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## **TEAMWORK! USING A CONTRACT TO INCREASE CONTRIBUTIONS AMONG TEAM MEMBERS IN UNDERGRADUATE MIS GROUP PROJECTS**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper describes many of the issues arising in properly assigning credit and assessing contributions to team projects in undergraduate MIS classes. To alleviate this problem, the authors demonstrate the use of a team contract, where guidelines for work are jointly assigned both by the instructor and the team members themselves. The use of this contract has increased the success of teams in the classes where they are used. Future research on the contract and teamwork is described.

**Keywords:** teamwork, contracts, group projects

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The role of academia has been to prepare students for work in society. How better to prepare students than to mimic the roles they may play when they are out of school and performing in the real world? Schools and Colleges of Business have taken on the role of incorporating group work into the classroom, with the expectation that students learn the roles and importance of collaboration as well as leadership. But does this necessarily mirror corporate life? Partnerships and 'working together' has become a necessity to keep pace with the everchanging international (aka 'flat') environment. What happens when teamwork fails at the College level? What are we truly teaching these students? This paper discusses the purpose behind having teams; what is expected by having teamwork; and what can be done to increase the mutual understanding of expectations and satisfaction with the team process in the classroom. The concept of the team contract [Crowe and Hill, 2006; Kinser 2007] is presented as a means to solve these problems.

## **II. WHY TEAMS?**

Teams are used in many varieties of society, from the playground to reality TV to sports to the business world. Some tasks and goals are too complex to be accomplished as individuals, thus they require people working together. As people and society are becoming more sophisticated and society is becoming more technically advanced, working as a team makes it easier to accomplish goals [Teamwork, 2005].

Teams are often formed as a means of collaboration among different areas of expertise. Teams may also be formed as a means of accomplishing a larger task in a shorter period of time. This strategy may work, but one also thinks of Fred Brooks' [1975] "mythical man-month" as a

reminder that simply throwing resources at a problem does not ensure a quicker completion time nor higher quality. In academia, teams may be formed to assist students in learning the importance of problem-solving and utilizing their creativity, in contrast to simple memorization and repetition of task. Team assignments that can best imitate the real world with real challenges can prove beneficial when students graduate and are faced with similar challenges in the corporate environment. To achieve maximum success, team members are all expected to contribute in order to all achieve a shared goal. As the size of a team grows, communication amongst team members and well-defined responsibilities of individuals can become major factors in the determination of the success of the team.

Alan Warner [1990] wrote about the need for teams of the future to be “rounded business people, capable of operating and working together in an ever-changing international environment, while maintaining a strong focus on local markets.” Two decades later, globalization and flattening of communications and the work environment became one of complete collaboration. Today’s college students often view work as something that is done, not a place where someone goes, and virtual teams will be a necessity. One can look at open source software projects like Linux and Apache as examples of great creations from teams who have largely never met each other.

### **III. POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH TEAMS (AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS!)**

Teamwork is necessary to ensure students have the ability to function in professional endeavors requiring collaboration. Classroom projects do their best to simulate real-world efforts, but there are a number of differences which add degrees of difficulty. For example, the loyalty to the team or team members may end after the final exam, as opposed to their being an employment situation assumed to be ongoing at the completion of the project. Also, the lack of perceived remuneration for doing the task may lead to decreased commitment. These artifacts are addressed in the problems below.

#### **PROBLEM 1: TEAM BALANCE AND FORMATION (SELF-SELECTED VS. ASSIGNED TEAMS)**

In the classroom, teams are usually formed by self-selection amongst the students or by assignment from the teacher [Crowe and Hill, 2006]. Factors affecting self-selection may include familiarity amongst members from previous classes or social groups, identification of individuals as being particularly strong in a certain area, or sometimes even something as simple as who happens to occupy the seats around them when the project is distributed. When the instructor assigns teams, it may be done with a desire to select teams that are particularly heterogeneous or homogeneous, a desire for teams to be of a certain size (and avoid the “can we have 12 people on our team?” questions), or perhaps just to assure continuity throughout the class. These two methods can force the instructor to sacrifice either social desirability or a concern for strengths and roles to achieve a goal in the other. Self-selected teams seem to be more tolerant of group member(s) who engage in social loafing or free-riding [Michaelsen et al., 2002], a problem addressed later in this section.

#### **SOLUTION 1: PROVIDING BALANCE**

With teamwork comes leadership. How best does one assemble a team? Should this be left to the students? Does one always get to choose their colleagues in a work situation? Much research supports instructor-formed teams as optimal [Fiechtner, 1992; Obaya, 1999], although others disagree [Bacon, 1999]. For instructors to form teams, information may be collected that assesses: ability levels; times to meet outside class; grades in prerequisites [Oakley, 2004]; hobbies; and even optional questions on ethnicity and gender. Instructors might then try to balance the teams with players of different abilities and skillsets. Though complaints may arise about not having the ability to choose their teammates or work solo, assigning teams may more closely mirror the business world in which employees are asked to work together.

Whether self-selected or assigned, using cross-sector heterogeneous teams may be the answer. The London Business School has set the stage with the "Tomorrow's Leaders Research Group" with the idea that companies learn from one another [Preparing tomorrow's leaders, 2003]. From the corporate arena, each company's individual strategies are shared in order to avoid repeating past mistakes. Ideas are shared, thus obtaining a broader perspective. Applying this model to teams would lead to believe that a more diverse team would lead to a stronger team/product.

## **PROBLEM 2: LACK OF TEAM TRAINING**

Most students, with the exception of students returning to school after having worked in corporate life, have had no training in team dynamics and how to obtain the best results from team collaboration. In many academic environments, students are simply put into teams and it is to be 'understood' how the students should function as a team. "The most common trouble with teams is that companies rush out and form the wrong kind for the job. According to Paul Osterman of MIT's Sloan School, when teams are introduced in combination with other organization changes, they work. When they are introduced as an isolated practice, they fail" [Dumaine, 1994]. Dumaine continues by discussing how "teams often get launched in a vacuum, with little or no training or support."

## **SOLUTION 2: PROVIDING TEAM TRAINING**

Providing detailed training on how to work in a team in each and every class is unlikely to be feasible. In addition to the time consumed with team dynamics training, individuals are likely to start tuning out the messages, and those with more or less experience are possibly going to participate at different levels. In the freshman experience, it is recommended that some training in participating in teams be provided to students. A communications class taken as juniors is probably a good place for reinforcement of those skills.

However, it is recommended that, starting on day one of the course, the instructor provides guidance on how team members may interact. Personality profiles may be discussed so that students understand how different 'paths' may then end up with the same result, in addition to simple respect for others and their own objectives. Leadership skills can be somewhat imposed by having the teams 'rotate' this role, be it as a project manager or simply the team spokesman. Team-building exercises in class may assist in the effectiveness of teams [Crowe & Hill 2006], but the effectiveness is unclear when the majority of work takes place outside the classroom. In any case, all team members need to understand the importance of understanding the entire scope of their project and not simply their own area of expertise and contribution.

## **PROBLEM 3: SOCIAL LOAFERS**

Much small group research has been done on social loafing theory [e.g., Latane et al. 1979]. Social loafing theory posits that the larger the group size, the more likely people are to expend less effort on a particular task. Yet, it is the authors' experience that when asked, students are quick to remember times where there was a "slacker" in a group but will never admit to being the slacker. Thus creates the dilemma between subjective and objective measures of levels of work.

In an effort to establish group norms or through a lack of communication (or for a number of non-social reasons), deadlines may get missed. Students take on their roles within their team, but what happens when a team member misses their individual deadlines? What happens to the team? What penalties are imposed on the team member?

In assessing contributions to teamwork, how should it be measured to determine whether or not each individual is doing his or her "fair share"? Is it measured by the hours one puts into a project or by the results? Some team members may be more efficient at obtaining results and some may simply see teamwork as a means of 'sliding by' and thus riding the coat tails of stronger classmates. Students may not be as likely to become a slacker if they understand that penalties due to their inactivity may result, though some research suggests that punishment threats may be outweighed by the effects of social loafing [Kunishima et al. 2004].

### **SOLUTION 3: EVALUATIONS OF TEAM MEMBERS, PLUS...**

Teamwork in academia usually includes some mode of self-evaluation at the end of the project. Contributions, leadership, quality, and effectiveness of team interactions are assessed and given weight by team members and factored in to individual final grades. In many cases assessments are weighted such that a team member be able to do very little on the team project and still pass the course, a result which may not mimic the progression of a person's career in an organization. One solution involves the possibility of students being fired from a team for violating the rules of operation or for not doing his share of the work. Puto [2004] describes such a situation: "If that happens, he has two weeks to convince another team to take him on as a member. If this fails, he has to write a 25-page paper on the value of effective teamwork, and the best grade he can get is a C." Dismissal from the team is perhaps the harshest of penalties, since in most cases, if a student is indeed let go from their current team, they would lack the ability to get hired by another team, leading to the potential of failing the course. Simply understanding this as a possible penalty may defer a potential slacker from not carrying their weight.

Rather than looking at how a team is apt to fail, and trying to determine how to penalize students, we should be looking at how we can avoid or at least minimize this situation if it all possible. The following section details a team contract as a means of describing the protocols that team members agree to and then adhere to throughout the life of their project. This contract shows the methods not just of evaluation but tells the means and methods of how the team will accomplish its goals.

## **IV. EXAMPLE OF A TEAM CONTRACT AND ITS APPLICATION**

Appendix 1 is a team contract that is used by one of the authors in her class. This contract was developed in 2006 in consultation with other professionals in the MIS area, including colleagues of Kinser [2007], as a means of addressing the various issues personally experienced with teams as well as those mentioned by others in the field. This contract has gone through revisions over the past three years and used in classes as small as 7 and as big as 80.

Three levels exist in the contract:

- 1) mandatory rules and consequences that are consistent to all students. These revolve around cheating, respect, and integrity;
- 2) a level that includes mandatory rules, but the team determines the consequences; and
- 3) any additional rules and consequences that the team may determine are necessary.

This contract has evolved over several years and has been used across several sections of introductory-level MIS classes taken by all students in the college of business. Parts 1-3 of the contract remain largely similar to that reported by Kinser [2007], but the contract and its application in the team has since evolved. This contract is used primarily for work performed outside the classroom. Moreover, the contract has also now been applied in situations where the team builds cohesiveness throughout the semester through multiple projects. Firing of malcontents is still a possibility, but fired students now have the opportunity to be rehired if their teams will accept them. Rehired students must also write additional rules of engagement and

zero-tolerance consequences. Teams also use peer assessments with each team submittal, and the assessments include team member contributions, cohesiveness, and suggestions for future improvement.

In the Winter 2009 semester, this contract was used in multiple sections of an introductory-level MIS course (we shall call course M) that had multiple ("M") team projects. The original intent is that the team members are chosen in the beginning and the team stays together for all three projects. A similar contract was also used in multiple sections of another introductory-level MIS course (we shall call course O) in which there was only one ("O") team project.

For all courses, the students chose their own teams. The instructor only intervened when students were unable to find a team or were perhaps absent on days when teams were formed. For Course M, these teams were selected close to day one of the term. For Course O, these teams were formed closer to the middle of the term.

The team contract template was provided by the Instructor during a class period, with instructions on how to complete and questions being addressed. Emphasis was made to take the contract seriously and how the contracts are to help with communications of members' expectations of one another. Also to build cohesiveness, teams each chose their own team name. Each team is required to have the same acronym for the team name (e.g., "BBA") but the team names should be different, amusing, and describing their project (e.g. "Bobby's Bubble Adventure").

Completed contracts were due approximately 1 week after the teams were formed and the template provided. Penalties were incurred to all team members for any contract that was late. The contracts accounted for 3-5% of the overall grade, providing incentive for the process to be taken seriously. Contracts were evaluated for completeness. All items in the contract had to be addressed; all pages needed to be initialed and/or signed. When items were missing, penalties were incurred and the contract was returned to the team to 'try again'. They were not able to proceed unless they had complete contracts.

Afterwards, projects are assigned throughout the term. A disclaimer is included in all projects that reads: "Note: no slackers allowed. If a team member is not contributing, they can be kicked off the team. **If you include the name of a team member who has NOT contributed their fair share, ALL team members will receive a zero for this project!!**" When the projects are completed, each project includes a summary of team interactions (written by the team as a whole) with their assessment of how the team performed and of what they would improve next time.

As a result, less teams had major problems (compared to previous semesters of same courses in which teams did not utilize a contract) needing instructor intervention:

- In Course M, it was found that most, if any 'violations' of the team contract happened for just the first team project. Across the different sections of course M, 3% of the students were fired from their teams. Out of these students, 33% ended up dropping the course; 33% ended up being re-hired with a zero-tolerance addition to the original contract and a penalty imposed for the first project; and, 33% ended up receiving a penalty on the first project and going solo for the remaining projects. An interesting sidenote is that in the same semester as this course, the national unemployment rate for college graduates was approximately 3% [Shin 2009].
- In Course O, approximately 1% wished to fire a team member early. After discussion, the team member in question decided to go solo without any penalty incurred rather than stay with the team with a grade-reduction-imposed penalty. An additional 1% wished to fire a team member 'late', i.e. at a time in which the instructor determined the team member had no opportunity to prove themselves. In this situation, additional detailed peer evaluations were distributed and completed by all team members with the instructor determining an end penalty based on each team members' contributions (or lack thereof).

Student response to the contracts has been overwhelmingly favorable. Emails to the instructor, course evaluations, and the responses as stated in their project team assessment all indicate that

team contracts are the way to clearly state team member expectations up front and thus maximize communications and team effectiveness.

Students in Course M indicated through their assessments that communications had improved from one project to the next. Most teams indicated the desire to work with those team members in future courses. Also, Students in Course O liked having the expectations stated clearly from the beginning, thus helping to head off potential problems. Students in all classes liked that team members not carrying their weight would not receive credit for something to which they did not contribute. Moreover, some teams have actually fired members in the contract formation section, realizing that there was a bad fit early in the process. However, the problem of "the new guy" finding a team still exists to some degree.

The instructor found that team contracts minimized the amount of subjectivity necessary in responding to student gripes of team fairness. In addition, in most cases the need for a separate peer evaluation form, which can also be quite subjective and time-consuming for the instructor to calculate, was eliminated.

This paper mentioned three problems with teams, and the contract most obviously deals with the third problem, that of social loafing. This of course does not mean that the first two problems (team member selection and training) are safely ignored. To address them, several adjustments were made:

- When teams were in the process of being formed, the contract template provided students a structure that assisted in their ability to assess (aka "interview") potential team members. Based on some of the expectations and consequences that were discussed, students actually switched teams before the contracts were finalized.
- Team members also looked at their abilities to meet outside of class. Thus, class schedules, location of home, and work schedules were also factored in when selecting team members.
- The instructor determined that there are major differences between diversifying a team in business and within an educational setting. In a business situation, most employees are shooting for the same goal and the impact of not achieving that goal is great. Within a course project, team members tend to juggle more outside responsibilities that may conflict with the intended goal of a successful team project. Students may also perceive that a decreased grade is simply achieving balance in their life.
- The College of Business has now addressed the team training aspect by adding team expectations to their general introduction to business course. Students thus receive this training very early in their college experience and it reduces the need for repetition within discipline-specific introduction courses. However, the contract itself was new to most students, and thus specific training was required in that tool.

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Teamwork is, and needs to remain, a staple in academic training. Working in teams, students establish a synergy from others in addition to gaining knowledge that expands beyond their own. Moreover, student teams provide additional abilities to experience diversity in thought, culture, background, and many of the other novel experiences for which students come to college in the first place. One could argue that the success of the team stems from the roots of how the team was formed. This argument though only defeats the ability to 'work with what you have' and get the best from the team. Training for teamwork can be incorporated into the curriculum. Though with all of the training possible, there always runs the risk of communications issues,

expectations problems, and students who simply do not wish to do the work. Expectations that are outlined and agreed upon up front by all team members can help to minimize possible communication misunderstandings and create an awareness that social loafing is unacceptable. This contract can be drawn up when the team is formed, and must be adhered to for effectiveness. Team member penalties need to be incorporated, when students simply are not carrying their weight. This helps prepare students for a corporate arena where poor performance on a team does not mean a bad grade, but potentially a loss of income.

This paper details the use of the team contract more as a teaching tip than as a research paper. Future research should be done to empirically test the propositions that teamwork with team contracts provide superior outcomes than teams left to their own devices. Is student satisfaction empirically greater when using a contract? Do students report less time spent in controlling functions? Do instructors report less time spent helping to negotiate problems with student teams?

While this contract borrows heavily from the work of those like Kinser [2007], and there are parts of teamwork applicable to all levels of collegiate education, MIS presents some unique situations that makes the application of the contract different in this context. For example, computers seem to present a phobia even today amongst business students when it comes to creating original content. Many still consider MIS to be "the computer thing," and when a team identifies one member to be a MIS major, it becomes natural for those with computer angst to dump the requirements on the major and respond with "I don't know how to do this" instead of simply addressing the issue.

Moreover, there are many other interesting aspects of team self-governance. For example, do student teams adhere to the penalties they state at the beginning of the contract? For students who are dismissed from a team, are their reasons for the dismissal similar to those reported by the team who is terminating the team member? It is intended that a cross-disciplinary study will be conducted in Fall 2009, and some preliminary results might be available for presentation at the conference.

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**APPENDIX I. TEAM CONTRACT**

Type Team Members Name, Email, and Phone:

Name: Email: Phone:	Name: Email: Phone:
Name: Email: Phone:	Name: Email: Phone:
Name: Email: Phone:	

Directions for Team Forming Contract

1. You will choose your own teams. Teams consist of 3-5 members. You will use this team for all 3 team projects, so choose wisely! Try to choose a diverse group to build on your own strengths. Fill out the top of this page with the names of your team.
2. Complete the contract (**MUST BE TYPEWRITTEN!**). This contract is to create a set of rules that each team member is required to follow. This contract is meant to help your team set up a solid foundation for a positive experience in this course, and to assist with communications and understanding expectations for your team. There are 3 sets of rules: Part 1 is mandatory rules and you cannot change. Part 2 is partially written and you must complete each of these rules/consequences. The third and final set of rules is freeform. They can be created by your team about any mutually agreed upon aspect in this course. **A minimum of 3 additional rules are required for Part 3.** Any questions regarding what can be written as a rule or consequence, please ask me.
3. Read the entire contract very carefully. Each team member must initial the bottom of every page on this document to attest to having read and understood each page. This is very important! You will be bound by this information. Failure to understand the system will not be a viable complaint after you have initialed and signed the final contract.
4. After completing the contract, make a photocopy of the contract for each team member.
5. One team member must turn in the fully executed original contract. This is due at the start of class, **January 28, 2009.** Be sure the contract **is TYPED and all members have signed/initialed all pages.**

Throughout the semester, your team must abide by this contract. In any disputes or problems, we will refer to the Team’s contracts.



## Team Forming Contract

- (1) The team whose members are \_\_\_\_\_,  
 \_\_\_\_\_,  
 \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ (“Team”) do hereby enter  
 into this agreement on \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, 2009.
- (2) This agreement will govern all of the activities of said Team during this semester.
- (3) This contract is bound to the jurisdiction of the College of Business.
- (4) The course Instructor will be the arbiter and mediator for any dispute arising in Team through this semester.
- (5) Team as a whole is liable for the completion of this Team Forming Contract and all other necessary and required documents and projects throughout the semester.
- (6) One act may violate more than one rule. In this case, the consequences for all rules violated may be instituted. Documented emergencies will excuse the violation of rules reasonably related to that emergency.
- (7) **Team members understand that they can be fired from their team for not participating or abiding by the team contract. If a team member is fired, they will receive a zero for that project (some exceptions may apply) and they may try to be re-hired in order to not lose any additional credit for subsequent projects. If a team member is fired, they must meet with the instructor to determine penalty and terms for being re-hired.**

**Part 1: Mandatory Rules and Consequences**

	<b>Rule</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
(a)	No cheating on any course graded item by any member of the team or any other individual affiliated with the team's actions.	Zero for the entire team on the project. Academic charges will be brought. Possible failure in the entire course for all team members.
(b)	No violating the Syllabus, the Statements of Academic Integrity, regulations of the University and/or other violation of law by any team member.	At the discretion of the Instructor.
(c)	Unprofessional behavior	At the discretion of the Instructor. The Instructor may determine if a team member has been unprofessional at any time and take any action the Instructor deems necessary.
(d)	Intimidating a Team Member	Immediate disbandment of entire team. Further consequences possible at the discretion of the Instructor.
(e)	Emails requesting a response by one team member must be responded to within 24 hours.	At the discretion of the Instructor.
(f)	Every team member has an absolute responsibility to communicate their ideas and opinions with other team members in a professional manner.	At the discretion of the Instructor.
(g)	Every team member must openly listen to the ideas of other team members.	At the discretion of the Instructor.

**Part 2: Mandatory Rules and Team Set Consequences**

	<b>Rule</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
(a)	Each team member shall attend all Team meetings. Team may specify a different consequence for varying numbers of violations. Please specify what kinds of excuses are acceptable, if any.	
(b)	Each Team member shall meet Team deadlines. Team may specify a different consequence for varying numbers of violations. Please specify what kinds of excuses are acceptable, if any.	
(c)	Each member shall be available during the days prior to a Team project deadline to work. Documented emergencies and participation in school events should not be penalized. However, if a major conflict exists with any Team members in the few days before the due date, then please state how that is to be handled in the consequence section even if the consequence is not a deduction of 'points'.	
(d)	Each Team member shall present work at Team deadlines of a <b>“sufficient quality.”</b> The Team’s consequence section must state what “sufficient quality” means in the previous sentence. In addition, the Team’s consequence section must state how the Team will decide if the work does not meet this quality. Team may specify a different consequence for varying numbers of violations. Please specify what kinds of excuses are acceptable, if any.	
(e)	Each Team member shall not be <b>“overly aggressive”</b> or <b>“overly passive”</b> in Team meetings. The Team’s consequence section must state what “overly passive” and “overly aggressive” means in the previous sentence. In addition, the consequence section must state how the Team will decide if a Team member’s actions are overly aggressive or passive. Team may specify a different consequence for varying numbers of violations. Please specify what kinds of excuses are acceptable, if any.	

**Part 3: Additional Rules and Team Set Consequences**

Please add in any additional rules and consequences that Team mutually agrees upon. If Team needs more room, please extend this table. **MINIMUM 3 REQUIRED.**

	<b>Rule</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
(a)		
(b)		
(c)		
(d)		
(e)		
(f)		

**We, the Team, do hereby agree to all of the pages in this document (pages 1-6). We, the Team, agree to be bound by these rules through the entire semester. We, the Team, also further agree that we have completely read and understood this document signed today.**

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

	(initial on the line provided)
<b>Team member 1 Name (type/print)</b>	<b>I, _____ have read the Team Forming Contract in full, pages 1-6.</b>
<b>Team member 1 Signature</b>	
<b>Team member 2 Name (type/print)</b>	<b>I, _____ have read the Team Forming Contract in full, pages 1-6.</b>
<b>Team member 2 Signature</b>	
<b>Team member 3 Name (type/print)</b>	<b>I, _____ have read the Team Forming Contract in full, pages 1-6.</b>
<b>Team member 3 Signature</b>	
<b>Team member 4 Name (type/print)</b>	<b>I, _____ have read the Team Forming Contract in full, pages 1-6.</b>
<b>Team member 4 Signature</b>	
<b>Team member 5 Name (type/print)</b>	<b>I, _____ have read the Team Forming Contract in full, pages 1-6.</b>
<b>Team member 5 Signature</b>	