Remote Delivery of MBA Management Consulting Projects for Corporate Sponsors: A Pivotal Twelve Months During the 2020-21 Global Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The experience of delivering remotely MBA management consulting projects sponsored by major corporations is described, as it evolved during the pandemic in Spring 2020, and continued for over a year into Spring 2021. The traditional experiential learning approach, involving student teams working in-person (both in class and with company personnel), was severely disrupted and had to drastically change to an online experience.

Results show that the pivot to this mode was largely successful, based on positive feedback from all stakeholders (students, company personnel, school administrators, and faculty). Limitations included team difficulties coordinating project tasks effectively and missing out on developing stronger ties with their colleagues and with the companies.

As conditions evolve, such experiential learning courses will need to adapt accordingly, using technology and new ways of managing individual and team tasks. It is also expected, that these experiences will possibly generate hybrid approaches to learning, involving combinations of in-person and online elements, that will result in even better models of teaching and learning.

Keywords: Experiential Learning; External Sponsored Projects; MBA Teams;

Introduction

Client-based experiential learning projects are widely offered in the majority of business schools. It is estimated that 92% of business schools use such projects in full-time MBA programs, 70% in part-time MBA programs, and 62% in executive MBA programs (MBA Roundtable, 2016).

Instruction of such client-based experiential learning projects courses faced a unique challenge in 2020-2021. The challenge was to pivot to the effective delivery of such courses remotely beginning in Spring 2020. The sudden change from the normal in-person delivery was due to the global pandemic necessitating universities to move to remote delivery of all graduate and undergraduate courses beginning in Spring 2020, and continuing into Spring 2021 and possibly beyond. The experience during this period at The Paul Merage School of Business, University of California, Irvine will be the focus of this paper, yet findings would apply to most such experiential learning programs/courses.

Remote delivery presented a significant challenge for such a projects-based course at UC Irvine because of its nature, namely the hands-on experience of MBA and other graduate students working on strategic management projects, sponsored by major corporations. The course traditionally defined as a "flipped classroom" (meaning that it merges business/management theory and practice by providing students the opportunity/ability to learn and practice by themselves), has included in-class sessions, team breakouts/work at school and elsewhere, in-person meetings with the sponsoring companies, plus secondary and primary research designed to address project topics.

Challenges with the online format were expected to relate to important project management activities such as teams coordinating work tasks, conducting research, holding regular project status meetings, and generating reports for the current and cumulative project periods (Wysocki, R.K. 2009). Many of these activities would need to be conducted remotely during the pandemic.

Would this format work? Would the student experience be less, compared to the traditional delivery? Would remote research activities be effective? Would the companies receive less value from the projects, due to limitations of research methodologies? Would students experience fewer career opportunities because of limited networking?

The purpose of this paper, beginning with the Spring Quarter 2020, is to capture what worked and what did not, and to document lessons learned. In a sense, this was action research geared towards addressing the questions posed above (plus other key ones that came up along the way). The timeframe of the initial experience was January-June 2020.

The paper first covers key events at the university and the School of Business, from the beginning of the crisis, roughly February 2020, until the beginning of the Spring

quarter in late March 2020. This includes University policies and directives, and the resulting pivoting to remote delivery of the course.

For the same period, the paper also covers preparation activities at the course level, including technology and equipment, information to students and companies, plus related instructor training and learning. The paper then describes additional experiences during Summer and Fall 2020, extending into March 2021.

The objective is to document and analyze course experiences continuing into Spring 2021, concluding with deliverables to companies. And to offer an overall assessment, with feedback from all stakeholders, including students, faculty, program officers, sponsoring company executives, and industry professionals.

Projects during this period were sponsored by major corporations such as Johnson & Johnson, Medtronic, SAP, Southern California Edison, Cal/Amp, Danaher, Masimo, Experian, and Western Digital Corporation.

The goal of this action research is to also outline and discuss key findings, and possibly suggest future improvements for experiential learning-oriented programs/courses.

The 2020-21 Virus Pandemic-Impact and Response at the University and Business School levels

As a reference, The University of California, Irvine is a public research university, one of the 10 campuses in the University of California system. UC Irvine offers 87 undergraduate degrees and 129 graduate and professional degrees, is classified as a Research I university and is a member of the Association of American Universities (see NOTE 1).

The Paul Merage School of Business at UC Irvine offers MBA programs – plus Ph.D., specialty masters, and undergraduate business degrees, and has over 1,000 students enrolled in master's programs. The school consistently ranks among the top 5% of all AACSB-accredited programs. Importantly, for the past three years, and has redefined its brand identity to a "Leadership for a Digitally Driven World" and focuses on management agility and savvy to succeed in the face of disruption challenges (see NOTE 2).

It was business as usual on campus in mid-February 2020: "*We are now halfway through the Winter Quarter, and the campus is buzzing with activity*". The crisis was felt in late February at the University, as expressed in messages to the campus community by the Provost and Chancellor, initially suggesting best practices to stay well, followed in early March by information that since mid-January, a dedicated team on campus had engaged daily in virus preparedness activities.

Additional messages from the University and the School of Business informed everyone that certain decisions had been made, including canceling travel and student international residential trips. As of March 8, 2020, the information provided suggested that the campus continued to remain open and was operating normally. Then on March 10,

and not surprisingly, it was announced that the Winter Quarter Final exams the following week would be administered remotely and that for the Spring quarter the University will be transitioning to a remote learning mode. It was also announced on March 27, that summer courses would be delivered only with remote instruction.

Most all academic and administrative personnel were directed to work from home (WFH) until further notice.

Since then, multiple daily emails and strategic communications came out from the University and the School of Business administration, addressing the status of the virus on campus and the community, status and policies regarding research activities, canceling of gatherings and events, travel, housing, academic instruction resources, canceling of traditional commencement activities, closure of facilities, financial systems, policy changes for libraries, and more. Also, surveys were conducted on teaching preparedness. And, during this time, a constant stream of information with technical assistance, teaching tutorials, and guides were communicated.

Pivoting of the Experiential Learning Course to Respond to the University and Business School Directives

Importantly, one of the key tools that are used by the University is Canvas, the digital learning management platform. Using the Announcements feature of Canvas on March 12, the 30 graduate students already registered for Spring, were informed that the course would be delivered remotely.

Interestingly, the Winter projects were due to conclude with final presentations at the offices of the sponsoring companies, on March 13 and 20. Yet, the project teams were informed by the companies that even though the schedule remained the same, the meetings were to be delivered via video conferencing. The teams responded and held these meetings as requested, with very good results. The technology worked, there was good interaction with the company teams, the attendance was excellent (in a couple of the meetings, ten executives participated plus ten team members and faculty), and the feedback all around was very positive. Of course, these student teams had worked in person with the company for ten weeks already, so they knew each other. Would the result be as good if the projects were conducted entirely in a remote format? Hopefully, the Spring project outcomes would provide answers!

Another key development around that time, was that one of the companies sponsoring a Spring project decided to postpone its project since they did not feel they could support the student team remotely, due mainly to the project topic that was about the alignment of stakeholders with the Corporate Mission, and requiring close personal interaction, maybe even shadowing of students and stakeholders. This was announced to the students, while at the same time confirming the other three companies would proceed online with the Spring projects.

The impact of this change was to reduce course enrollment and cap it at 21 students, a level appropriate for three project teams. This was accomplished by asking students who were not graduating in June 2020, to postpone taking the course until the following academic year. This marked the first time in 18 years for this course, that not all students who wanted to take it could be accommodated. Historical course metrics are included in NOTE 3.

Preparing for Remote Delivery of Course in Spring Quarter 2020

Preparations for remote delivery and digital learning and teaching included actions such as inserts in the course syllabus on Canvas of tech requirement policies and support, plus overarching University policies and course policies. In addition, the University inserted information, and links to websites, on every Canvas course home page, to prepare students with technical help resources, a remote learning student guide, and a "learn anywhere" website.

Another preparation for the instructor involved learning about the Zoom video conferencing platform, including attending webinars, communicating with School digital learning and IT computing support experts, testing mobile, desktop, and other equipment, and holding practice sessions with family and friends to ensure preparedness.

In a departure from the traditional delivery of the experiential learning Merage Consulting Projects course, most all Canvas files of course materials were set up from the start, to allow students full visibility, if they had time to study ahead, plus the project team rosters were also published. This was done to resolve any student questions or issues prior to the first class session, and to reduce communication challenges with individual students on Zoom, while the class was going on. And it proved to be a good decision since such issues came up early on and were resolved.

Overall, it is estimated that it took at least 100 hours of extra work for the instructor to pivot and prepare the course for remote delivery from the time of the School announcement on March 10 to the first class on April 1, 2020.

Spring 2020 Consulting Projects Class Sessions (Remote Delivery)

Remote delivery meant that all class sessions, team meetings, guest speakers, primary/secondary research, and all meetings with the companies, were conducted online, in an asynchronous format.

Key takeaways from all these sessions, interactions, and other project activities during the eleven weeks of the Spring 2020 course are as follows (April 1-June 8):

Delivery via Canvas and Zoom: All the Zoom class sessions worked well, and problems were only minor, namely sharing large PowerPoint files that took a few tries to become visible to the students. All other aspects also worked well: video, audio, chat, students voicing questions, and student teams meeting in breakout rooms with the instructor visiting one room at a time. Overall, the technology worked very well.

Canvas Assignments: All assignments and announcements via Canvas were effective ways to communicate and post the project documents. Assignments for each project team included the development of a Statement of Work, the conceptual approach to each project (along with an "issue tree"), drafts of the mid-project and final deliverables, as well as peer reviews, and project hours.

Attendance and Participation: Student attendance was nearly perfect, possibly reflecting the work from home situation, plus no travel for students who were employed. This was also the case with the company personnel that the teams worked with, and with those, the teams reached out for research purposes (interviews, focus groups, and surveys).

Participation during each session was active via Zoom chat and live questions, with the instructor calling on each of the students.

The student engagement and participation were at least on par with past in-person class sessions for this course, possibly even higher. And access to company personnel was even better than in past.

General Sessions: Each week's class was conducted in two parts: a general session, followed by team breakout meetings. The general session, with all students connected via Zoom, generally lasted 90 minutes.

During this time, the instructor reviewed files pre-posted on Canvas, and the teams provided project updates. Other times during the general session, the School's Research Librarian conducted a workshop focused on research sites for each project team, sharing via live internet, a variety of recommended sources. Also, in class, a consultant from a major management consulting firm interacted remotely with the teams on their projects, on industry trends, and on careers in consulting.

Breakout Rooms: At the end of each general session, a 15-minute break took place, which allowed the instructor time to assign each student to a project breakout room, where the teams worked on their projects for another 90 minutes. Project teams in the Zoom breakout rooms organized themselves, framed project problem statements and conceptual frameworks, determining research methodologies, developed project schedules, allocated individual tasks, coordinated communications with the company project sponsors, and worked on deliverables. The instructor was able to visit each room separately and interact with each team.

Team remote activities outside of class sessions: Key accomplishments for the teams included, contacting their companies and scheduling meetings, executing company non-disclosure agreements, conducting meetings with the companies online (project kick-off, mid-project review, final presentation), conducting online weekly meetings with the companies, plus holding Zoom team meetings outside of class. These meetings used a variety of conferencing platforms: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, Ring Central, etc.

Other accomplishments for the teams included doing secondary research, conducting interviews, and participating in online focus groups for primary research.

Faculty Support of Project Teams: Each team, in addition to the course instructor, was assigned a faculty technical advisor, knowledgeable on the topic and/or industry. These advisors assisted the teams as resources during the projects, on an as-needed basis. This is an element of the course that was introduced years ago and has proven to be of valuable assistance to the student teams. The experience of the faculty advisors with remote delivery was positive, and if anything, they seemed to be even more flexible and available online to the teams.

Student Feedback Surveys: Periodically, each student was asked to respond to a class mini-survey posted on Qualtrics.com and to provide feedback on: the remote delivery general sessions and breakout sessions, the team's ability to conduct needed project research, the belief about providing value to the company, the online meetings with the companies, the feeling of belonging to a team, the value of outside speakers, the remote delivery versus the in-person course, and the overall satisfaction with the experience. Overall, student feedback was quite positive.

Survey results showed that students rated the Zoom general session and the breakout session highly (mean points of 95 and 90 respectively out of 100). A couple of their comments: "Zoom is great! Encourage video use during class to get better acquainted."

The project teams' belief in their ability to conduct needed research online was also high: a mean of 90 out of 100. And their belief in delivering value to their company grew from 86 early-on to 93 at the end (out of 100). Students rated the productiveness of the online meetings with the companies at a mean rating of 85 (out of 100). The feeling of belonging to the team, given the online nature of all activities, was rated at a mean of 86 (out of 100).

General comments indicated difficulties interacting, with quieter team members not getting to voice their views and challenges in settling teams' work rhythm. Yet, other comments were very positive, "everything moving fluidly." They also rated highly outside speakers, 91 out of 100. Suggesting more consulting industry visitors.

Survey results indicate student overall satisfaction for the course is high, despite the remote delivery, with a mean rating of 90 (out of 100). "This class is one of the most impacted by COVID 19 since it requires a lot of teamwork. I am impressed by the instructor's ability to make this consulting project efficient despite the difficulty." Yet, they all looked forward to meeting their teammates and sponsors in person down the road!

Furthermore, in the official Scholl course evaluation, the Spring 2020 course and instructor were rated very highly by the students, even slightly higher than in the previous in-person deliveries of the same course.

Company Executives' Feedback

Overall, company Spring 2020 project sponsors indicated great satisfaction with the value received from the teams' work. Their comments suggested that the work done, final deliverables, and collaboration experience did not suffer much at all because of the remote delivery. Their focus was on the results: "outstanding presentation, you leveraged the latest tools in product management, proud of the work you did," "fantastic report/presentation, moving forward we will execute a good part of your recommendations, very valuable for us," "these are great suggestions, eye-opening your sharing best practices, we will study in detail the material."

If there was one general regret, it was that the executives felt the remote delivery did not allow them to get to know the students in person and to celebrate with them after the projects.

The Summer and Fall 2020 Experiential Learning/Consulting Projects Courses

As was indicated previously, changing the Spring 2020 course to a remote delivery experience, was very positive for all, including the corporate project sponsors, despite the quick pivot in March. It truly became an experiential learning opportunity in every way!

Yet, would that experience remain positive as the course was offered remotely again in Summer and Fall 2020, with different project teams, and additional companies sponsoring the projects? The following were the findings and takeaways.

In Summer 2020, and to assist students who may have not been able to obtain internships, the option of doing remotely an Experiential Learning project was offered.

A team of eight MBAs worked on this management consulting project. An additional group of 11 MBAs, worked remotely on company internships, and independent studies. Offering such a summer projects course was done only one other time in eighteen years at the school, in 2009, during the global financial crisis, due to the lack of internships for MBAs.

Student course evaluations were again very positive. And on par with previous in-person projects courses. Overall, the remote delivery experience continued to work well and supported initial findings.

Company feedback was also very positive: "we appreciate your insights and thoughts; your recommendations will generate several internal debates and decisions." "Concerning working with the MBA team, it was straightforward to communicate via the Zoom platform. We find many of these tools to be quite intuitive and similar in their layout. Also, the ability to see each other via video certainly helps make a more personal connection.

The Fall course was conducted via Canvas and Zoom, in a remote delivery format as was the Spring and Summer 2020 project courses, involving thirty-six students, and five project teams. Remote delivery included all class sessions,

team meetings, guest speakers, primary/secondary research, and all meetings with the companies.

Overall, the experience remained very positive for all, including for the students and the corporate project sponsors. Technology continued to work very well, and the teams adapted quickly to companies' use of different communication platforms. Student attendance was better than with the traditional delivery, and class participation was on par, plus it was quite possible to attract professionals from the consulting industry to visit class sessions.

Students, via course evaluations, rated the experience as excellent, and at least on-par with prior in-person offerings of the course.

It is also worth noting that many Spring, Summer, and Fall 2020 students attended class, conducted research, and participated in meetings, from a variety of domestic and international locations away from campus.

Despite that, attendance, participation, and effectiveness remained high.

Winter 2021

The Winter 2021 course was conducted via Canvas and Zoom, in a remote synchronous delivery format, the same as for the Fall, Summer, and Spring 2020 projects courses.

This included class sessions, team meetings/breakout sessions in class and separately, guest speakers, primary/secondary research, and all meetings with the companies. For the students, this meant 30+ virtual sessions/meetings, and for the instructor 35-40 virtual sessions/meetings.

Despite a large number of virtual meetings/sessions, the experience continued to be valuable for all, including students and corporate project sponsors.

Technology continued to work very well, and the teams adapted quickly to companies' use of different conferencing systems. The final project deliverables did not suffer, as both primary research (interviews, surveys), and secondary research, were accomplished.

Student attendance remained better than with the traditional delivery, and class participation was on par, plus, it was again relatively easy to attract professionals from the consulting industry to visit the class.

Company feedback continued to be quite positive: "Would have loved to meet and onboard the students in person, as well as receive the final presentation in person, but we made the best of the situation and used technology to keep the communication alive and frequent."

Students again were positive about the experience: "Despite the fact the course was run online, I did not feel that any aspect of the class experience was compromised, and the virtual nature allowed for more diverse projects with companies and business units that otherwise would have difficult to work with given their lack of proximity to the campus." "Great course! This should be a highly recommended course for all students, especially for those in

their last year of study so that they can bring all the skills and knowledge that they've learned in the MBA program to work on an actual project with real companies."

Yet, a few students expressed increasing frustration with the lack of in-person experience at the school:

Many experiences severe fatigue, balancing the online school classes with online work for their jobs. "I would not recommend this course being available in a virtual setting. "

Additional student feedback on the remote delivery of 2020-2021 projects is in Appendix.

Work from Home and the Digital Workplace

Much has been published recently about working remotely, and the following are a few key trends that can also relate to academic settings and the remote delivery of MBA projects for corporate clients.

With the future of work changing, the digital workplace has grown in importance. Responding to COVID-19, tens of thousands of companies around the world have adopted work-from-home policies. The trend toward telecommuting was already underway before the coronavirus hit, but the trend skyrocketed as the virus spread. In the wake of COVID-19, enterprises are now figuring out their digital workplace strategies and how to adapt to a hybrid workplace. (Avasant's Digital Workplace Services 2020 RadarView™ report).

"Progressive companies that already embraced the idea of digital workplaces were able to respond better to the pandemic," said Avasant Research Leader Shwetank Saini. "Those who were behind the curve faced many challenges responding to these challenging times. As businesses gradually move forward, they need to evaluate where they are in the maturity curve. The focus should be on adopting cloud-based models, in conjunction with other technologies to enable better ways of working."

Key findings from the report include:

1. Businesses should enable remote working in the short-term and long-term.

2. User experience and productivity are at the center of new workplace designs.

3. Cloud as a strategic and foundational enabler of digital workplaces.

4. A revamping of IT support services is needed in the era of remote work.

The McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) estimates that more than 20 percent of the global workforce (most of them in high-skilled jobs in sectors such as finance, insurance, and IT) could work the majority of its time away from the office and be just as effective. (The Next Normal: Business Trends for 2021 | McKinsey).

The future of work arrives ahead of schedule: before the COVID-19 crisis, the idea of remote working was in the air but not proceeding very far or fast. But the pandemic changed that, with tens of millions of people transitioning to working from home, essentially overnight, in a wide range of industries.

There are two important challenges related to the transition to working away from the office. One is to decide the role of the office itself, which is the traditional center for creating the culture and a sense of belonging. The other challenge has to do with adapting the workforce to the requirements of automation, digitization, and other technologies.

Evidence shows that the benefits of reskilling current staff, rather than letting them go and then finding new people, typically cost less and bring benefits that outweigh the costs. Investing in employees can also foster loyalty, customer satisfaction, and positive brand perception.

General feedback from project-sponsoring executives regarding working remotely (WFH):

Positives

- Working remotely has worked out overall with some minor drawbacks. There are many benefits including saving time on commuting, equalizing the playing field between in-person and off-site participants
- For the most part, the transition from working and collaborating in-person to working via a plethora of Zoom and Skype calls was seamless
- Found creative ways to make virtual meetings and events more engaging than they had been in the past
- More time-efficient. I have been able to join meetings for only the pertinent parts
- Greater ability to multi-task and to be in two or more places at once as needed
- Ability to attend more international meetings/conferences where time for travel and cost are no longer barriers
- Cost-effective meetings (no meeting room rental cost, no travel cost, no meal cost)
- Feel just as efficient working from home, to focus on work, as there are fewer interruptions by colleagues
- Concerning working with my colleagues, it has been quite smooth. Has also helped us to collaborate a little more effectively by using technology

Negatives

- Feeling overworked at times due to blurred lines of separation between work and home.
- There is something about being part of a co-located team that does have its benefits and builds that trust and common team goal
- Not as easy to build relationships with new contacts
- Some suppliers are not as timely or productive without in-person follow up or hands-on demonstration
- The drawbacks include limited team-building capacity, lack of attention during meetings, and inability to read body language
- Starting a new job remotely is not ideal, but understandable given the circumstances. It's harder to get to know and open up to people virtually

- Feels more sedentary working from home unless I force myself to exercise
- Less social atmosphere, inability to connect with colleagues, and no team building events
- Takes a little longer to get things done, as you cannot have an impromptu conversation in the hallway and often have to wait for a meeting to get questions answered
- in general, our teams are feeling the 'meeting fatigue' where several hours are spent on virtual meetings with little time allocated to strategic thinking and follow-ups
- Everyday communication and relationship-building feel a bit strained.

General Conclusions

Experiential learning through client-based management consulting projects requires an integrated, holistic approach that examines the issues from different business perspectives, as well as from different functional disciplines. Such fieldwork is an excellent mechanism for students to improve research abilities and critical thinking skills (Cook, 2006).

Compared to this traditional experiential learning model, the new process of remotely delivering graduate business consulting projects for external organizations worked quite well. Both the student teams and the sponsoring executives expressed a high level of satisfaction with the value that was generated from the online research and results. And even though the approach was not as hands-on as before, this project-based experience still offers students the opportunity to work on technical and managerial skills and is a" sticky" way of learning (Pilafidis, 2008).

Peer evaluations from each student supported this conclusion, as did the student course evaluations, which were higher and above School averages, than those for the same course delivered traditionally, in-person, the previous few Quarters.

And clearly, feedback from the sponsoring executives was very positive as well, expressing deep satisfaction with the value received. One of the companies that sponsored a Spring 2020 project, had also sponsored a similar project in Winter 2020 (which was conducted primarily in person). Company feedback suggested a very similar level of high satisfaction with the results, while the students in Spring evaluated the course higher than in Winter.

Regarding project research activities, such as structured interviews and secondary research methods, all worked well. Yet, the teams did not conduct as many, or in-depth focus groups or surveys, for these projects, so this remains to be seen how effectively such research can be accomplished purely online by student project teams.

As to other course metrics, such as attendance and class participation, the remote delivery seemed to produce even higher results than the traditional delivery. Class attendance, including online class sessions and online formal

meetings with company personnel, was very high at 98.9%. And class participation also seemed at least on par, with the chat function on Zoom, and the use of the video function by most students.

Another important finding was that selection of class guest speakers for a remote delivery course, is enhanced by an expanded pool and increased availability of experts to participate, resulting in a richer experience for all.

And the projects hours that the teams generated were generally higher than in previous in-person delivery of the course: 110 hours per student average, versus 82 hours.

Finally, we can conclude that technology works well in support of remote delivery, and even though the initial learning curve for instructors is daunting, it does get a lot better quickly, especially with the support of School and University specialists and related tutorials. This course involved only synchronous delivery, yet, there is no reason to expect asynchronous or hybrid deliveries to be any less effective.

In the past, securing quality projects was the greatest challenge (MBA Roundtable, 2016), but now it seems the delivery method will also become an important challenge.

Yet, it was also found that the remote delivery experience of such corporate-sponsored MBA projects, did eventually create fatigue for all involved, plus it was also realized that important benefits of experiential learning were compromised. Namely, teamwork and coordination became more challenging, and personal connections among team members and with company sponsors were compromised.

Specific key issues that will need to be addressed include, the remote-delivery learning curves of faculty, students, and company personnel, and, significantly, the team members' ability to coordinate work tasks among themselves, to conduct online teamwork meetings (other than those scheduled for class or client updates), to conduct primary research, and to effectively debate and discuss ideas, priorities, and decisions. More attention to these project management issues will be required in the future.

At the same time the traditional practices of careful project screening, careful attention to team formation and team-building, oversight of each project team by seasoned faculty through guidance without interference, and with regular reviews of the project by the faculty and the client, will remain exceedingly important (Culver, 1998).

As trends in the digitization of the workplace are continuing to evolve with, and work-from-home becoming at least a component of the workplace for a significant segment of working professionals, project work will increasingly require flexible approaches as to how individuals and teams will be effective, involving technology, managerial mechanisms, and staff reskilling.

Moving forward, most experiential learning projects courses will likely revert to in-person delivery, yet we now know that can also be offered effectively online, and possibly in a hybrid format (a combination of remote plus in-person delivery). The lessons learned so far will certainly help, yet, more needs to be explored on how best student project teams can self-manage online. And as work from home (WFH) company policies evolve, the ways student teams and company internal teams collaborate on projects will be adjusting with experience and learning.

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NOTE 1

The University of California, Irvine is a public research university in Irvine, California. It is one of the 10 campuses in the University of California system. UC Irvine offers 87 undergraduate degrees and 129 graduate and professional degrees. The university is classified as a Research I university, and became a member of the Association of American Universities in 1996; the youngest university to hold membership. It is considered to be one of the "Public Ivies," meaning that it is among those publicly funded universities thought to provide a quality of education comparable to that of the Ivy League. https://uci.edu/

NOTE 2

Located in the heart of Orange County's "Tech Coast, "the UCI/Merage School is surrounded by a network of cutting-edge businesses in an evolving ecosystem of tech firms including Amazon, Google, and Western Digital, plus digitally-savvy firms including Capital Group, Disney, Experian, Hyundai, Pacific Life, and Taco Bell. It is in this environment that the Merage School prepares students for the disruptive technology forces they will encounter as future business leaders

The School has completely reframed its curricula to give students the high-caliber, holistic preparation they need to become effective leaders in a digitally-driven world. Experience-based decision-making skills are integrated into the curriculum with data-driven decision-making at the forefront. Experiential learning components continue to provide real-world education, allowing teams of students to immerse themselves invaluable projects with area companies. https://merage.uci.edu/index.html

NOTE 3

In the Experiential Learning Merage Consulting Projects program, since the Fall of 2002, 207 strategic management projects have been completed (for 109 different organizations) with 207 teams. In total, 1,239 graduate students have participated, most of them from such programs as Full-Time MBA, Fully-Employed MBA, Executive MBA, Engineering Management, and Biotechnology Management.

A total of 102,319 graduate student hours have been invested in these projects, averaging 6 students 494 hours per team, and 83 hours per student.

APPENDIX

Additional Course Feedback from Spring 2020 students:

How has working remotely with the project teams been this year?

Working remotely with the project team members seems to be smoother than I expected. Probably it is because everyone is tech savvy. Everyone seems to be more flexible when it comes to meeting schedules.

I certainly wish I could have gone to the company and get to know other colleagues, which could have promoted relationships better.

What have been the key positives and negatives of your 2020 remote consulting projects experience?

Positives:

- Everyone seems to be extra sympathetic and more understanding at work since we are all in the same boat facing this unprecedented pandemic
- People are more receptive to calling/video conferencing when it comes to networking in general
- Opportunities to meet many colleagues across the globe, including senior managers

Negatives:

- Work burnout is easy because we sit in front of the laptop with back-to-back meetings
- Lack of exercise due to lack of facilities like fitness center – feeling imbalanced with lots of sitting in front of the laptop
- Lack of social life with classmates, and lack of live events that provide great opportunities for learning and networking
- Overall, working remotely went well, though I did miss the in-person interaction with clients and classmates.
- I did find that I was able to get better feedback on our project's progress in the in-person class format, as it was easier to follow team updates and presentations.
- Visiting the company in-person facilitated brainstorming sessions and afforded the opportunity to better read the clients and their needs.   Not with remote delivery.

Additional Course Feedback from Summer/Fall 2020, and Winter 2021 students:

Positives:

From an internal team standpoint, I believe that there have been some collaborations that have been missed due to the need to divide the work. From an external sense, however I feel as if there has been more interaction with the client on a more consistent basis since quick check ins can be done and also potential new lines of communication have been opened.

The remote work experience would help students prepare for the new work environment in their future workplaces as many of the traditional office work are gradually shifting toward remote, working from home styles, and this trend was greatly accelerated by COVID. I would not be surprised if in the future, many of the jobs would become 100% remote in nature.

The remote consulting project experience is useful in a sense that we can easily meet for 30 minutes to 1 hour, assign work to each team members, and then break off to perform our assigned tasks in our own pace, where as in-person work would normally dictate that we meet and work together for a prolonged period of time (usually 2 hours or more) as it would be a bigger hassle to get everyone to physically meet in one place, only to spend 30 minutes outlining tasks. Since everyone have different work ethic and procedure, this flexibility provided freedom to accommodate everyone equally, which takes a lot of pressure off everyone.

For the consulting projects working remotely was surprisingly convenient. Meeting with teams as well as the client seemed just a little easier because it was all virtual and did not involve any commute or in person setups for anyone in our team or theirs. Easier to schedule calls and meet for few minutes with peers and project teams as we all are having that 10-15 min time on our calendar. It's been easier to talk to customers as well as we are able to schedule interviews in short notice.

Ease of setting up meetings with the project team and company contacts
My experience of working on the project was great. Even though it was remote, I was able to get constant response from the company, they were being very responsive.
Overall, I would have to say that working remotely with project teams has been surprisingly smooth.
Academically, this forced everyone to become more technologically literate and become more digitized.

Negatives:
There are limited defined roles and skillsets during the projects. The electronic communication can sometimes make this more difficult.

Information sharing has been an issue with remote work.

Missing the crucial brainstorming sessions, we used to have in person.

Presenting the final project at the company office would have been more meaningful.

The team could not connect personally as much as we would have in-person.

Since the team was not able to meet in person, some of the team members were demotivated.

Also, not meeting in person created a lot of miscommunications and confusion.

There was difficulty in coordinating the work with the team members and preparing for presentations.

I would not recommend this course being available in a virtual setting.

Professor Bio

Professor Emile Pilafidis teaches Experiential Learning, and Global Business courses at the University of California, Irvine, the Paul Merage School of Business, in the Full-Time MBA, Fully Employed MBA, Executive MBA, Master in Innovation and Entrepreneurship, and the Undergraduate Business Administration programs. He advises the UCI Chapter of 180Degrees Consulting, a global social impact consultancy, and the UCI Ph.D. student consulting club.

Dr. Pilafidis has conducted over 200 consulting assignments for major corporations, guiding MBA student teams on strategic issues, as well as other consulting engagements.

He also has been affiliated with the Peter F. Drucker and Masatoshi Ito Graduate School of Management at the Claremont Graduate University, and with the School of Global Policy & Strategy at the University of California, San Diego, where he has taught Strategy, International Management, and Management Consulting MBA courses. Professor Pilafidis has also taught MBA management courses overseas, in Asia and Europe.

He earned his BS in Engineering Physics at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, his MS in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Cincinnati, his MBA in International Management also at the University of Cincinnati, and his PhD in Executive/Strategic Management at the Peter F. Drucker Graduate School of Management, Claremont Graduate University.

He is an experienced executive, having served with three multinational firms in the US and overseas, in engineering, business planning, operations, and product management positions, as well as in senior management.