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The Business Solutions Technology Program: The new Office Assistant

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ETEC 522: Ventures in Learning Technology

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**Introduction**

Have you ever imagined if your traditional Administrative Assistant or Office Assistant had the skills and abilities to not only do the work, but to drive the work and provide solutions to your business problems? Or, what if this person could combine their superior business technology skills with better critical thinking and problem solving skills to be more productive? You might think of this person as more of an Associate or as a Technologist because of the higher value they could contribute to your business operation. With these enhanced skills, this person could also add value to you as a Senior Business Administrator or Manager, much the same way that an Engineering Technologist adds value to the work of an Engineer.

Today, this is only a dream as Administrative Assistant diploma programs at Canada’s post-secondary institutes including ours, train these people to be Administrative Assistants and not Business Solutions Technologists. However there is a growing demand from leaders in industry for graduates of these programs to think outside the box to provide unique solutions to business problems. Leaders are recognizing that Administrative Assistants are not only very good at typing and organizing, but are becoming the organizations’ leaders in advanced office technologies such as: MS Word, Excel, Power Point, and Access, and Adobe products. In addition our graduates are the power users of social networking and social media tools and they can be easily shown how these tools can be adopted for productivity in the business environment. Industry recognizes that our graduates move quickly into higher level positions but they also wish these new employees had better problem solving and critical thinking skills and have better experience integrating their knowledge and skills with current business problems.

The School of Business has spent the previous 12 months evaluating, analyzing and re-designing our Administrative Information Management program from that of a traditional Administrative Assistant program to the “Admin of the future”: The Business Solutions Technologist. This pitch to Deans’ Council describes why we need to move forward with the Business Solutions Technologist program so that our industry partners will continue to look to us as a leader in learning by providing solutions to their workforce needs.

**What is the Business Solutions Technologist?**

The School of Business recently worked on a design for a new Administrative Information Management program. After reviewing existing Administration Assistant Diploma programs in Western Canada, including our own, with recent information from the graduate job market and industry needs. A gap in education and training was found which lead to this new proposed program (Connery, 2012).

The proposed new program is Business Solutions Technology. The foundation of the program is the existing Administrative Information Management program but was redesigned to address current industry needs where graduates will now use enhanced critical thinking and problem solving skills integrated with technology skills to be better prepared to provide solutions to problems in the business environment. The new program outcomes include many competencies at the level of demonstrate, synthesize, develop, produce, manage and integrate. The program Scope Statement is as follows:

“The graduate of the program will have the broad knowledge and skills to excel in an entry level position and to advance in various industries in a variety of career opportunities as a business solutions technologist” (SAIT, 2012A)

The two year program will consist of 19 courses over four semesters plus a four week practicum in May of their second year. Rather than the traditional method of running a series of silo courses on business computer applications such as word processing, spreadsheets or Adobe products, and silo administration courses, the new design starts with a business computer foundation course that is then integrated into several content streams. As graduates from this program work in a broad cross section of industry types, sectors and sizes; streams of courses (two or more in sequence) such as industry studies, large business solutions and small business solutions are integrated with business computer applications and administration topics. In addition, streams of creative solutions and major projects courses culminate with the business solutions courses in semester 4 with a major 6-credit capstone course that students must successfully complete before moving onto the practicum and graduation. In addition, the first year of the program includes foundation courses in: communication and presentation skills, applied business math, unified media and organizational behaviour.

This integrated approach will allow the new graduates to better integrate skill and knowledge development in an applied method as they move from semester to semester. As they move onto the practicum they will have acquired advanced business technology skills that they have applied with critical thinking and problem solving skills modeled after finding solutions in the business environment.

**Why is it the wave of the future?**

The idea to develop a Business Solutions Technology diploma idea came from talking to key representatives in industry. Many of these people serve on our current Program Advisory Committee and they see a gap in the skill set of their workforce that a Business Solutions Technologist could fill. They see how our program and graduates have evolved over the years from Secretary to Office Assistant to Administrative Assistant, and now to the next evolution of this profession.

Somewhere along the way of this evolution, the digital age met the administrative profession; this marked the beginning of this current change. This meeting or crossover of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and Business sectors was gradual, however it has happened and the need for a new career definition continues to be overlooked by both the Business and ICT sectors. The problem is we continually try to modify pre-digital age job titles to fit with changing and emerging positions. The answer is to boldly park current Administrative Assistant job titles and define a new career that integrates advanced software technology skills proven with industry standard global certifications with business soft skills to provide solutions to support industry today and to be adaptable for upcoming changes tomorrow. This new career will permit the acceptance and value new job titles such as Business Analyst or Project Administrator already starting to appear in organizations.

There is movement within industry to support this new business solutions technologist career through discussions towards creating a new professional association and the creation of a new National Occupation Classification (NOC).

Creating a new program and a new occupation does not come easy, especially when you are early adopters on the innovation curve (Rogers (1962). Just because some industry representatives see a need for this change, the majority probably do not understand what it is or why we need to change. Similarly the intake to a new program has many challenges as many in-coming students to Post-secondary institutes and most High School Guidance Counsellors will not know or understand the purpose and value of a new program or career. These are mostly perception changes that will take time and resources to deal with. The new program will have higher program outcomes and thus will require higher entrance requirements from high school to ensure student success throughout the program. As a result, the initial intakes of this program could be lower compared to our existing program so some full load equivalents (FLE’s) will need to be used in other programs until the intake numbers in the new program increase. Once the new program gets established with informed incoming students and with confident outgoing graduates and the program grows through industry demand, then these FLE’s can be returned to the program.

On the positive intake side, high schools through the Focus on Information Technology (FIT) and Business Information Technology (BIT) clusters are encouraging students with an interest in business technology applications to take courses in this area that will help them focus their careers towards the Business Solutions Technology program. This in turn will contribute to recruiting focused students with adequate entrance requirements into our program.

This growth strategy fits within our Vision: “to be recognized as Canada’s premier Polytechnic ….”, our Mission: “… shall be an innovative organization equipping people to compete successfully in the changing world of work by providing relevant, skill-orientated education’, and our Cultural Values of: Learning, Entrepreneurial Spirit and Technology and Innovation. In addition, our Directional Priority of Leader in Learning supports this new program and growth strategy where our “….. Instructors combine industry experience with accepted teaching methods to provide valuable learning outcomes” (SAIT, 2006).

**How can it be developed?**

With a $1 million investment, the School of Business can complete the design, develop courses and market this new program to start delivery in September 2013. Our central technology and development department has the instructional design, project management, multimedia and writer/editor resources and expertise to work with the program subject matter experts to complete detailed design and development of the courses. We have previously earmarked $450,000 to design and develop year one courses and to design year two courses for financial year 2012-13. In financial year 2013-14 we will need an additional $350,000 to develop year two courses plus the practicum. Marketing the program will round out the investment with $200,000 required over and above the baseline marketing budget to promote the new program and to contribute to changing the perception of the new graduate from Administrative Assistant to Business Solutions Technologist.

The courses will be developed to meet or exceed our institutes’ blended and online learning standards as defined recently by Deans’ Councils’ curriculum standards (SAIT, 2012B). These courses will be available for blended daytime delivery, for night time and weekend on-campus continuing education delivery and for fully online facilitated distance delivery.

**Graduation and Beyond**

Students will graduate with a diploma in Business Solutions Technology that will permit them to start working in their careers immediately, or they can continue their education by working towards a degree supported through articulation agreements with other post-secondary institutes. One of the problems with our current program is there is no credential available for early leavers from the program after one year. These students receive credit for their courses but there is no program credential available. The new Business Solution Technology program will have an early exit strategy of a one year Office Professional certificate. Students in the diploma, who choose to leave early, can do so with the ten first year courses and an Office Professional certificate as long as they transfer from the diploma to the certificate before they start semester two. This will be attractive to students who want to fast track a career and it will be recognized by employers for hiring and compensation purposes. Alternately, students can complete the one year certificate and leave for the workforce or apply to the diploma and receive full transfer credit into year two of the program. They will progress through year two of the diploma program and graduate with a diploma to complement their certificate.

 **Conclusion**

We have some problems with our current Administrative Information Management program that need to be addressed, or like similar programs at other institutes, it will need to be scaled back or discontinued. Many institutes have scaled back their diplomas to one year certificates, however there is a diploma gap that we can fill if we listen to the research and revise our program to match this new demand. The School of Business proposes that we park our Administrative Information Management program and work with industry leaders to stop trying to yet again remould the Admin Assistant role. Instead, create the new proposed Business Solution Technology program that will allow graduates to become technologists in the workforce to satisfy a growing demand for workers to apply their business technology skills with technologist level critical thinking and problem solving skills. This new program will require a substantial investment of $1 million over the next 2-3 years to make this a reality. It will also allow our industry partners to continue to look to us as a leader in learning by providing solutions to their workforce needs.

**References**

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**Appendix A: Script for one minute elevator pitch**

**Elevator Pitch: Hey There Business Pro**

Hey there Business Pro, I am Doug Connery from the School of Business. Have you ever imagined if your Administrative Assistant had the skills and abilities to not only do the work, but to drive the work and provide solutions to your business problems? Or, what if this person could combine their superior business technology skills with better critical thinking and problem solving skills to be more productive as a Business Solutions Technologist?

Well dream on, as todays Admin diploma programs at Canada’s post-secondary institutes train these people to be ….well, Admin Assistants. However there is an exciting new opportunity not far off were you could wake up from that dream and have what you want.

The School of Business has spent the previous 12 months evaluating, analyzing and re-designing our Administrative Information Management program from that of a traditional Admin program to the “Admin program of the future”: The Business Solutions Technology program, an idea that our competitors have not figured out yet. This pitch to Deans’ Council encourages us to move forward with the Business Solutions Technology program so that our industry partners will continue to look to us as a leader in learning by providing solutions to their workforce needs.