

RBE PROJECT GUIDELINES

STRATEGIC BUSINESS PLAN GROUP PROJECT

Consulting firms are companies that employ experts who provide professional advice to organizations or individuals for a fee (here, 10% of your final course grade). By the end of this course, you should possess the expertise necessary to complete the Reality Based Education component of this course, which is to act as consultants to a for-profit business of your choice. You must develop and present an innovative strategic business plan that addresses current firm conditions and details concrete strategic steps that the firm should take to secure its future. Although you may choose to include some information regarding the company's current operations, the primary focus of the report should be your team's creative, forward-thinking strategic recommendations for the firm. These recommendations must include concrete plans for surmounting at least three (3) distinct challenges that the firm currently faces, or will likely soon face. These three challenges should encompass a wide enough scope that they provide ample opportunity for making recommendations *throughout the paper* (i.e. not a suggestion as simple as improving the mission statement). If you or the manager whom you are interviewing is uncomfortable with the connotation of the word "challenges," refer to them as "goals" that the firm seeks to achieve. Note that, when interacting with members of the firm and writing your report, you should always aim to maintain a positive, constructive tone. Keep in mind that you are not to denigrate any of the company's previous actions; instead, you are to provide the firm with recommendations intended to enhance the company's future performance.

Throughout the project, groups should concentrate on making recommendations that will help the company surmount the challenges it faces. I am far less interested in knowing where the company has been than in knowing where the company is going and how it can best secure its market position. For each section of the report, give just enough background information to explain the basis for the recommendations that you are suggesting; this means that your report should contain very little discussion of the company history, as the client is already fully aware of its past. For example, if you are recommending that the company adopt a new mission statement, then you should delineate the company's current mission statement but emphasize the new mission statement that your team devises. Or, perhaps your team feels that the client firm should diversify its product offering, which means that you will, very briefly, mention the firm's current product portfolio, but emphasize how your team suggests how best to modify the product mix. **Remember that, as consultants, your task is to provide what the company expects – answers for the future, not descriptions of its past.**

Your final strategic business plan must begin with a Title Page, Table of Contents, and an Executive Summary, and must end with an Appendix that includes a written excerpt (at least one page) of your interview with a manager whose name and email address must be specified at the top of the transcript. You must divide the paper into clearly defined sections, but the structure of the paper is entirely up to the group. For instance, you could organize the paper around topics such as Operations and Management Structure, Products and Services, Market Analysis, and Strategy and Implementation. Or, you might prefer to devote a section to each challenge. Perhaps a blend of these two styles would work best, or maybe you have a unique idea of how to structure the paper. Beyond the four required components, the shape that the project takes is up to you and your teammates. An actual business plan would include a financial plan; however, for the purposes of this project, you will not be required to probe into the company's financials, but feel free to include financial details that you believe are necessary to, or would enhance, the

project. Your ability to integrate core course concepts into a single, cohesive project will play a substantial role in determining your grade, so be sure to demonstrate your mastery of the subject matter covered throughout the semester. While you must clearly identify the three most pressing challenges that the firm faces, and your solutions, you should include, throughout all sections of your team's business consultants' report, *many* more recommendations that result from your observations and evaluations.

Your final report should be a minimum of 15 pages in length, single-spaced with one-inch margins, 12-point Times New Roman font (typeface can vary for headings, subheadings, tables, figures, etc.). The page count does NOT refer solely to the physical number of pages, but to the amount of written text. For example, a page with one quarter left blank would be counted as three quarters of a page, and two pages with half a page of text on each would be counted as one full page. The Title Page, Table of Contents, and Appendices are not included in the page count. Since managers want information – not “fluff” – avoid padding. Please include page numbers, at the bottom of every page other than the Title Page, Table of Contents, and Executive Summary pages.

Your writing must be in prose form (i.e. no bullet points, notes, etc.) and must be clear, concise, formal, professional, and free of any trace of plagiarism. (When in doubt, please consult the Plagiarism file on Blackboard.) Please be mindful of proper formatting standards, since managers tend to disregard reports that appear sloppy or hastily assembled. As is expected in a business setting, your group's work will be evaluated as a whole, so it would behoove you to elect the best writer(s) in your group to proofread the entire document. It is important to thoroughly proofread your report to ensure that it is free of spelling and grammar errors, because you will lose points – quite a few if the problems are particularly egregious – should your project be lacking in this regard. In short, you should be proud enough of your final product that you would be confident presenting it to the management of your client company. In fact, it is my hope that you will actually give a copy of your completed business plan to the manager whom you interviewed for the project. Who knows – there may be a job or a promotion in it for you!

Your group paper must be submitted, before the specified deadline, as a virus-free Microsoft Word document through Blackboard. Be aware of Blackboard file size limitations and other technology-related complications, especially should you decide to include graphic-intensive materials. Technical difficulties are not an acceptable excuse for late work, so you should complete everything well in advance of the submission deadline.

Key grading criteria for written report (see rubric at end of document):

- Integration of course content
- Three (3) major challenges and innovative solutions
- Additional recommendations throughout the paper
- Creativity of recommendations
- Grammar, formatting, flow, and readability

Additional Information

Include on the cover page:

- Strategic Business Plan Prepared to Fulfill Consulting Duties in Service of [Client Firm's Name]
- Your team name
- Individual members' names
- Your class section number

The Executive Summary (maximum 600 words) should be written last and should include a brief overview of the key information presented throughout the report. Do not worry about “spoiling” material that is discussed elsewhere in the paper. The Executive Summary is meant to catch the reader’s attention – if the manager to whom you submit your report is not both impressed and intrigued by your Executive Summary, s/he will be unlikely to read any further. This section is essentially your sales pitch as to why reading your report is worth the manager’s precious time.

Some questions that you might want to consider/answer:

- What changes would you recommend that the firm make to its vision statement, mission statement, goals/objectives, values, etc.?
- How would you describe the firm’s environment? What makes this environment unique, and how can the company best cope with its environment?
- What is the company’s target market? How can the company best address this market? Should the company consider exiting this market and/or entering new markets?
- What might a detailed SWOT analysis reveal about the firm?
- In what ways does the firm’s short-term future differ from its long-term future?
- What operational modifications would allow the firm to function more efficiently? more effectively?
- What are the firm’s key resources, capabilities, core competencies, distinctive competencies, etc.?
- What roles do the firm’s managers play in the organization? What roles should they play?
- What is the structure of the organization? What should it be?
- How would the firm classify its product offerings? Which are most important? least important?
- What additional products might the firm want to consider adding to its portfolio?
- Where does the company stand on issues such as pricing, sourcing and fulfillment, technology, and market share? How can the firm improve its position in each of these areas?
- How would you characterize the firm’s competition? How does the company compete in key categories? In which areas must the firm remain competitive? What does the firm need to do to remain competitive in each of these areas?
- Should the firm reconsider its marketing strategy? How?
- Would a merger, acquisition, or strategic alliance be to the firm’s advantage?
- Does the company compete globally? Should it?
- How does the firm treat personnel? Should alterations be made to pay structure, training methods and requirements, division of labor and specialization, use of seasonal workers, telecommuting policies, or promotions?

For each question that you answer, remember to provide sufficient details to put your suggestions into context, but ensure that the focus is squarely on your consulting team’s unique recommendations. Justify all advice that you give to the client.

Any individual whose contribution is lacking should be made aware of this deficiency. If the behavior is not quickly rectified, the team is encouraged to apprise the professor of the group’s concerns.

Project Evaluation Rubric

Criterion	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Course Content Integration	no course content included in report					some course content integrated and applied within report					an abundance of course content organically integrated and expertly applied within report
Major Challenges and Solutions	major challenges and solutions unclear/absent					minimum number of major challenges (3) clearly specified; solutions for each adequately detailed					several major challenges (3 or more) clearly specified, delineated, and explained; deep-level, innovative solutions thoroughly detailed and supported with highly compelling research and analysis
Recommendation Breadth and Depth	no recommendations beyond those stated for the major challenges					recommendations for major challenges exhibit moderate depth of analysis; several additional recommendations beyond those stated for the major challenges are provided and detailed					recommendations for major challenges exhibit extraordinary depth of analysis; numerous additional well-reasoned recommendations beyond those stated for the major challenges fill the report and are fully supported with thoughtful rationale
Recommendation Creativity	recommendations display little innovativeness					most recommendations display a moderate degree of innovativeness					virtually all recommendations display a high degree of innovativeness and attempt to view problems from multiple unconventional perspectives
Grammar and Presentation	report is nearly unreadable, poorly formatted, and/or fails to adhere to instructions					report suffers from several grammatical, formatting, and/or presentational errors, including instruction violations					report is almost completely free from grammatical, formatting, and/or presentational errors and adheres closely to all instructions

Note that the above dimensions are not equally weighted and do not reflect all criteria factored into the final project grade. For instance, 3 points will be deducted for each page that the report falls short of the minimum page count.