ACCOUNTING TEAMS: ARE PEER EVALUATIONS TOO GENEROUS?

Laura Rickett, Ph.D., C.P.A.
Assistant Professor
Cleveland State University
Email: L.Rickett@CSUOhio.edu
Cellular: 330-465-6272

Deborah Smith, Ph.D., C.P.A. *
Assistant Professor
Cleveland State University
Email: D.L.Smith11@CSUOhio.edu
Cellular: 954-218-4681

Illustrations by Cynthia Drummond
Palm Harbor, Florida
CDrummondGo@TampaBay.rr.com

* Corresponding Author
ACCOUNTING TEAMS: ARE PEER EVALUATIONS TOO GENEROUS?

INTRODUCTION

University instructors often incorporate team projects into the college curriculum and some instructors utilize peer evaluations where students evaluate their teammates’ performance on the project (Takeda and Homberg, 2014). These evaluations allow the instructor to assess the contribution of individual team members. We provide valuable insight into a student’s perception of their teammates based on the results of peer- and self-evaluation surveys. How do students rank themselves against their peers? Are students overall generous or harsh with their evaluations? Are slackers identified? Are there differences in the perceptions of students based on gender? We gather peer evaluations from four years of classes and analyze the results to look for answers to these questions.

We critically examine the collective responses of peer- and self-evaluation surveys from graduate accounting student, team-based projects spanning several classes and semesters, in order to provide a holistic view of peer feedback and how a student’s contribution to a group project is seen through the eyes of their teammates. Although a number of research papers provide suggestions on how to write peer evaluation surveys and how to supervise team projects, there are few studies that share the results of students’ peer evaluations. We use the results of cumulative comparisons of peer evaluations to identify some of the challenges and opportunities in team interaction, and we provide a brief discussion of the implications of these findings for accounting students and instructors.

This topic is important because the accounting profession has evolved to require collaboration in almost every accounting career-path, whether it is with other accountants, with business operations personnel, or with experts in other fields. Teams of accountants are established in every area of accounting, for example audit teams include a partner, manager, staff, and administrator, and new systems development teams include an accountant, analyst, programmer, and manager. Long gone are the days of accountants sitting alone in a cubicle crunching numbers; instead accountants collaborate with others to achieve effective solutions in an ever-changing business environment.

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

Accountants are renowned for their analytical skills and knowledge of complex regulations, but a critical component of many of today’s accounting professionals is building relationships and managing various team roles. Outside of a self-owned, private practice, accountants often work with other
accountants, in auditing, with other professionals, in consulting, or with management, in industry, and the accountant’s team role may be constantly changing. For example, controllers manage an accounting department, yet they also work as a member of the management team, contributing to decision-making and goal setting, providing assistance to the internal and external auditors, and participating in professional organizations. Accounting professionals are being challenged to “…move beyond core transactional accounting to partnering with the business (Bilbrough, 2013).” Stephen Patras, a recruiter for KPMG advises new college students that employers are looking for demonstrated leadership and teamwork (Patras, 2011). It is not surprising that so many professional organizations, such as the American Institute of CPA’s, the Institute of Management Accountants, Financial Executives Institute, and the Institute of Internal Auditors, are challenging accounting educators to incorporate teamwork into the curriculum to prepare students for careers in accounting. Working effectively with others and working in teams is a component of the AICPA Core Competency Framework for Entry into the Accounting Profession (Bryant and Albring, 2006).

Therefore, not only should instructors provide the opportunity for students to gain experience working on a team, but they should also evaluate the student’s ability to work in a group setting and provide them with feedback about ways they can improve. One way to gauge a student’s performance as part of a team project is to have the student evaluate their contribution to the project and also their ability to work in a team setting. Unfortunately, it is all too common that some students do not perform their fair share of the work or have difficulty working with others in a team environment. To what extent can a professor rely on a student’s peer evaluation as an accurate reflection of his or her teammates’ performance? Our results uncover some important factors about the reliability of peer evaluations in terms of students’ willingness to critically evaluate their peers.

METHODOLOGY

Graduate students in an accounting information systems course were required to complete a group project, and they were permitted to select their own team members to form groups of two to five students depending on class size. The project involved extensive collaboration whereby team members met to assign individual responsibilities and then created one project report by combining the various components of the project such as organizational summary and structure, documentation, internal control evaluation, recommendations, and conclusions. The teams were also required to present their projects to the class and upon completion they were asked to evaluate each team member in their group, including their self, in each of the six categories listed below. Students rated their self and their team members using the following evaluation scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Very Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A seventh item was a question asking whether or not the student would work with this team member in a group setting again, eliciting a “yes” or “no” response. The evaluations also allowed for optional open-ended student comments.

Survey Questions:

1. Willingness to work in the group - preparedness, arranging meetings, resolving differences, dividing work, cooperation, etc.
2. Effectively communicating with team members
3. Completing assigned work on a timely basis
4. The value, quality, and/or accuracy of his/her contributions to the team’s work
5. Did his/her share of the team’s work
6. Overall performance on group case work
7. Would you work with this person in a group setting again? (Y/N)

RESULTS

Our sample includes 488 evaluations in total, which is comprised of 356 peer evaluations and 132 self evaluations. The surveys were obtained from classes during Fall 2010 through Spring 2015 semesters. Some evaluations were turned in on paper, and students had the option of submitting the survey via email. In either case, the confidentiality of the survey results was maintained. Students were required to complete the evaluation. However, some students chose not to submit the evaluation. Our sample includes 204 participating students.

The rankings given by students are summarized in Table 1, and overall, students assigned their peers high marks. The mean overall score is 4.729 (the median is 5 for all categories), and 91.9% of students said they would work with this teammate again. The most critical marks were given for communication (mean 4.714), and the highest scores were for timely delivery of work (mean 4.819). In this age of technology, students appear to have high expectations for communication.

Upon examination of the optional comments written on the evaluations, it is not surprising that our sample of students gave high ratings to teammates. We find that of the 488 evaluations, 222 (45%), or nearly half, include comments and 178 (80%) of those comments are positive, while only 25 (11%) are negative, and 19 (9%) are neutral. While the negative comments allow us to explore reasons why a student would not be willing to work with a teammate in a group in the future as discussed later, the positive comments provide insight into why a group member was rated highly. Over half (65%) of the positive comments were related to either the ease of working with a teammate (37%), for example “…great team player…” or “…easy to work with…” or a teammate’s contribution (28%) such as “…put a lot of time and effort into the project…” The remaining comments related to leadership skills (8%) such as “…took the lead on coordinating assignments and setting deadlines…,” communication (9%) for example “…kept the group informed of progress…,” timeliness (4%), and “other” (15%). It is beneficial to understand how students perceive a good teammate in order that accountants can perfect those collaboration skills which co-workers find valuable. Additionally, instructors can use these qualities to evaluate the performance of students working on a team project.

Table 1 - Summary Rating of Teammates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>N = 356</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Willing Work in Group</td>
<td>4.812</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Communication</td>
<td>4.714</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Delivered On Time</td>
<td>4.829</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quality Of Work</td>
<td>4.722</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Did Their Share</td>
<td>4.778</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Overall Performance</td>
<td>4.729</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Work With Again</td>
<td>0.919</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the differences between gender evaluations. Men were ranked significantly higher in communication (90% confidence level) compared to the women in our sample. Men were also ranked slightly higher for overall performance and for willingness to work with on a future project, but the
differences are not statistically significant. On the other hand women were ranked higher for doing their share of the project and delivering their work on time, but again the differences are not significant. Overall, the ratings in our sample between men and women are highly similar. These results are in contrast to Takeda and Homberg (2014) who find that all-male groups underperform and solo-males (one male in a female group) exhibit reduced collaborative behavior. In part, this alternate finding could be due to differences in demographics for the graduate student population in our sample.

Table 2 - Performance of Men versus Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>WOMEN (N = 170)</th>
<th>MEN (N = 186)</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Willing Work in Group</td>
<td>4.812</td>
<td>4.812</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Communication</td>
<td>4.682</td>
<td>4.742</td>
<td>-0.06*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Delivered On Time</td>
<td>4.835</td>
<td>4.823</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quality Of Work</td>
<td>4.724</td>
<td>4.720</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Did Their Share</td>
<td>4.806</td>
<td>4.753</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Overall Performance</td>
<td>4.718</td>
<td>4.739</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Work With Again</td>
<td>4.718</td>
<td>4.739</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another gender aspect is how men and women evaluate others, shown in Table 3. In our sample, men were more critical of their peers’ willingness to work, communication, and on-time delivery of work. Women were more critical of quality of work and sharing in the workload and handed out slightly lower overall ratings. However, as with evaluations of men and women, the evaluations by men and women are not statistically different in most of the categories. One significant difference is detected between men and women as evaluators. Women were more likely to say they would not work with a teammate again (90% confidence level). We interpret this as women are more likely to identify “free riders” or group members who do not contribute to the project (Elliott and Higgins, 2005; Hall and Buzwell, 2012).

Table 3 - Evaluations by Men versus Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>WOMEN (N = 170)</th>
<th>MEN (N = 186)</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Willing Work in Group</td>
<td>4.828</td>
<td>4.797</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Communication</td>
<td>4.753</td>
<td>4.676</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Delivered On Time</td>
<td>4.845</td>
<td>4.813</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quality Of Work</td>
<td>4.707</td>
<td>4.736</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Did Their Share</td>
<td>4.770</td>
<td>4.786</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Overall Performance</td>
<td>4.698</td>
<td>4.758</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Work With Again</td>
<td>0.891</td>
<td>0.945</td>
<td>0.05*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 provides a synopsis of the reasons why students did not want to work with a teammate again. Most students were willing to work with their teammates again, however students identified 29 teammates (8.1%) that they would not be willing to work with on a future project. Interestingly, the performance ratings for these students were not extremely low. The strongest criticisms leading to a broken teammate relationship are in the categories of quality of work and overall performance, but willingness to participate and sharing in the workload also received low marks. The differences between

1 Significance for differences is indicated at 1%, 5%, and 10% with *, **, *** respectively in all tables.
rejected teammates and those who were welcomed back for a future project are statistically significant (99% confidence level). These results indicate that students may not be willing to assign their peers a low evaluation even in cases where they do not want to work with a teammate in the future. This brings into question whether students are willing to evaluate their peers critically and provide an accurate assessment of their teammate’s work.

Table 4 - Would you work with this person again?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes N = 327</th>
<th>No N = 29</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Willing Work in Group</td>
<td>3.552</td>
<td>4.916</td>
<td>1.36 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Communication</td>
<td>3.483</td>
<td>4.833</td>
<td>1.35 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Delivered On Time</td>
<td>4.000</td>
<td>4.924</td>
<td>0.92 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quality Of Work</td>
<td>3.172</td>
<td>4.856</td>
<td>1.68 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Did Their Share</td>
<td>3.517</td>
<td>4.916</td>
<td>1.40 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Overall Performance</td>
<td>3.327</td>
<td>4.848</td>
<td>1.52 ***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In an effort to further understand reasons why a student is unwilling to work with a teammate in the future, we examine the optional comments provided by students. Recall that of the 222 (45%) evaluations which include comments, only 25 (11%) are negative. Of the 25 negative comments provided by students, 18 (72%) were accompanied by a rating of “No” under the question “Would you work with this person in a group setting again?” Half of these negative comments (9 out of 18), relate to quality of work. Common phrases included “…had to redo work…,” and “…did not submit a quality product…” The remaining comments either indicate that the teammate was “…difficult to work with…” or did not communicate well, for example “…did not attend meetings or answer emails…” When accountants are called upon to work in a team setting they should strive to submit high-quality work and communicate effectively with team members. These are important aspects that instructors should consider when assigning grades for a student’s performance on a team project.

The participants’ evaluations of self versus teammate are shown in Table 5. Looking at the ‘Difference’ column, students ranked themselves higher in every category by at least one tenth of a point. The largest differential in self versus peer evaluation is in the category of ‘share of work performed.’ Participants viewed their own contribution to be higher than what was perceived by their teammates. In fact students, on average, ranked themselves higher in every category by at least one tenth of a point compared to how their teammates rated them. The largest differential in self- versus peer- evaluation is in the category of ‘share of work performed,’ and the next highest difference is in the category of quality of work. Again, students appear to view the quality of their work as higher than their teammates’ perception of the quality of their work. In most cases, there were multiple peer-evaluations for an individual, but only
one self-evaluation, which is why there are 356 peer evaluations compared to 132 self evaluations. These results are consistent with prior literature studies (Johnston & Miles, 2004) of self and peer evaluations where evidence of self-bias is identified, whereby students rate their own contribution higher than their teammates.

Table 5 - Self versus Peer Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Peer - Evaluation</th>
<th>Self - Evaluation</th>
<th>Difference¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 356</td>
<td>N = 132</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Willing Work in Group</td>
<td>4.812</td>
<td>4.917</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Communication</td>
<td>4.713</td>
<td>4.833</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Delivered On Time</td>
<td>4.829</td>
<td>4.924</td>
<td>0.10**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quality Of Work</td>
<td>4.722</td>
<td>4.856</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Did Their Share</td>
<td>4.778</td>
<td>4.917</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Overall Performance</td>
<td>4.729</td>
<td>4.848</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An additional factor we noticed when studying these evaluations and related comments was that the qualitative evaluations of team members did not always match the quantitative rating students assigned to their peers. For example, some students wrote about their teammate “had to re-do some of their work,” yet they assigned a high numeric rating for performance. Another example is comments such as “did not return emails,” and yet the teammate was given a high score for communication. This discrepancy between comments and ratings is anecdotal, yet it indicates an area for future evaluation and also further suggests that teammates may be reluctant to critically evaluate their peers.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ACCOUNTING PROFESSIONALS & INSTRUCTORS

Effective team building skills and interpersonal skills are not just for students, these are skills that accounting professionals continue to develop throughout their career, whether they are in public accounting, private industry, or internal auditing. For example, EY sent Partners and Directors to seminars based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MTBI) instrument. The seminars were focused on improving interpersonal skills by first understanding yourself (International, 2004). Mary Werner, CPA and certified executive coach, refers to teamwork as the, “…lifeblood of a successful CPA firm (Werner 2010).” CFO’s, who are typically late in their career, are challenged to partner with their business to add value (Bilbrough, 2013). PwC and the IIA performed studies of the internal audit profession and concluded that internal auditors need more leadership skills and connection to their business-focused peers if their profession is to “remain relevant” (Whitehouse, 2011).
Today’s generation of accountants has more to manage than ever due to the evolution of technology. As more communication is done electronically, accountants must not only manage relationships in person but also while using technology such as email and text. One study performed on undergraduate college students found that their communication and self-concept were improved by this technology (Sponcil and Gitimu, 2012); however, communication technology will likely continue to grow in complexity and variety. Therefore, it is essential that accounting students are challenged to develop and improve their communication skills in a team setting, and receive valuable feedback about their performance.

Accounting educators should seek to advance their students’ collaborative and team-based skills as employers demand these skills in a fast-paced and technologically advanced business environment. This study indicates that high quality work and effective communication are critical components in a team setting. Individual team members should avoid perceiving their contribution as overly significant. Also, women may be more willing to call attention to “free-riders” in a group setting. Finally, individuals appreciate colleagues that are easy to work with, and communicate well. Teammates, on the whole, tend to provide positive feedback about their peers and appreciate their dedication to the project. It is important that students recognize the qualities of an effective group member so they can continue to sharpen their team-based skills in a competitive workplace.

Instructors should use caution when incorporating peer evaluations into a student’s grade on a team project. In our sample of students and evaluations, students tend to rate their teammates high. Students may be unwilling to rate their peers low even in cases when they are unwilling to work with a teammate again in the future. On the other hand, students tend to see their own contribution as greater than what is perceived by their peers. In summary, while peer evaluations may be necessary to identify extreme cases of “social-loafing” where the instructor may find it necessary to adjust a student’s grade, peer assessments may not accurately reflect a student’s performance on a group project and may tend to be a bit overly-generous due to students reluctance to be critical of their peers. Overall, peer evaluations reveal qualities that make a teammate valuable and provide insight into areas in which students do not live up to their teammates expectations.

REFERENCES


Werner, M. C. Teamwork is a Contact Sport: Seven Skills of High-Performance Teams.” *CPA Practice Management Forum*, 6 (2010).