

: How can and should students collect field information about DSS?

At least half of the Ask Dan! email questions come from students studying Decision Support Systems in an undergraduate or graduate academic program. Recently, Soma asked "I have a project in DSS ... for the project I must go to any company and ask them about DSS and ask how they make decisions. But I don't know what questions I should ask and what person in the company will help me. Could you help me plz."

Soma's question raises a number of issues for me, some troubling and some reasonably trivial. Among the issues include: Is this a worthwhile assignment? What guidance or direction should be given to students in completing this assignment? Should a protocol or question list be provided the student or is the inquiry best left unstructured? How will managers in a company react to such a request and assignment? Let's examine each issue one at a time.

Is this a worthwhile assignment?

MAYBE. I have used a similar assignment. Having students in a DSS class meet with and interview a manager or Information Systems staff member is often enlightening, stimulating and useful. Note I used the word "often" because such an assignment can be especially difficult for students located in small college communities and in some countries. Also, the more knowledge a student has about DSS when they conduct a field interview the better. The worst situation occurs when a student is uncertain about what is meant by a decision support system and when the helpful manager has little knowledge of DSS. Soma's assignment is two pronged in that s/he needs to "ask them about DSS and ask how they make decisions". My guess is that most managers would have trouble explaining "how they make decisions". Also, depending upon the job of a manager, s/he may only participate in part of a decision process. In general, my sense is that focusing on either the DSS or decision making question is best for advanced undergraduates. For graduate students, both questions can be used, but the student needs to start the interview by asking about the "job" of the manager. Information Systems staff can discuss DSS in an organization, especially enterprise-wide systems, but they won't usually have many details about specific decision making activities and tasks.

What guidance or direction should be given to students in completing this assignment? If a student is faced with this assignment, how should they begin?

In general, this type of assignment assumes a knowledgeable person will cooperate with the student. Students should check with parents, relatives and their friends for recommendations of people to contact. If the student feels they must make "a cold call", then they need to be prepared to do much more work to gain access to a "key informant". The first step is to find some background information on the company. Try to determine that the company is likely using computerized decision support. But today even some small companies are using DSS. A local pharmacist may use a knowledge-driven DSS to help check for drug interactions while filling a prescription. A local bank lending officer may use a decision support system to help evaluate loan applications. An estimator at a construction company may use a cost estimation DSS.

As in any situation where a student wants help from community members, it is important to be polite and explain the assignment and explain why the specific company or manager is the best source of information. A student may need to persuade a few people that the interview is necessary, useful or even a reasonable request. My Strategic Management Skills (Power et al., 1986) book provides some suggestions for conducting interviews that I'll paraphrase and summarize:

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URL: <http://dssresources.com/faq/index.php?action=artikel&cat=&id=94&artlang=en>

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1. Become familiar with as much background information as is possible before conducting an interview.
2. Ask friends, relatives, professors, and contacts if they would be willing to refer you to people they know.
3. When setting up an interview, explain who you are and what you are doing. Do not misrepresent yourself.
4. If no one in a company can be identified beforehand, ask to speak with someone in public relations or personnel. They may be able to refer you and help set up an interview.
5. When arranging an interview, choose a time convenient for your interviewee. Also realize, especially in the case of a busy executive, that interview time will be limited. Clarify exactly how much time you will need and how much time the interviewee has available.
6. If more than one interviewer will be present at an interview or if you want to tape record the conversation to ensure complete notes, mention these requests with the interviewee in advance. Never begin an interview with unexpected requests.
7. When preparing for an interview, develop a few key questions to ask. Specific questions ensure that you get desired information. Remember, time will be short so it is usually possible to ask only seven or eight questions. Several minutes before the end of the scheduled time, ask the interviewee an open-ended question like "Is there anything else about DSS at your company that we have not discussed that I should know?" This type of question may give you additional insights.
8. During the interview, spend most of your time listening. Also take detailed notes that can be used later. Look at the person you are interviewing occasionally, don't focus only on taking notes.
9. At the end of the interview, thank the interviewee and ask if he or she has any questions or requests. You should also write a thank-you note.
10. After the interview, review your notes and summarize them as soon as possible. This step will reduce the amount of information lost due to gaps in your memory or notes.

Should a protocol or question list be provided the student or is the inquiry best left unstructured?

In general, students can benefit from constructing their own question list. Also, the list should be targeted to who will be interviewed and to what can be discovered in advance about the person's job, role and position in the company. The Decision Support Readiness Audit questions in the DSS Concepts book (2002) may provide a starting point for some types of interviews. In general, one might ask "Has your firm implemented any computerized systems to support decision making? If so, are you using any of the systems? What are the most important decisions that you make? Does your company have an Executive Information System? If so, when was it implemented? Who uses it?" If possible, the course instructor/professor should review the interview questions prior to the actual interview.

How will managers in a company react to such a request and assignment?

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Generally, my experience is that the reaction of managers and Information Systems staff is supportive and in some cases one of curiosity. Decision support systems and decision making are interesting topics for managers. If a student interviewer is well prepared, a manager can learn from reflecting upon the questions the student asks and hence will benefit. Contributing to the preparation of the next generation of DSS developers is also perceived as a worthwhile reason to participate. Professors, managers, IS staff and students can benefit from this type of assignment. My trepidation comes from the fact that some students are poorly prepared to undertake such an assignment and hence create ill-will rather than goodwill in the community. So make sure you understand the definition of DSS and know something about what types of DSS exist currently in organizations; learn something about DSS and decision making in class before you venture out to do an interview. Recognize that someone is helping you so be prepared to conduct a professional interview, be courteous and say thanks.

References

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The above response is from Power, D., How can and should students collect field information about DSS? DSS News, Vol. 6, No. 5, February 13, 2005.

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Last update: 2005-08-16 21:44