Rice University
Jones Graduate School of Business

MBA@Rice Capstone Assignment #1 – Research & Work Plan
Guidelines and Lessons Learned

OVERVIEW

The purpose of the assignment is to have teams formally plan the research and other work activities for solving your complex, multi-month, detailed project, before getting started on the other assignments. It also provides a good starting point for discussions between a team and their instructor on the project, and how the team is approaching the effort. Recall that teams can submit draft assignments to their instructor prior to the due date for feedback. Finally, it provides information for the teams and the instructors to hold individual team members accountable for their participation.

A template and examples for the plan have been provided on 2RU. The templates provide structure and expectations of requirements for the assignments. However, teams are welcome to add other sections to their plan, as they see fit to better serve their team. For instance, some teams develop detailed project plans anchored to the assignment due dates.

The purpose of this Guidelines and Lessons Learned document is to provide guidelines and lessons learned to teams for developing this assignment, since a class period is not available before its due date. Its structure is based upon the different sections outlined in the assignment.

Terminology – the word 'client' is used throughout the document to describe the entity who is sponsoring your project. This could be a company or a non-profit organization.

OUR UNDERSTANDING AND HYPOTHESES

This section was formally included in the template a few years ago, so some of the more recent examples have this while the older ones do not necessarily. This section is to show your understanding of the basic parameters of the project and demonstrate some critical thinking into the project by developing a list of initial hypotheses for the situation and potential solutions. Basic parameters should include: background, objectives, scope, assumptions, and constraints (as applicable). You can also list the deliverables, though these should exactly match the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th assignments for the course.

PROJECT RESEARCH NEEDS

The Project Research Needs are areas that the team will need to understand in depth to complete the assessment, strategy, and detailed designs for the project. These needs generally fall into categories of internal dimensions of the client, external dimensions of the client's industry or service sector, and client strategy. Thus, a short sample of these are:

- Specific internal characteristics of the client (e.g., financials, marketing plans, etc.)
- Specific external characteristics of the market that the organization is in (e.g., size, dynamics, customer needs, competition, macroeconomic or governmental effects, etc.)
- Client's current strategy, core competencies, mission and vision, etc.

A listing of the specific, detailed analyses that the team will perform as part of the Current-State Assessment is not required for this section. However, the team will want to begin considering these analyses, since they inform the Research Needs. The asynchronous homework for the course's first class will discuss these analyses in more detail, but the team should have enough core knowledge at this point in the program to develop a preliminary list.

Research will be an on-going process throughout the semester as new questions are revealed to the team through the assessment. However, the weeks leading up to the completion of the Current-State Assessment are perhaps the most intense research time during the semester. Thus, this section provides a foundation for planning and executing your research activities during this time period, as well as subsequent time periods, as necessary.

INFORMATION/DATA REQUEST FOR THE CLIENT

This section of the plan consolidates the team's additional information and data request for the client and links these requests to the team's Project Research Needs. The team should also prioritize their information/data requests into specific groups. It is left to the team to come up with its own prioritization schema and define it in the document. One suggestion is to define groups with respect to the criticality/urgency of the need for the data. For instance, highly critical information/data would go in an initial information/data request and other information might be classified as 'nice-to-have' and requested later.

Example:

- Information/Data Requested: "Detailed Fundraising Data (2016-2019)"
- Research Need Addressed or Anticipated Use: "Required for analyses of current fundraising strategies & results"

OTHER RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

The team will also define other research activities beyond information/data requests to fully address the Project Research Needs. Potential research activities for consideration include, but are not limited to:

- Basic research into a specific area regarding the project (note: consider contacting Peggy Shaw and her team in the BIC to see how they can support the team)
- Market surveys
- Interviews with client executives and functional leaders
- Interviews with Board members
- Interviews with customers
- Site visits and other observation activities (if possible)
- Interviews with subject matter experts for the industry, service sector, or functional areas

The team should also prioritize their other research activities into specific groups. It is left to the team to come up with its own prioritization schema and define it in the document. One suggestion is to define groups with respect to the criticality/urgency of the need for the activity. Some activities might be done after the completion of the second assignment and some activities are in the critical path for getting assignment #2 completed.

CURRENT-STATE ASSESSMENT ANALYSES

The team will also define the analyses that they initially plan to do for their current-state assessment (assignment #2). Examples of potential analyses for your consideration include, but are not limited to:

- SWOT
- Competitive Landscape and Analyses
- Market Segmentation and Targeting

Again, the team should prioritize these analyses in consistent manner as done in the previous two sections.

TEAM MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES

The workload for the capstone course requires active participation of all team members with specific assigned responsibilities for each one. This course cannot be successfully completed with 1-2 team members doing 80-90% of the effort. Past observations of teams that have taken this approach have shown that the 1-2 team members quickly get overloaded, which had a significant negative effect on them, the quality of the assignments, and the experience for everyone. Thus, it's critical to organize the responsibilities at the outset of the course across the team members. Some considerations for the teams with respect to responsibilities include:

- The Team Lead will be the team's primary point of contact for communication with the team for the Capstone instructor. Note that this does not, in any way, preclude communication between other team members and the instructor. However, it is intended to provide a team focal point for the instructor to communicate more easily with the team.
- Assignment Lead(s) – This is a significant responsibility for an individual to coordinate team member activities and inputs, as well as assuring document consistency and quality, for each assignment. Some teams have the Team Lead assume this role, but then balance this against expectations for quantity of content development for that person. Other teams will rotate this responsibility to different team members for different assignments (not necessarily around to all team members) and then adjust their content development workload on those assignments.
- Some teams have assigned ~2-3 team members to the role of 'strategy' lead. These individuals will typically take the lead on assignment #3 (Strategy). However, the role is active throughout the course by providing the overall thought-leadership to the team that consistently maintains a 'big-picture' view and incorporates functional, organization, and service sector perspectives. Often, the Team Lead will be one of these individuals; however, that is not a requirement for success.
- Other responsibilities:
  - Functional responsibilities (finance, marketing & public relations, operations, etc.) should be assigned to 1-2 team members per function. This allows them to concentrate on these specific areas throughout the course and is especially helpful for assignments #2 and #4. It also leverages team members' specific expertise.
  - Given that understanding the client's industry or service sector (e.g., healthcare) is important throughout the course, it is helpful to have ~2-3 team members focused on this. Team members with background in the area are a natural fit for this and can provide that perspective. If no team members have that background, then several team members will have to take the lead throughout the course in this area and do the research and become the team's "experts" and provide that perspective. This role includes understanding

overall industry or service sector size, dynamics, major players, and other external influences (e.g., government agencies).

- There are some other responsibilities that may also be considered, such as designating someone other than the team lead to be the main client liaison, quality control, etc.

Finally, it is typical that most team members carry multiple responsibilities from the lists shown above, depending on the scale of the responsibilities.

TEAM MEMBER COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Each team member should think carefully about what they want to learn from their capstone course experience. This is a relatively low risk opportunity to build or enhance capabilities that could be valuable to each of your careers/lives in the future. Use the list of learning opportunities in the 'MBA@Rice Capstone Course Introduction' materials as a set of examples to spur further thought. In this section of the plan, do not list the course's core learning opportunities – these will be consistent across all team members. However, list customized objectives for each team member. Also, use this as an opportunity to discuss this amongst the team and how the team can help each individual realize these objectives over the semester. The course instructors will also use these lists to help support the team members' realization of these objectives.

PROJECT RISK ANALYSIS AND MITIGATION STRATEGY

Project risks are things that could hinder the team's ability to successfully complete all of the assignments on-time in the course. Note that *these are not risks associated with the recommended strategies and detailed plans that you will develop* as part of the course; that risk analysis will be performed as part of assignment #4. The team should consider prioritizing the project risks by using the impact and probability dimensions specified in the template with largest risks at the top.

- Areas of risk for consideration include, but are not limited to:
  - Client risks (e.g., lack of detailed data, slow responsiveness, etc.)
  - Team member risks (e.g., professional commitments such as major overseas trips, personal commitments such as paternity/maternity leaves, etc.)
  - Schedule or team assignment execution risks
  - Team expertise level risks (e.g., low level of healthcare experience on a healthcare-related project)
- Example:
  - Risk: Slow responsiveness of the client to questions or requests.
  - Mitigation Strategy: Allow reasonable time for client to respond by building buffer into your timelines and establish an issue escalation approach with your instructor at the beginning of the course.