

Student article

The Challenges and Value of Booster Week Activities

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My name is Ignacio Vera Izquierdo: I am a 29-year-old Industrial Engineer from Chile. I graduated in 2008 and after that, for two years I worked for a water supplier company in the public sector, mainly focused on the production of public infrastructure. During these four years, it was always my intention to continue improving my professional skills and my level of English. However, I did not make the decision to do so until an earthquake struck Chile in 2010: this encouraged me to fulfil my desire. From then, English was much more present in my daily work due to increasing communication with foreign firms, such as insurance companies and technology suppliers. Therefore, I decided to go to England to study for a postgraduate degree.

The University of Birmingham (UoB) seemed to be one of the most attractive because of its prestige, world ranking position, the quality of its programmes and its location in a multicultural city with international relevance. In addition, my decision was strongly influenced by the great international approach that the Birmingham Business School has and the special focus on preparing its overseas students for successful performance in their chosen programmes. In particular, the university offered me a course called the Business Management English (BME), a discipline-specific pre-sessional programme which has been the pillar for my current performance in both language abilities and professional skills.

The BME aims to help students consolidate language skills such as communicating and debating ideas, and of course, the skills needed to achieve professional goals such as time management and the prioritization of tasks. Definitely, to obtain a Master of Science requires competencies that go considerably beyond language and also, these competencies need lots of training and a proper environment to practise them in. Fortunately, the 10-week BME-course fits exactly with that description, because I started the course with an intensive but effective process of levelling, and just two weeks later, I experienced the famous and hard “Booster Week”.

During Booster Week, students are challenged to create a product or service with a complete business plan and also think up in a marketing strategy to convince a hypothetical group of business people to invest or do the business together – all within five days. After one day of tough brainstorming, we came up with our idea: a *Dryer Unit* located in public places around the most crowded parts of Birmingham. The design was like a public toilet, which included a room to hang and dry clothing, a hair dryer, sofa, internet access and lastly a toilet. All facilities would be used according to customers’ needs and they would just pay for usage time. While I did not like the idea, I realised that this is another thing to consider within the learning process with teams: work is not always about interesting topics or total agreement, but you need to go on as a team.

It was not a coincidence to have been assigned to a Booster Group with people from different nationalities; in fact, this is the Booster Week organizers’ intention, not to make it more difficult, but more realistic. From the beginning, I noticed that the coordination between

people from Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and Chile would be quite complicated, and it really was! I had never before imagined that a thing such as the rhythm of everyone, the unknown expertise and cultural factors could affect the performance of the group. I was more used to working with people from my own country, which was easier because of the common language and roles already defined. And so the countdown began and there was no time to adjust everything, so eventually I dared to take control of the group. With very little information about the potential of team members, we allocated tasks according to what everyone said he or she could do well.

One important and remarkable thing I have learned is that unfortunately, some cultural behaviours, such as to be extremely shy, could play against the work progress. For example, in my group a Chinese person was an expert at producing videos, but she did not say anything about that and this task was assigned to another person who was less skilful. The same happened with the Marketing Strategy, but in reverse, where another team member said that she could produce a very good Marketing Plan, but it was a very poor one. As a result, individual characteristics that could be present in individuals from different cultures such as introversion or shyness could make the task allocation process more problematic. I was amazed by all that I could learn through organizing group meetings and discussing possible ideas. Ultimately, in real life you rarely choose the people who you work with, but you need to overcome this barrier to success.

Once we found an idea, defining roles within the group was a complicated job to do. Accordingly, we defined a function for everyone in order to ensure the completion of the assignment. We knew that it was necessary to have a leader, someone responsible for time management and another one responsible for organizing meetings and booking rooms. It seems to be easy, but here we needed to deal with different personalities. Even though we all agreed that I would be the leader, some members did not want to abide by decisions. In addition, the person responsible for time management often had trouble distributing workloads, and when the person responsible for organising meetings convened one, nobody was ready with his or her work. Therefore, to overcome these obstacles, and due to the fact that there were just two days left, we finally assigned a task to everyone and we supported each other when help was needed, omitting the laziness of some members. This situation could also occur in the real world. So, I have learned that is not necessary to always seek perfection but to assume some inefficiency, because groups are made up of people.

Booster Week ended with a presentation that was even more challenging, because it was my first real presentation about business in English. The presentation was in the form of a pitch to potential investors. It is quite nerve-wracking to imagine how you will react if the professors ask you a difficult question, or how your group mates may react if you do not respond well, because Booster Week involves group work for which you share a mark. Definitely, this presentation was my starting point to learn how to present during my postgraduate studies. It also gave me the confidence that I currently have.

Finally, the experience that I really enjoyed was the video that we were required to make. We showed it to the audience on the day of the presentation and here we illustrated how the service works. The commonly untold part of this task is how to select the actors, because the person who had a good English speaking level was not so confident to act, and in my case I was not afraid to do that, but my pronunciation was not the best in the group. We took advantage of the fact that technology allows you to do everything, so we recorded several versions of videos and afterwards we edited them. Having seen the videos produced by the

other groups on the day of the Booster Presentations, I have to admit that our video was not as exciting as some of the other groups'. So, we realised that we could be more creative and that is something that I would like to improve another time. Nevertheless, we had a lot of fun doing the video and it was very helpful to get to know each other in a different setting.

In conclusion, Booster Week was essential to teach me how to prioritize tasks and how to identify the different skills within a group. In addition, it definitely helped me to realise that you cannot depend on the first impression of people, as there could be more talent hidden behind a shy personality. The shyness could be attributable to cultural factors, but also language skills, so group meetings and tasks such as making a video give the group the opportunity to know each other better and then identify the real strengths and weaknesses of everyone. All these matters are things that we learned how to overcome in just one week. In summary, as well as making me a better English speaker, booster activities pushed me to be a better professional, a better human and a more flexible person when facing real dynamic problems like the ones I am facing in my postgraduate programme. Working under pressure with people from different backgrounds taught me that there is no time to know the entire personality of someone; therefore making the best decision with incomplete information is something vital, and that I take as a great lesson.

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