

Theory vs Reality

Student

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BUS 394

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I currently work for XXX Corporation, at their main office headquarters here in the heart of Flint. XXX has been around for quite some time. They have acquired multiple smaller chain banks, and even some isolated branches of larger corporations to become the massive, 2400 employee, 50+ location corporation that it is today! There are currently branch and main office locations in Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Michigan. XXX offers a number of commercial and consumer products along with their own Investment entity called XYZ. In the last 10 years the company has seen many changes including a new CEO, a new leadership team, the purchase of new locations, the loss of less utilized locations, threats of buyout, a new culture, 2 new performance appraisal systems, the first true mass layoff the company had ever experienced, any many, many more. In my six years with the company, I've witnessed most of them!

When I started with the company I worked at the front desk of Human Resources as a junior year, high school intern. I made \$6.00 and thought that was absolutely wonderful. I answered phones, typed up meeting agendas, minutes and notes, took messages for the "boss" and scheduled appointments for practically everyone in the department. Although I didn't plan to answer phones forever, it was a starting point! After about a year of experience, I began working with the Organizational Development area of HR and was put in charge of a few smaller projects — but they were mine to create, develop and maintain! I then took on the responsibility of setting up training

sessions for employees, scheduling the rooms, getting the equipment needed, and finalizing the details along with securing an instructor.

After getting more in depth with my accounting classes, I was ready for more responsibility and the accounting environment I'd been learning all about. In February of 2003 I approached my current supervisor with the possibility of getting more involved in the accounting side of HR and the number crunching I loved so much. We collectively decided that the best way to utilize my skills within the HR department and still keep me interested in my work was to move me to the Compensation area of HR. In April of last year I officially took on the title of Compensation Reporting Specialist/Analyst and gained my own work space, computer, telephone and printer. I also gained a new group of co-workers, new responsibilities, and a new sense of respect for the amount of work that goes on behind the scenes — that most people never see!

I now work in conjunction with the payroll and benefit areas of HR — as we have recently restructured our department. I do system input for pay increases, incentives and manual checks for special recognition. I also maintain all retiree files, their benefit coverage and payment for that coverage. Lastly, I am constantly pulling, editing and analyzing various reports requested by my supervisor or even the leadership team — in order to make a more educated decision about the direction of the company. Although I maintain a variety of activities — each seems to have their own bit of accounting

embedded in them and I enjoy learning the many differences and caveats that accompany each!

As I have advanced in my skills and knowledge at work, I have also grown in my knowledge through school. However, what's interesting to me is to see the differences in what I learn in class and how it's applied in what I do at work. Until just recently, I still believed that what I was learning in class was going to prepare me to jump right in and start getting my hands dirty in my first place of work. What I've gathered in these last two semesters is that my assumption was completely false! I think one of my professors said it best, "school is merely teaching you how to learn." She's completely right, and until I started getting deeper into the accounting side of HR and deeper into my classes I had no clue!

Throughout my work experience — especially just in the last year — I've noticed three major differences in what you're taught in class and how it's truly done in the "real world." First and most obvious, is the difference in the perception about time in the class fully preparing you for the job — and the actual on-the-job training and happens in real life. Second, is the huge difference in the way you are taught and required to do things in the class room and how they are actually done in the workplace. Third is the unfair justification of memorization in class and the true art of "referencing" a book or article for your answer!

As I've stated above, one of my professors has been quite candid and open with our class during this semester. Although I knew not everything was clear cut and worked like the problems given in our books, I don't think I truly understood how different real life really is from school — until she said it! When you get into college and first start, you are learning, and as you continue to advance, you are continually learning more. However, unless you have the work experience or someone to point it out, you don't realize that what you learn in school is not exactly what you'll be doing - - anywhere!!

You learn theories in class, you have to remember names and dates, you have elaborate equations that encompass every aspect of the written problem and all you do is fill in the numbers. The problem is, when you get into the real world — no problem that comes by has a written explanation of the entire problem, what aspects it encompasses and which formula will best solve it! Half of the theories I've learned have never even been mentioned by anyone I work with!

You learn in BUS 201 that $\text{Assets} - \text{Liabilities} = \text{Equity}$ — but what do you do in the real world when both sides don't add up? They never prepare you for that — because in the wonderful world of accounting, it's your job to balance! When I first started my job with the Compensation area — I knew nothing of how their system worked, how they calculated their incentives, how they calculated their salary budgets each year or where they got the information they used to create and begin designing an entirely new performance appraisal system. None of that was ever taught to me in a class room! It was all hands on experience.

I learned the system like the back of my hand, not through a training manual, but by watching someone else do the input a few times. I gained the understanding of how we calculate our incentives and pay increases by looking over the calculations a number of times, working them backwards and always asking when I didn't understand something! The class room does not teach you what you need to know the first day you walk into a new job — it teaches you how to be on time, maintain good attendance, and most importantly, how to learn and be open to new ideas!

The second major difference I've noticed since working with Compensation and payroll is the difference in the way you are required to do your work in class. Everything in class is manual. You are taught the reasoning behind a calculation or formula, and then you are required to use that reasoning to help you write down and calculate your answer by hand. In BUS 322 you had to know how and when to do every kind of journal entry you could possibly think of. You had to write the journal entry out; you had to know the correct amounts, the correct account name, and the correct timing of when to make the adjustment. You then needed to know how each transaction would effect your T-accounts, what side a debit or credit went on, and how that effected your financial statements. We had to complete financial statements by hand, knowing exactly where each item fell (asset, liability, equity, short-term, long-term, revenue, expense, etc.). Everything was manual — and you had to know how and why it was done!

What I find hilarious is that in the real world, you have a system that does it for you! By the click of a button, I have a complete balance sheet sitting in front of me, an income

statement and a cash flow statement all ready to print in a matter of moments. To record a sale of an item, you choose salesinvoicing from the menu, type in what you sold, who you sold it to, how much you sold it for and if they paid with cash or on account. The system creates the journal entry for you, transfers the funds to the correct accounts if needed, and indicates the change in inventory - - all as I hit the Save Entry button! Now I realize the CPA exam is going to a computer based system — and you won't have to do as much by hand, but the classroom setting hasn't changed. And while I see the benefits in knowing the mechanics behind the pre-created form on the screen, I'm not quite sure why it is stressed as highly as it is, when in the real world, there's less and less use of it!

The last thing that I've noticed is quite different between the classroom and work — is the amount of information you are required to commit to memory! I've only had one class in which the teacher truly recognized that once we got to the real world, there'd never be a quiz on what we did and didn't know! Each of our exams were open book — now don't get me wrong, they were difficult, but we were allowed to research each question and find the correct answer. Not in any other class were we allowed that luxury! I suppose the reason this bugs me so much is because in the real world, you have every opportunity to research the topic you're discussing. You can go out to a company's website or an HR website and find information about your topic, you can thumb through books to find the correct solution to a problem, and you have the opportunity to use any resource available to you in order to come up with the best, most accurate answer to a problem!

For example, as I stated above we recently implemented a completely new performance appraisal system. In order to do this, we needed ideas and plenty of them. Now, if this were a test in one of my classes or a question on the exam — I would have to know what sort of things typically show up on a performance review, who completes them, what they are used for and why — right off the top of my head. However, in real life I was given a multitude of options for doing research and bringing recommendations and proposals to the table, based on my findings!

First I did a bit of research on the internet — visiting sites such as SHRM and posting bulletin board questions inquiring about what other companies were currently using. I then referenced a number of HR Magazines that we had in the department and read through any that surrounded this particular subject. I then pulled a few sources from the public library on performance appraisals, their attributes, success rates and other miscellaneous information. I then compiled all of the information I'd gathered to create a variety of scenarios for the management team to review, make changes to and eventually use. In this case, I wasn't required to have anything memorized, or know anything off the top of my head, I simply had to have the common sense to know where to go and where to look to find the necessary resources!

Throughout my entire university career I would say 80% of the classes — especially those in accounting — require that you memorize a multitude of information. What I find to be quite disappointing is that in those classes, more times than none, I've crammed before the test so that I know it at the moment — and come a year later when they say, "didn't you learn that in such-and-such class? sadly I must say no! Or at least admit

that I don't remember it! There are things that stick with you, the basics mostly, that you commit to memory and no matter what you do you couldn't get it out if you wanted to! However, what I've found is that it is much easier to have the resources available — so that you can make an informed decision - rather than trying to memorize every little detail and forget most of it along the way!

While everything has its ups and downs, I have learned a great deal in my 4 years of college and 6 of working! I think the work experience and the book knowledge go hand in hand. Without the work experience, I think the classroom knowledge tends to fool you a bit, however without the classroom knowledge you wouldn't be ready to jump into a career and be 100% successful. I think what my professor said is very true, I think school gets you in the mindset of learning — which only proves more useful once you get a job. If you hadn't gone through college and tried out all the different techniques to studying and experienced the speaking in front of crowds and working in small groups — how would you know what to do when your boss asked you to get a group together, come up with a recommendation and present it to the head of the department? You'd be lost — and although you might come out looking great — it would be really tough without the prior experience!

I think I can definitely say it was all worth it! I couldn't have asked for a better opportunity than the job I have. I was blessed to get in when I did and with the college experience and knowledge that I've gained, I've been able to turn it into a career with great possibilities. The classes have given me the background and skills that I need to be successful in the workplace. My work experience has given me a more realistic

outlook on life and where I'm headed. When I started in my classes, I was sure I would get my Bachelor's degree, take the CPA exam and go on to be a public accountant.

However, completing some higher level accounting courses I learned that being a CPA was not in fact what I truly wanted to do. My work experience on the other hand proved to be my niche and interested me beyond my expectations. Because I was able to acquire this internship, I was able to see what I did and didn't like about the accounting world, outside of school, and figure out what I truly wanted to do with my life. The HR classes that I took later in my university career helped me to realize that while I was obtaining a degree in accounting — I could accompany it with a Masters in HR Management. I am now planning to take about a year off and then continue on with my masters — in HR Management — on a part-time basis, while I continue with my career!

I am glad I had the opportunity to attend the University of Michigan and find myself lucky to have found a job and future career so early in life. I've enjoyed my classes, classmates and professors, and look forward to my future!