualification	8.06	2.03	34
For personal satisfaction	8.53	1.76	34
For personal development reasons	8.65	1.61	34
For professional development	8.88	1.39	34

The following scale was utilised:

0 (never or not at all) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (always or extremely so)

It is important to note, however, that items included in the questionnaire given to students in the third stage of data collection directly reflect the issues and concerns identified from the first two stages of data collection. They provide, therefore, an overview of results from the first two stages of data collection.

About the Respondents

A total of 34 students (16 males and 18 females) completed the questionnaire given to students in the third stage of data collection - a response rate of 51.5 per cent. The response rate was adversely affected by the high incidence of extended absences by the students from a home address because of travel, mostly related to their work for Ansett but also on account of holidays.

The background characteristics of the respondents provide an interesting insight into the range of employees whose participation in the course was sponsored by Ansett. On average, they had been employed by Ansett for 10.1 years (the range was from 2 to 24 years), and had an average of 12.1 years of formal education (the range was from 10 to 15 years). Their average age was 33.1 years (the range was from 23 to 43 years of age), and two-thirds had no dependent children. One-half were studying two units concurrently, and, at the time of completing the questionnaire, they had completed an average of five units in the course.

One of the themes to emerge from interviews conducted in stages one and two of the data collection concerned the high levels of importance attached by students and recent graduates to the course. One recent graduate commented, for example: "It has given me more confidence in

approaching the business side of things. Things such as how businesses tick, the bottom line, profitability. If I put myself in the role of strategic planning or personnel planning it will certainly give me a lot more tools to be able to do things well." This theme was explored in more detail in the third stage.

Respondents clearly valued the course. Details are presented in Table 1. The respondents valued the course for a mix of personal and professional reasons. Greatest importance was attached to "professional development", "personal development" and "personal satisfaction". Other important reasons given for wanting to obtain the Diploma were: "to obtain a tertiary qualification", and "for my own intrinsic interest". Respondents were also very highly committed to their studies. As indicated by the results presented in Table 1, there was an especially strong focus upon success: "I try to achieve the best results I can", and "I try to learn as much as I can." The respondents were generally prepared, therefore, to "study on days off and weekends", to "commit myself fully to my studies" and to "spend less time socialising".

A concern expressed in the interviews related to the importance of support by family and friends for studies, and, at the same time, a perceived lack of encouragement from immediate line managers. An attempt was made in the questionnaire to establish more clearly the extent of these perceptions. Details are presented in Table 2.

Respondents identified the main sources of support as being "my family", "my partner", "University administrative staff", "University lecturing staff" and "my friends". Their employer, the Ansett organisation, which was contributing substantially towards the cost of the course, was regarded as providing only moderate support.

Table 2
Support for study

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Dev</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>My immediate manager:</i>			
Is interested in what I have learned in order to apply it on the job	3.73	3.00	33
Encourages me to apply what I have learned wherever relevant	3.76	3.10	33
Communicates with me about my study	4.30	2.98	33
Shows interest in my study	4.88	3.01	33
Is supportive of my study	5.52	3.27	33
<i>I receive support for my study from:</i>			
Other – agencies outside Ansett with whom you have contact	4.25	3.14	24
My immediate manager	4.65	3.33	34
My work colleagues	4.73	3.16	33
University Learning and Information Centre	5.25	3.45	24
My study buddies	5.60	3.66	30
The Ansett organisation	5.62	2.66	34
My friends	5.82	2.86	33
University lecturing staff	6.30	2.76	33
University administrative staff	6.94	2.54	32
My partner	8.04	2.75	27
My family	8.06	2.09	32

The following scale was utilised:
0 (never or not at all) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (always or extremely so)

Perceived levels of support were even lower from “my work colleagues” and “my immediate manager”. Immediate line managers were generally felt not to be “interested in what I have learned in order to apply it on the job”, nor to “encourage me to apply what I have learned wherever relevant”.

Reactions to the Course and Perceptions of its Impact on Learning

When asked about their reactions to the course (level one of the Kirkpatrick model), respondents indicated greatest satisfaction with the “[distance education] study guides”, “University administrative supports”, “course materials provided” and “feedback on assessment items”. Details are presented in Table 3. The respondents were generally less satisfied with “collaboration with my study buddies”, the “availability of lecturers” and the “turnaround time on assignments”.

The students were asked to indicate how stimulating, interesting, difficult and stressful they found each of the units in the course. They were also asked to indicate if any of the units involved too much work, and about the extent to which particular units were relevant to their workplace needs. Details are presented in Graphs 1 to 6 in the Appendix. Nearly all of the units comprising the Diploma course were regarded as having been interesting and stimulating. The “Project Management”, “Elements of Business Law in the Travel and Tourism Industry”,

“Personal Communication for Tourism” and “Human Resource Management in the Tourism and the Hospitality Industry” were rated generally as the most interesting and stimulating of the units (mean scores greater than 7.0 on the ten-point scales). The “Financial Analysis for the Travel Industry” unit was rated generally as being the least stimulating and interesting, and it was also rated as being the most difficult and stressful of all of the units. The two high-workload units were “Financial Analysis for the Travel Industry” and the “Ansett Project”.

Applications to Behaviour

Kirkpatrick’s third level addresses the extent to which job performance is affected by a training program. In general, the respondents were very positive in terms of their perceptions of the outcomes of the course. The course was perceived as providing “more self knowledge”, “a broader view of what I can achieve”, improved “skills in communicating”, better “information skills which I can use in other areas of my life”, improved “skills in organising information”, improved “skills in searching for information” and “more self confidence”. Details are presented in Table 4.

Respondents were less positive about “being sought out for advice”, “being noticed” and being “more favourably placed in promotion decision making” - confirming a theme from the interviews about a perceived lack of recognition within the organisation.

Table 3
Satisfaction with the course

<i>I am satisfied with:</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Dev</i>	<i>n</i>
The residential schools	4.89	3.71	18
Collaboration with my study buddies	5.89	3.17	28
Availability of lecturers	5.95	2.33	33
Turn-around time on assignments	6.03	2.32	34
Resources of the University Learning Assistance Centre	6.16	2.61	25
Support from lecturers	6.47	2.33	34
The teletutorials	6.71	1.98	34
Feedback on assessment items	6.88	2.03	33
Course materials provided	7.68	1.53	34
University administrative supports	7.73	1.57	33
The study guides	8.03	1.51	34

The following scale was utilised:

0 (never or not at all) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (always or extremely so)

Some comments made by students and graduates interviewed in the first and second stages of data collection illustrate the point: “It’s a waste of money for Ansett if they don’t use our skills”, “I would like to feel my talents would be recognised, but recently I went for a job and didn’t get it”, and “I don’t know the Ansett perception or where they see what we are doing.”

While students appeared to be obtaining satisfaction and a strong sense of personal and professional development from doing the course, they had concerns about how well their knowledge and skills from the course were being recognised and utilised by Ansett.

Impact on Results

The fourth level of Kirkpatrick’s model addresses the extent to which the organisation is achieving improved results as a consequence of the training program. Table 5 presents a summary of perceived benefits of the Ansett Project unit in terms of its potential for the Ansett organisation. Only eight respondents reported having completed the unit. In general, these respondents expected their projects to result in “problem identification”, “feasibility studies which saved somebody else having to do the project”, “problem clarification”, the “evaluation of existing programs” and “improved customer satisfaction”. The respondents were less optimistic about their projects resulting in “cost savings”, but one reason for this finding may be that many of the projects were too recently completed to have had the feasibility of their recommendations comprehensively appraised by Ansett.

Discussion

The findings from the survey confirmed many of the themes identified in the earlier stages of the evaluation. They provide quantitative estimates of the strength of student feeling about different aspects of the course. They

also give valuable insights into the elements of a successful workplace-based training program.

Student commitment is clearly one of these elements. Employees who were selected into the course were very highly motivated to succeed. They were prepared to make sacrifices, and they recognised the course as being important for personal as well as for professional reasons. A high level of commitment was, of course, essential to progress in the course because these students were also engaged in demanding full-time jobs.

Student support is another element. Of note from the results is that this support was generally felt to be much stronger from family, friends and University staff than it was from immediate line managers, or even immediate work colleagues. Comments made in the interviews suggest that, even though Ansett had entered a partnership to get the course established, the course was not felt to be valued as much within the Ansett organisation as would have been liked. The enthusiasm for the course at senior levels had not filtered through to the workplace of individual staff members, thereby constraining the potential “value-added” impact of the course. There were exceptions, however, with some managers taking a particular interest in their staff who were enrolled in the course.

Another element is the quality, relevance and degree of difficulty of the course. Respondents were generally very positive in their reactions to the course. They were especially satisfied with the study guides and course materials. They reported only one of the units as having been difficult and not so interesting or stimulating. Only two units were identified as requiring very high workloads: one of these was the “Ansett Project”, which required a high level of independent initiative, and the other was the “Financial Analysis for the Travel Industry” unit, which was singled out as having been not so interesting. In short, the course was well pitched to the needs of the students, and was generally very well received.

Table 4
Effect of the course

<i>As a consequence of study towards the Diploma:</i>			
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Dev</i>	<i>n</i>
My advice is being sought	5.12	2.63	34
I am being noticed	5.85	2.76	34
I will be more favourably placed in promotion decision making	6.12	2.34	33
I can bring about constructive changes	6.59	2.06	34
I am motivated to study further	6.74	2.26	34
I am able to make improvements in the workplace	6.97	1.99	33
I am better placed to act as a mentor to workplace colleagues	7.03	1.98	34
I have greater knowledge of the Ansett organisation	7.15	1.91	33
I am in a better position to get ahead	7.15	2.24	33
I can do my job more effectively	7.18	1.77	34
I am better able to provide useful information to other sections	7.18	1.94	33
I have improved day-to-day work practices	7.21	1.81	34
I see more opportunities to make a contribution	7.38	1.78	34
I am better able to act as a resource to management	7.39	2.45	33
I can better apply knowledge to reinforce existing practices	7.45	1.95	33
I have improved practical work skills	7.47	1.78	34
I have a more professional approach to work	7.53	1.89	34
I can deal more effectively with agencies outside Ansett	7.59	1.79	34
I have more self confidence	7.79	1.53	34
I have improved skills in searching for information	7.97	1.79	33
I have improved skills in organising information	7.97	1.80	34
I have developed skills which I can use in other areas of my life	8.15	1.46	34
I have improved skills in communicating information	8.21	1.43	34
I have a broader view of what I can achieve	8.38	.99	34
I have more self knowledge	8.38	1.44	34

The following scale was utilised:

0 (never or not at all) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (always or extremely so)

A need for some additional attention to the one less attractive unit was indicated, however.

Effective academic support for learning is another element. While respondents were generally pleased with the level and quality of the academic guidance they received, claims made in the interviews about the need for faster turnaround times in the return of marked assignments, and about the difficulty of contacting lecturing staff, were confirmed by the questionnaire results. Respondents, though not highly critical, were least satisfied with these aspects of the delivery of the course. Systems for ensuring a rapid turnaround of assignments, and for advertising times when staff are available, require development.

Finally, but by no means least important, students need to feel that the effort involved in successfully completing a course will be rewarded in the long term. A strong theme from the interviews conducted in the first and second stages of the evaluation concerned disappointment about the extent of recognition and reward that Ansett was perceived to be providing for employees making the effort required to complete the Diploma course. It was not clear to the interviewees if Ansett had any plans for utilising their newly acquired skills as a valuable resource within the

organisation. They felt strongly that the broad issue of reward and recognition was being neglected. Respondents to the questionnaire distributed as part of the third stage of the evaluation confirmed this theme as being a significant one. The outcomes of study towards the Diploma with which the respondents were least satisfied related almost exclusively to professional recognition by Ansett - including "being noticed", "being more favourably placed in promotion decision making" and "being sought out for advice". The general point is that, where an organisation encourages and sponsors staff to undertake an advanced training program, then the long-term issue of recognition and reward must be explicitly addressed. Ideally, this issue would be considered as part of the organisation's human resource development strategy

Conclusion

In this evaluation, the Kirkpatrick model for training program evaluation was employed as the conceptual basis for a wide-ranging review of the effects of a workplace-based Diploma course developed by staff at Southern Cross University for delivery to selected middle-managers from

Table 5
Impact of the Ansett Project

<i>My project has potential benefits for Ansett with respect to:</i>			
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Dev</i>	<i>n</i>
Cost savings	5.86	1.77	7
Validating current designs	6.50	2.88	6
Improving staff relations and self esteem	7.00	2.71	7
Problem solving	7.14	2.41	7
Improved communications between sections	7.29	3.45	7
Forward planning	7.75	1.67	8
Improving customer satisfaction	8.00	2.08	7
Evaluation of existing programs	8.13	1.96	8
Problem clarification	8.14	1.77	7
Feasibility studies and saving someone else having to do it	8.50	1.60	8
Problem identification	8.86	1.07	7

The following scale was utilised:

0 (never or not at all) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (always or extremely so)

Ansett Australia. The evaluation differed in approach from others in which training programs have been considered from the perspective of cost-benefit analysis (Bramley & Kitson, 1994; Leimbach, 1994.), response analysis (Pulley, 1994), impact analysis (Bramley & Kitson, 1994) and the costs of not training (Rabey, 1990).

The general finding of the evaluation is that the Diploma course did expand the students' knowledge base, particularly in relation to skills relevant to their workplace, and did provide valuable opportunities for professional and personal development. The large majority of questionnaire respondents reported that the insights and skills obtained from the course were resulting in better workplace practices and performance – though corroboration of this perspective by the employer clearly requires further investigation.

The methodology of the evaluation is noteworthy in that both qualitative and quantitative exploratory procedures were employed. The two initial stages of the evaluation required interviews with students and graduates, respectively, from the course. From these interviews, themes were developed, which were then the basis for a questionnaire given to all students on the course in the third stage of the evaluation. This approach provides a strong basis for confidence in the reliability of the findings.

Various insights of potential interest to an international readership are provided by the evaluation. Of special note is the importance to students of *feeling that the substantial effort in successfully completing a course is valued by their employer and will be rewarded long-term*. The Ansett Diploma course was clearly successful, but its impact might have been greater had Ansett anticipated the need to match the high level of employee commitment to the course with career pathways responsive to the newly acquired expertise of the graduate employees. Furthermore, Ansett needed to develop a culture in which the immediate managers of employees undertaking the course were supportive of it.

The success of the course may be attributed in large measure to the relevance of the curriculum to the workplace needs and requirements of the students. Another insight, therefore, concerns *the importance of a strong and productive collaboration between the higher education and industry partners in achieving course relevance to the workplace needs and requirements of students*. The Centre for Business Education, established to support the collaboration with Ansett, was a highly effective vehicle for ensuring that both academic and work-based requirements were properly integrated.

Finally, *the value of comprehensive course evaluation procedures in contributing to the improvement of training programs* is emphasised. The results of this evaluation were instrumental in alerting Ansett to the need to consider the Diploma course more centrally as part of its human resource development strategy. Measures were also introduced to provide the immediate managers of employees undertaking the course with a greater sense of involvement in the initiative. A mentorship scheme was introduced to allow recent graduates to provide workplace-based encouragement and support for current students. These interventions in support of the course might not have been considered were it not for the availability of the evaluation results.

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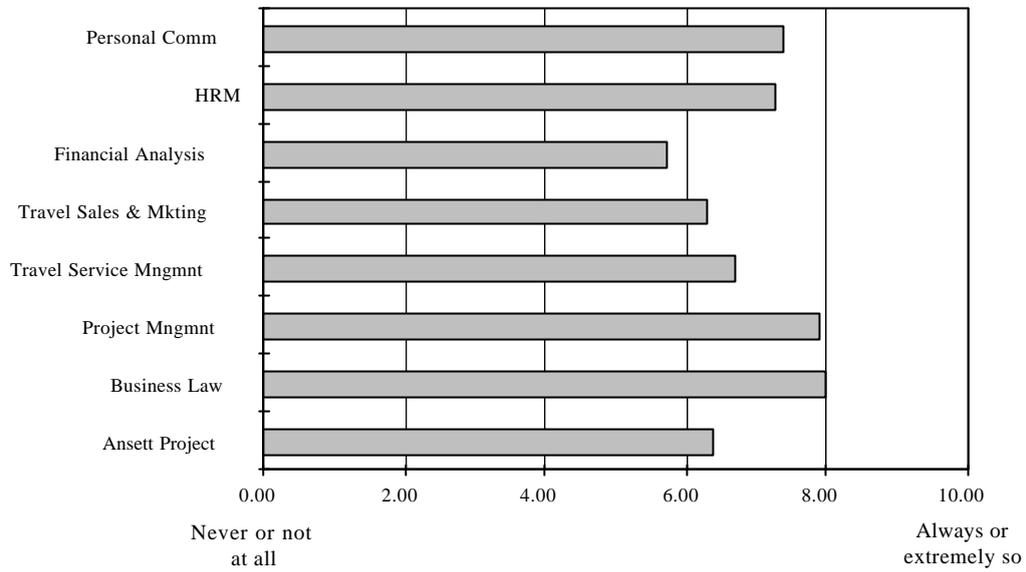
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Appendix

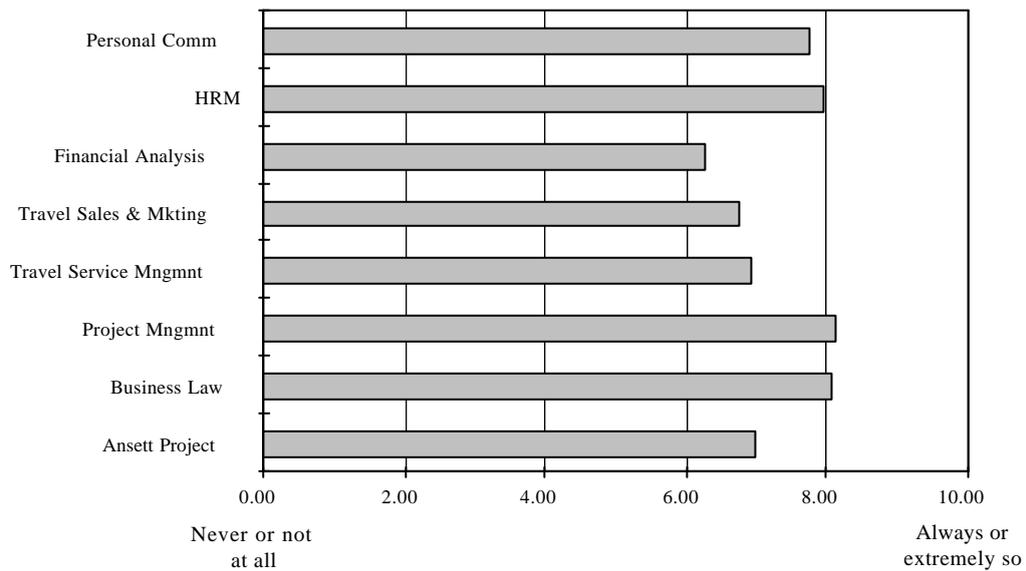
Graph 1

Responses to the Question: “I found the following units stimulating”



Graph 2

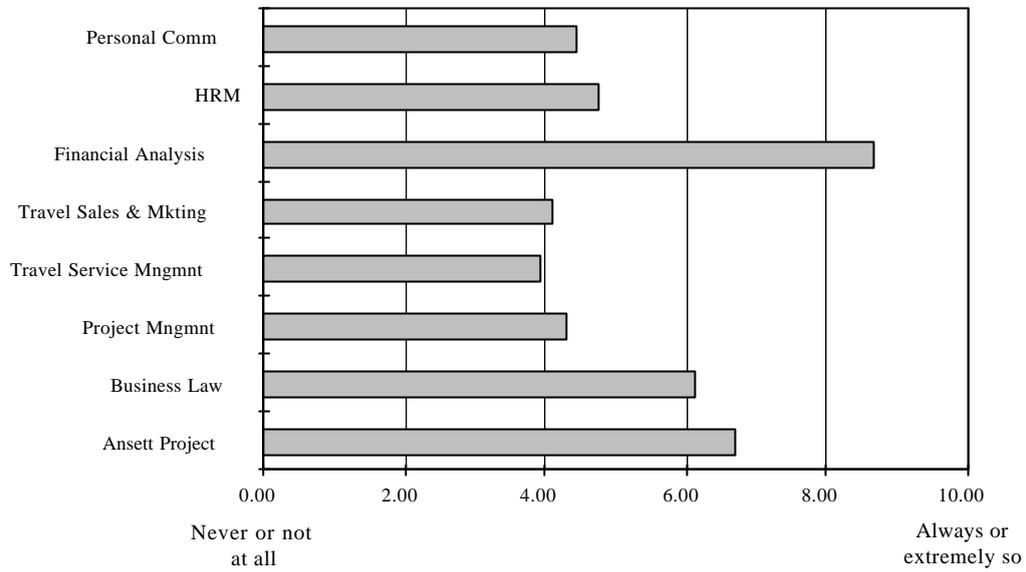
Responses to the Question: “I found the following units interesting”



Appendix (Continued)

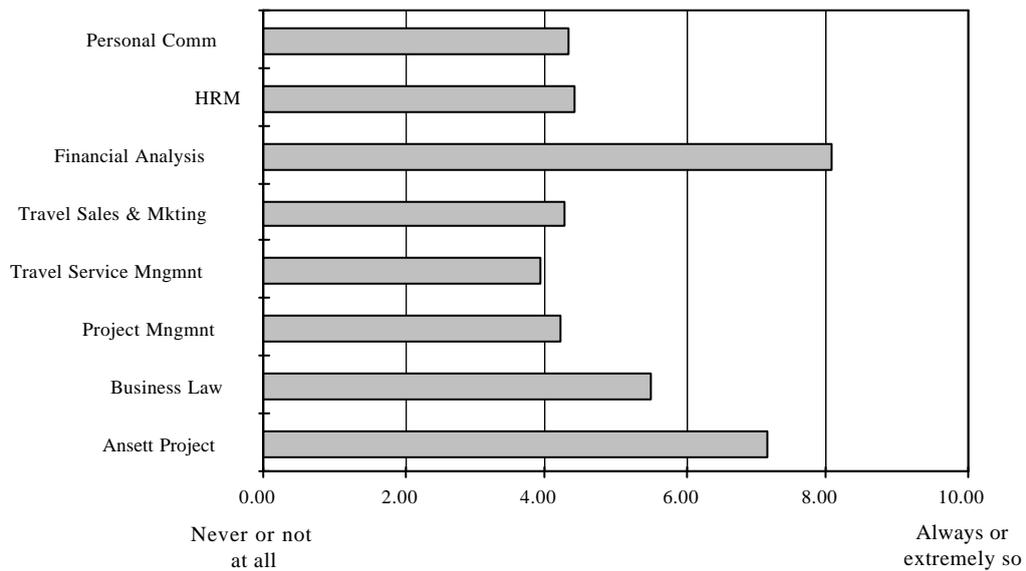
Graph 3

Responses to the Question: "I found the following units difficult"



Graph 4

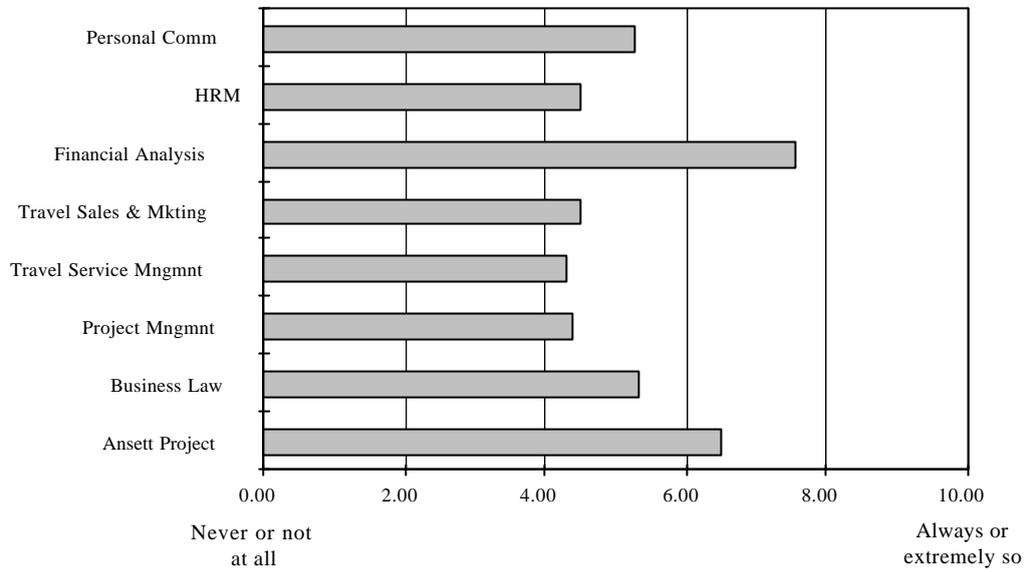
Responses to the Question: "I found the following units stressful"



Appendix (Continued)

Graph 5

Responses to the Question: “I found the following units too much work”



Graph 6

Responses to the Question: “I found the following units relevant”

