Coursework commentaries 2015–16

CO1108 Information systems: foundations of e-business

Coursework assignment 1 and 2

General remarks

Overall, this course is designed to introduce you to the management of information systems in a commercial context. This includes both direct management and indirect management, as part of a company management team. The course raises and deals with the appreciation of information system issues that may arise internally in a company or externally.

The coursework assignments (CW1 and CW2) provide an opportunity for you to address two information systems scenarios as an 'expert consultant'. The assignment requires you to have read the CO1108 subject guide and the recommended texts as a basis for study. It is expected that to prepare as an 'expert consultant', you will also engage in additional reading and research (library/media-based and internet sources).

Comments on specific questions

Coursework assignment 1

The coursework outlines the following scenario:

You are the IT/IS technology consultant for a global business consultancy company. Your company has been retained to advise a major electronic company (e.g. Samsung/HP) of the importance of competitive advantage and the impact on the organisation of strategic initiatives following the implementation of new IT/IS systems.

Question 1

Discuss what is meant by the concepts of competitive advantage and sustained competitive advantage in the context of information systems.

Overall, the question was well answered with Porter's four generic competitive elements (cost/differentiation/focus on niche/customer and supplier intimacy) being correctly identified and expanded. Only a few answers extended to describing sustained competitive advantage which requires consistent effort to stay ahead with the above elements. Focused research and reading will yield more material from which to build your answers.

Many students expanded Porter's five forces model which was not required. Many students did not relate the competitive elements to IS.

Question 2

Discuss four competitive strategies that the organisation can choose to pursue which might be enabled through the use of information systems.

The question was an opportunity to expand in detail how elements from Q1 could be pursued to achieve competitive advantage; for example, cost savings from staff reduction/product and service differentiation such as Facebook/ customer relationship management. Many students effectively just repeated their answer to Q1. Students should re-read Q1 and Q2 and note that they were looking for definition, and then management application.

Question 3

Discuss what you would consider to be the central organisational factors which will need to be considered by the company in planning for new systems.

The critical concept for expansion here is the term 'organisational factors'. Organisational factors require comment on formal planning, organisational alignment, HR role and impact of change management, and training and communication. Many answers simply focused on the end IS deliverables, and missed the concept of planning.

Question 4

Discuss four reasons why there may be resistance by employees of the organisation to the introduction of the new information system.

The question was generally well answered with focus on change management. Students developed key resistance factors – poor implementation planning; employee fear; management change blockers; and poor management communication. Most answers focused on employee fears as a key point.

As a guide for the future, students should note that the best answers were framed as though they were written by a consultant. Good answers identified a client company and throughout gave real world examples. This demonstrated good business acumen and thinking.

Coursework assignment 2

The coursework outlines the following scenario:

As a consultant from a global IS/IT services company you have been retained by a major organisation to identify, evaluate and make recommendations relating to catastrophic systems failure. (choose an organisation that you are familiar with. i.e. a University/hospital/automobile manufacturer/multi-channel retailer).

Before commenting on the answers to questions it should be noted that you needed to frame answers in the context of an organisation that you were familiar with. Some students answered generically. In doing this they disadvantaged themselves as 'catastrophic failure' varies depending on industry. Generic answers were also typically prone to anecdotal comment.

Question 1

Identify four risks the company faces in the event of a catastrophic systems failure.

Categories of failure include: database security, logistics, manufacturing disruption, critical 'life support' functions, loss of sale and profits, natural disasters, etc. Priority and severity are dependent on the industry. There were many answers that focused on security and hacking, and this became an over-dominant theme. The question required an organisational basis and a straightforward list of key risks. Security/hacking was often developed in too much detail.

Question 2

Evaluate the impact that each of the risks that you have identified in Q1 above might have on the organisation.

Some students duplicated points from Q1. Good answers were able to demonstrate risk/impact; for example, human risk caused by airline/hospital IT system failure, customer data corruption, or compensation claims from service failure. Further to this, the best answers were able to give a broad financial impact of catastrophe, demonstrating personal reading and research. Students had a high degree of freedom here with the identification of catastrophe relevant to the organisation that they selected.

Question 3

Make a set of recommendations to them on how the risks you have identified may be mitigated.

The question is seeking practical applications within the IS area. Good answers directly addressed issues from Q2. Generic answers often focused only on data/hardware backup. Overall, the options are very broad (including backups). Good answers extended thinking both internally and externally, introducing concepts of outsourcing – cloud technology, data farms, customer service functions and developing an audit of current systems and processes to identify potential threats. There were clear opportunities for real examples.

Question 4

Discuss who should be responsible for managing the risk policy for the organisation.

Answers fell into two broad groups. The first group consisted of those who simply stated that risk policy lay with the IS Manager. Secondly, better answers discussed accountability, sharing risk and developing a disaster recovery policy. Hence leadership/sharing responsibility is a key factor in contemporary global companies. In this way, a catastrophe is not the 'fault' of the IS manager. In some cases, very good answers developed a reporting/organisational chart to support their viewpoint.

In summary, for CW2, those students who had researched an organisation or industry sector were able to underpin their answers with real examples and remain focused.

General remarks for CW1 and CW2

It is key for future assignments that as a student, you read any scenarios/ outlines with care to fully understand the nature of the assignment. Look for keywords for overall direction; in this case:

- you are a consultant, an expert
- you are a business professional
- the objectives set out; that is, we are looking for understanding/application of IT and IS
- contemporary industry examples and knowledge of practice are required.

In terms of execution, it is recommended for all questions that you scope out a plan. We recommend the following.

- Try to construct an answer with an introduction, core answer and a summary conclusion.
- Ask yourself, does the plan/response address all parts of the question?
- Avoid unsubstantiated anecdotal statements.
- Make sure you cite your sources correctly in your text, and that you supply a detailed reference section.
- If you find you are duplicating answer content, then you have missed something or misunderstood the questions.