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Guest Speakers: A Win-Win Outcome for Business Management Education?

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Abstract

Approaches to the teaching of responsible management for business management students have been evolving over the last ten years. There is a growing shift from lectures and the acquisition of academic knowledge to student-centred activities and the development of softer employment skills; the skills that educators perceive as a prerequisite for students' career success. One approach to this favoured by students is the incorporation of a guest speaker.

Whilst students' appreciation of infrequent guest speakers within a lecture series is generally accepted, there is little consideration of potential benefits for the guest speaker. To close this research gap, this paper adopts a wider perspective on the value of guest speakers and considers whether becoming a guest speaker can benefit the business practitioner (the individual volunteering as the guest speaker) and their organisation, as well as the students, thus offering a win-win outcome.

Through this exploration, this paper will contribute to, and develop, two strands of discourse; on how business practitioners and/or their organisation can benefit from engaging with business schools as guest speakers:

- How business practitioners and/or their organisation can benefit from engaging with Business Schools as guest speakers
- Novel approaches to learning and teaching for responsible business that can promote students' knowledge and skills to enable them that to survive in the real world after graduation.

It will therefore be of interest to educators seeking innovative and inspirational new approaches to education, to those seeking shared value creation through smart partnering with business schools, to managers seeking opportunities to develop their corporate social responsibility objectives and impacts, and to those who simply want a new challenge.

Key words: Guest speaker, Responsible business

Introduction

Most future business managers and decision makers are educated by universities (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2011). It is through learning and teaching that business schools can provide their most valuable contribution to businesses, developing students with appropriate employment skills, subject knowledge (Chalkley, 2006) and life skills such as communicating, influencing, and listening (Drayson, 2015). Universities have frequently been criticised for not developing work-ready graduates with these employment and life skills. Consequently, graduates frequently arrive in their workplaces unprepared for real-life work (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; Rajaratnam & Campbell, 2012) and ill-equipped to handle the complex, multifaceted issues they encounter (Waddock, 2007; Govender, 2016).

Previous research suggests the incorporation of guest speakers into lectures can contribute significantly to this preparation for real-life work in a learning environment favoured by students (Glenwick & Chabot, 1991; McClearly & Weaver, 2009; Riebe et al, 2013; Krogstie, 2017). However, this research relates to the infrequent use of guest speakers and has generally focused on the student perspective, which leaves it unbalanced and missing the guest's perspective. To close this gap, this paper adopts a wider perspective on the value of guest speakers. It uses business practitioners' reflections on participating in responsible business lectures as a guest speaker, and considers whether being a guest speaker can positively

benefit the individual and/or their organisation. The focus is on responsible business as this is an evolving topic within business management education, and an area of skills shortage and business challenge that may benefit from the real-world learning provided by guest speakers (Riebe et al, 2013; Krogstie, 2017).

Definition of a Guest Speaker

This paper adopts the definition of a guest speaker proposed by Fedoryshyn & Tyson (2003):

“A person from industry, the public sector, another part of the university, or from another university, who comes to give a guest lecture within the module; the lecture topic is relevant to the module’s contents, learning goals and assignments, and the module’s students are the primary audience.”

The motive for participating in lectures varies between individuals according to their expectations and desired impacts. For example, motives for being a guest speaker range from participating to achieve their personal CSR objectives within their job appraisal, attempting to develop students’ responsible business skills or simply wanting to give something back to society. Many only realise the value it has for themselves after their lecture. Whatever the motive, each guest speaker will make a difference to each student; they may inspire students to move into a specific career path or be remembered long after students have left the Business School.

The Benefit of Guest Speakers for Students

Guest speakers have long been held to be a valuable pedagogic tool that adds real-life relevance to the curriculum (Riebe et al, 2013; Krogstie, 2017). Research recognises that guest speakers can enhance engagement, disseminate practice wisdom, and bring the real world to classroom (Metrejean, Pittman, & Zarzeski, 2002). They can also enrich the curriculum (Riebe et al, 2013) and help students develop positive attitudes and find career opportunities (Fedoryshyn & Tyson, 2003; Kamoun & Selim, 2007). Students can be encouraged to engage and co-create knowledge to develop discourse, interest and recognise learning. This can promote academic continuity in an interactive and collaborative environment that adds value to the students’ learning journey (Glenwick & Chabot, 1991), challenge disengagement, which is a growing problem for higher education (Yacek & Jonas, 2019) and develop students’ confidence.

Guest speakers from different organisations and different countries can encourage students to broaden their global and cultural awareness (Universities UK, 2014). By exposing students to a range of different beliefs and business cultures, and giving them the opportunity to challenge other people’s views and to develop their own opinions, guest speakers can help students to fulfil their potential to develop personal values and the needed business skills to become change agents. In addition, guest speakers act as role models who provide expert content and inspirational teaching to support and guide students’ learning in the ‘complex chaos’ that is responsible business (Schumann, 2018). In turn, this can promote self-reliance and self-efficacy, and support students to develop effective communication skills that enable them to interact with range of different audiences and succeed in the real world (McClearly & Weaver, 2009).

The Value of Being a Guest Speaker

This section looks at how guest speakers can gain personal value and business benefits, with findings from a survey of current guest speakers engaged in responsible business lectures. Guest speakers consider that supporting the students’ learning is enjoyable, satisfying and rewarding.

For example, a guest speaker recognised:

"It's always a pleasure to work directly with students and I look forward to it. Whilst the business school thinks I might be doing them a favour, it is the exact opposite"

Seeing speakers evidently enjoying their subject may appear to students as inspiring, real life relevance, and so drive students to engage (Riebe et al, 2013). This delivers a win-win outcome.

Both internal university and external business guest speakers recognised that value of hearing the perspectives of responsible business held by the students. For practitioners, the students' voice offers a new viewpoint on business practices, strategies, and interventions from the university's key stakeholders who operate within the marketised environment of higher education (Munroe, 2018). The students can be a pool of knowledge, innovation and expectations representing current and future customers, employers, advocates, and hopefully, change agents. By discussing responsible business with students, a guest speaker can gain a new perspective that would not otherwise been possible, which Keys, Malnight & van der Graaf (2009) suggest can promote the creation of shared value through smart partnering.

Guest speakers from within the university recognised the value this opportunity offered them:

"It is a valuable opportunity to garner young people's opinions, which are freely given."

"I always go away with a fresh and different 'to do' list."

This opportunity can deliver a win-win outcome as it enables the students to feel their voice is heard, which helps to build self-confidence for students and speakers alike (Metrejean et al, 2002). It encourages business practitioners to tap into the expertise of students to find creative and desired solutions to challenges both within the curriculum and operation of the business school.

For external business practitioners,

"Getting feedback from fresh pairs of eyes is invaluable. The insights the students bring invariably make me think and reassess."

"You realize what are the challenges and the opportunities you haven't notice before, you learn from the experience of other people, you adopt some smart practices"

Business practitioners contributing to learning and teaching have also recognised the opportunity it offers to inspire the next generation to consider responsible business careers. One guest speaker reported:

"I enjoy providing an insight into sustainable procurement as this area of work is not always obvious from the outside. Hopefully, it will provide a little inspiration to a new generation."

This offers a longer-term win-win outcome as students embarking on responsible business careers help businesses close skills gaps whilst earning a higher-than-average salary.

This input can also lead to the adoption of CSR activities that offer real benefit to society as well as the more traditional focus on building reputation. The setting of responsible business objectives and public reporting are growing areas of CSR contribution within the business community that can benefit from the engagement of students. Objectives can be influenced indirectly through guest speakers' discussions with students or directly by delivering a guest session that completes an appraisal objective.

Whether the guest speakers' input is direct or indirect, their smart partnership enables organisations to strengthen their business responsibility by incorporating students' suggestions on improving corporate reputation and embedding academic theory on attracting,

retaining, and motivating employees. This can reduce corporate risk, whilst improving their contribution to society (Keys et al, 2009).

Conclusion

By considering a wider perspective of the impacts of guest speakers a new understanding of their value has emerged. In addition to enabling innovative and inspirational learning and teaching that can effectively engage students in real-world businesses and the skills needed to succeed in them. Being a guest speaker can also benefit the business practitioner and their organisation.

Understanding the viewpoint of the students, obtaining their inputs to improve responsible business practice, and encouraging them to become responsible business professionals can offer value for the guest speaker, in the same way as engagement in real-world learning and development of business skills within a relevant learning environment does for the students. Therefore, using guest speakers within management education can provide a win-win outcome for the guest speaker and students.

Becoming a Guest Speaker

Hopefully, this paper will encourage business practitioners to volunteer as guest speakers at their local business school, where they are likely to be welcome.. At Worcester Business School the process is quick and easy. Simply email the author with details of your preferred topic and any students' inputs you could benefit from to start a discussion.

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