

Finding answers in the Human Resource's office: An Escape room activity

Abstract:

I bring to the classroom the experience of an escape room game. The game's scenario, tasks students with finding answers to questions related to Human Resource (HR) topics. The game is intended as an experiential activity that allows students to experience the dynamic interactions among team members in collaborative settings, while applying their critical thinking and understanding of specific HR concepts. The game targets students understanding of types of recruitment, selection, and of specific types of performance evaluation forms. The game can be done in a 75-minute class session and is suited for both, graduate and undergraduate students.

Key words: Escape room game, experiential exercise, HR

Introduction

Human Resources (HR) play an integral role in any organization. Despite its heavy presence in the management textbooks, and its critical role in the corporate world, I have noticed students' lack of engagement when HR concepts are discussed. Thus, I have felt the need for a more engaging way to convey some of the material related to HR.

This 90-minute activity session aims at demonstrating how I engage students to apply, in a fun way, specific HR topics, such as recruitment and selection, as well as specific types of performance evaluation forms. The proposed activity is applicable for in-person classrooms and could successfully be used in classes such as Organizational Behavior, HRM, Introduction to Management, or any class that teaches fundamentals of HR.

Theoretical Foundation

To help students understand some of the HR-related concepts, I have designed an activity inspired by a very popular social game, the escape room. In an escape room game, people are locked in a room for a given amount of time. To unlock the door and escape, players must discover clues, solve puzzles and riddles, and accomplish tasks (Nicholson, 2015). Each escape room game has a narrative that provides players with a reason to unlock the door. The escape room games are interactive and engaging for they require constant collaboration, skill- and knowledge application and communication among all players in the room, all of which I believe, make them ideal for teaching and engaging students in the classroom.

Learning Objectives

Ideally, by participating in the game, students will (1) identify specific recruiting- and substantive selection methods; (2) explain the applicability of escape rooms in recruitment- and training efforts; and (3) identify specific performance evaluation forms.

I also have two Goals in mind for the MOBTS session participants:

Goal A: To provide participants with ideas how to accomplish the above student learning objectives in the classroom.

Goal B: To receive feedback as to how the class experience and application could be improved along with addressing questions that participants might have in relation to the presentation.

Activity Overview

I initially designed the game for a class of 40 students with the intent to engage the audience in hands-on learning and application of HR-related material. Over the last couple of semesters, however, I have realized that 1) the activity can be successfully executed in class sizes ranging anywhere from 10 to 40 students and 2) in addition to HR topics, the game successfully facilitates the learning of a variety of OB topics (e.g., leadership, teamwork, communication, decision-making). I have discovered that the ideal class size ranges between 16 and 40 students, divided into 2 to 5 groups of 8 students per group. In my experience, forcing students to accomplish the task in 50 minutes for extra credit, adds an additional motivation and excitement about the game playing on the part of the students.

I have used this game to facilitate learning, with both homogenous and mixed culture groups at undergraduate- and traditional MBA levels. The simulation is appropriate to use immediately after the basics of HR are covered.

Prior to running the activity, I introduce the fundamentals of HR, including topics such as recruitment, selection, and performance evaluation. This introduction takes about 75 minutes, thus, in a class that meets twice per week, I begin with the theoretical foundations and then transition to the game the following meeting. In a class that meets once per week, the lecture is

presented first, followed by the game. Instructors could choose to also pre-record their lectures and upload them onto their LMS prior to running the activity.

To run the escape room game, 10 minutes prior to the event, I: (1) arrange the front of the classroom to look like the missing employee's office with a desk, chair, trash can under the desk, "safe" box, etc. (see Appendix 1 for the materials needed) and (2) upload the power point (Appendix 2) onto the classroom's computer screen. I also bring copies of the power point, enough for each student. The actual game consists of three phases – setting up and general introduction, play time, and debrief. These three phases can be covered in one 75-minute class session.

Introducing the game (5 minutes)

1. I project on the screen a power point slide that introduces the events that lead to the current situation. I introduce the scenario and the game to the class. My escape room story places students in the office of the missing head of the HR department. Students are told that the CEO of the company has requested a meeting to discuss the job search efforts and results as well as Kim Lee's performance evaluation, all done by the missing HR employee (Chris). Given, that Chris is their direct supervisor, the team has to attend the meeting and answer the CEO's questions. The situation is urgent - teams have only fifty minutes to find out: 1) Which specific type of recruitment was used, 2) Which type of substantive selection did Chris use, 3) Who was hired, and 4) What type of Performance evaluation was used to assess Kim Lee's performance.

2. I show the goals, rules, and procedures on a second slide. The second slide remains projected for the entire duration of the game as a visual reminder of the mechanics of the game. The timer reminds students of the time left to game completion.

3. I start the 50-minute timer, imbedded in the second slide.

Playing the game (50 minutes)

The elements of the game, including the clues, the puzzles, and the riddles, further shape the story of what happened. Ultimately, students would discover that Chris used an employee referral approach to recruit, and as a follow up step, proceeded with interviewing the potential hires (as a substantive selection method). Chris' pick for the position was Vera B. Lastly, Chris used Graphic Rating Scale to assess Kim Lee's performance.

While students are working on the tasks, I simply observe the teams. I only get involved in cases of 1) technical issues, such as batteries needing replacement and/or 2) answer verifications. The involvement here is in the form of announcing of whether the team is correct and "has escaped"¹.

Debrief (20 minutes)

I engage the classroom in a discussion about the game. I begin with disclosing the answers and the concepts behind the game (internal recruitment, selection, performance evaluation form; see Appendix 3). I then transition to asking questions, related to the learning objectives. If time is of essence, instructors could assign a reflection paper to be turned in next class meeting addressing the questions described in the debrief section. I have attached the debrief questions in Appendix 4.

MOBTS Session Description

After a brief introduction, the bulk of this session will involve engaging participants in a demonstration and discussion of the activity. The session will close with a dialogue regarding participants' thoughts, reactions, and questions. Conference participants will be encouraged to

¹ If a team was able to provide all of the correct answers, they are told "correct, you have escaped". If they are incorrect, I simply say "Incorrect. Continue". If there is still a lot of time left, I ask the team that has escaped to leave the room for the remaining time and come back for the debrief session.

share their own experiences as well. This dialogue is important for many reasons. Specifically, participants will have the opportunity to leaf through the resources they can use in the classroom and assess the benefits and challenges of using the presented activity in their own classroom.

My presentation will be covered in a 90-minute session and will be in the following format:

<i>Introduction (purpose of session and set up)</i>	5 minutes
<i>Presentation and Session Activities:</i>	
Conference participants play the escape room activity (Goal A)	50 minutes
Conference participants engage in plenary debrief (Goal A)	20 minutes
<i>Dialogue:</i>	
Conference participants share their impressions of the activity (Goal B)	5 minutes
Conference participants suggest improvements (Goal B)	5 minutes
Participants share their experiences with similar activities (Goal B)	5 minutes

Unique Contribution

This presentation is unique and novel and has not been presented or considered for publication elsewhere.

References

Nicholson, S. (2015). *Peeking behind the locked door: A survey of escape room facilities*. White

Paper available at <http://scottnicholson.com/pubs/erfacwhite.pdf>

Appendix 1: Required Materials

In Chris’ office, students see:

- Trash can with shredded piece of paper and a “Keep Calm and Call HR card” (with conversion table and “even for one question” message on the back). On each side of the shredded paper, there is a message.
- Clipboard with clipped-in copies of the power point.
- Stack of scratch paper.
- Big “Safe” Box. The box is locked with a (4) digit combination lock. Inside the Big “Safe” Box:

- Filled Graphic Rating Scale form (Kim Lee’s performance evaluation)
- Calendar with names and secret message inside, written with invisible ink (to be seen with a blue light only)
- Rotary phone card with coded message as a number to dial
- Cocktail booklet
- 3-digit lock combination riddle printout
- Batteries for the blue light
- Small Box with a key padlock. Small Box contains:
 - Blue light (with empty battery compartment)
 - “Seven” riddle note

Item	Quantity	Location	Reason/Clue/Answer
Invisible ink pen	1 for the instructor		Assist the game design in writing a secret message.
Power point presentation	1 for the instructor	Uploaded on a class computer	Contains the game scenario, rules, countdown clock, and debrief points.

Scenario print out	1 per team	Clipped to a clipboard	Allows teams for answer all of the questions.
Scratch paper	3-4 sheets per team	On a table/desk	Assist in solving riddles and clues.
Clipboard	1 per team	On a table/desk	To help read a message on a two-sided shredded paper (helpful, but not mandatory). To hold the scenario print-out.
Trash can	1 per team	Under/near a table/desk	Contains clues: 1. Shredded message and 2. Keep Calm and Call HR card. These clues are used to help open the 1. Big Box (aka safe) and 2. Small Box.
Shredded Paper with message	1 per team	Trash can	Message that gives the code to opening the Big box (safe); Message that answers Q2 (Interviews)
Keep Calm and Call HR card (with conversion table and “even for one question” message on the back)	1 per team	Trash can	Contains clues to help answer Q1 (Employee Referral) . Must be combined with the rotary phone card.
Large Box, locked with a (4) digit combination lock	1 per team	On a table/desk	Contains clues: calendar, cocktail book, Kim Lee’s evaluation form, rotary phone card and 3-digit lock combination riddle. These clues are needed to help answering Q1, Q2, Q3, and Q4 (Graphic Rating Scale).
Filled in Graphic Rating Scale form for Kim Lee’s performance evaluation	1 per team	Big box	Answers Q4 (Graphic Rating Scale) . Students must be able to identify the form as GRS and not any other form.
Rotary phone card with coded message as a number to dial	1 per team	Big box	When combined with Call HR card, helps to answer Q1.
Cocktail booklet	1 per team	Big box	When combined with the 3-digit lock combination riddle, allows to open the small box. The correct answer, mentioned to the instructor, lets her to open the small box with the key she has.

3-digit lock combination riddle printout	1 per team	Big box	When combined with the cocktail book, allows to open the small box. The correct answer, mentioned to the instructor, lets her to open the small box with the key she has.
Batteries for the blue light	1 set per team	Big box	When combined with the blue light from the small box, allow to read a message written with invisible ink that helps to answer Q3.
Small Box with a key padlock	1 per team	Big box	Contains clues: blue light without the batteries and “seven” riddle printout. These clues are needed to answer Q3. Key stays with the instructor. When presented with the correct phrase by the players, the instructor opens the small box with the key they have.
Calendar	1 per team	Big box	Contains names of random individuals, one of which was hired. When combined with the blue light from the small box, allow to read a message written with invisible ink that helps to answer Q3.
Blue light	1 per team	Small box	When combined with the calendar from the big box, allow to read a message written with invisible ink that helps to answer Q3.
“Seven” riddle note	1 per team	Small box	“Add one letter to me and I go from even to odd. What am I?” Answer: seven (points to the candidate NO. 7 on the June calendar as the selected one for the position). When combined with the calendar and the blue light (to read an invisible ink message), helps to answer Q3 (Vera B.)

Appendix 2: Game Power Point – Scenario and Rules

Slide 1:

INTRODUCTION



Chris is gone missing. When you try Chris' cell phone – it goes directly to Voice Mail. Chris is the head of the HR department. Unfortunately, with Chris gone, so are Chris' notes on the recent:

1. Job search and candidate selection for the Accounts Payable position, and
2. Performance evaluation of the Head of the IT department, Kim Lee.

The CEO of the company has requested a meeting to discuss the job search efforts and results as well as Kim Lee's performance evaluation. Given, that Chris is your direct supervisor, you have to attend the meeting and answer the CEO's questions. But where is Chris? Where are the notes on the job search and performance evaluation? Knowing Chris, you know he has the answers to the above questions, but due to security and liability concerns, the answers are not in plain view in his office. You asked security to let you in Chris' office. You are now in possession of Chris' Trash can and Safe.

You have **50 minutes** before the meeting with the CEO and thus, you need to find information on:

1. Which specific type of recruiting was used?
2. Which type of substantive selection did Chris use?
3. Who was hired?
4. What type of Performance evaluation was used to assess Kim Lee's performance?

Slide 2:

OBJECTIVES AND RULES

For those of you who have participated in an Escape Room, this exercise is similar, except that your door is closed but not locked.

Please, be kind and do not break the props. Do not write on anything, but on the provided scratch paper. Thank you!

You have 50 minutes to find out:

1. Which specific type of recruiting was used?
2. Which type of substantive selection did Chris use?
3. Who was hired?
4. What type of Performance evaluation was used to assess Kim Lee's performance?



Once you feel confident in your answers to these questions, use your handout, noting your team's name and responses to the above questions. If you have the correct answer, I will "open" your door; if you do not have the correct answers, I will say "incorrect", and you can continue (if time allows).

Appendix 3: Answers to the Game Questions

Students are first presented with a Big “Safe” Box. The box is locked with a (4) digit combination lock. To open the lock, students must find the trash can. One of the items in the trash can is a shredded piece of paper with messages on each side. The shredded message #1 spells the code for the lock (in my case: the lock contained four rows with two digits per row, thus I spelled “seventy eight, four times” – students have to enter 78 on each of the four rows).

Shredded paper with message:

Side 1: **opens the lock of the big box**

Seventy eight, four times

Note: if instructor is using a different lock combination, they can spell their combination.

Side 2: **answers question N0.2 (Interviews)**

Calendar in the safe contains the names and dates of the people I *interviewed* for the job.

(1) Which specific type of recruitment was used: Employee referral. Artifacts:

HR card Clue: when combined with the rotary phone card answers question N0.1 (Referral)

Side 1:



Side 2: Even for one question and conversion table

Even for one question		
A = 1	K = 11	U = 21
B = 2	L = 12	V = 22
C = 3	M = 13	W = 23
D = 4	N = 14	X = 24
E = 5	O = 15	Y = 25
F = 6	P = 16	Z = 26
G = 7	Q = 17	
H = 8	R = 18	
I = 9	S = 19	
J = 10	T = 20	

Rotary phone card with coded message: when combined with the Keep Calm and call HR card answers question N0.1 (Referral)



The number on the phone is to be converted (using the keep calm card and attached code) into letters that read “**referral**”

- 18 = R
- 5 = E
- 6 = F
- 5 = E
- 18 = R
- 18 = R
- 1 = A
- 12 = L

(2) Which type of substantive selection did Chris use: Interview. Artifact:

The shredded message #2 (retrieved from the Trash can) spells:

Calendar in the safe contains the names and dates of the people I interviewed for the job.

To open the Small Box, students must tell the instructor a 3-coctail combination phrase.

Cocktail booklet: when combined with the 3-digit lock riddle, produces an answer phrase.

The mention of this phrase to the instructor, allows the latter (has the key in their possession) to open the small box.

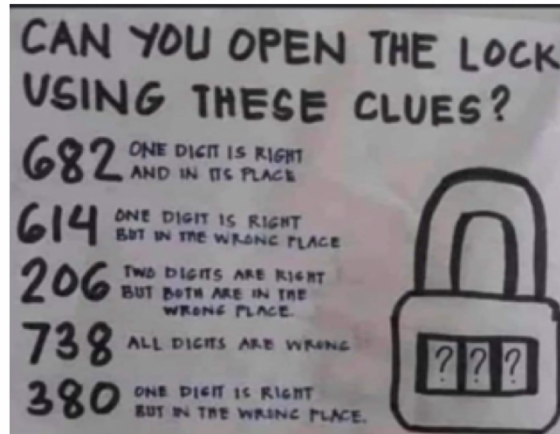
Includes cocktail recipes numbered from 0 to 15.

<p>No. 0</p> <p>GRAPEFRUIT COLLINS</p> <p>2 oz GIN ¾ oz LEMON JUICE ¾ oz SIMPLE SYRUP 1 ½ oz GRAPEFRUIT JUICE</p> <p>Combine all ingredients except soda in a cocktail shaker with ice and shake. Strain into a chilled Collins glass and fill with ice. Top with soda. Garnish with grapefruit slice.</p>	<p>No. 1</p> <p>JACK ROSE</p> <p>2 oz APPLEJACK ¾ oz LIME ¾ oz GRENADINE</p> <p>First, make grenadine by combining 8oz pomegranate juice with 1L simple syrup. Then, add applejack, lime and grenadine to a shaker fill with ice and shake. Strain and garnish with an apple slice. Drink alongside 1775: Rebellion or Founding Fathers.</p>	<p>No. 2</p> <p>SIDECAR</p> <p>1 oz COGNAC/BRANDY 1 oz ORANGE LIQUEUR ¾ oz FRESH LEMON JUICE ORANGE PEEL</p> <p>Pour all ingredients into a shaker with ice. Shake and strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Garnish with an orange peel.</p>	<p>No. 3</p> <p>YELLOW BIRD</p> <p>1 oz WHITE RUM ½ oz GALLIANO ½ oz TRIPLE SEC ½ oz LIME JUICE</p> <p>Shake and strain into a chilled cocktail glass.</p>	<p>No. 4</p> <p>BACKSEAT BOOGIE</p> <p>¾ oz VODKA ¾ oz GIN CRANBERRY JUICE DRY GINGER ALE</p> <p>Pour Gin and Vodka over ice, followed by the cranberry juice and then the ginger ale.</p>
<p>No. 5</p> <p>DIAMONDBACK</p> <p>1 ½ oz RYE WHISKEY ¾ oz APPLE BRANDY ¾ oz GREEN CHARTREUSE COCKTAIL CHERRY</p> <p>Pour all ingredients into a mixing glass with ice. Stir well and strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Garnish with a cocktail cherry.</p>	<p>No. 6</p> <p>SOUTHSIDE</p> <p>2 oz GIN 1 oz LIME JUICE ½ oz SUGAR SYRUP (2:1) 7 MINT LEAVES</p> <p>Shake all your ingredients with ice. Double strain into a chilled glass.</p>	<p>No. 7</p> <p>FLORADORA</p> <p>50 ml GIN 25 ml LIME JUICE 25 ml RASPBERRY SYRUP GINGER ALE RASPBERRIES, TO GARNISH</p> <p>Shake the gin, lime juice and raspberry syrup with ice. Strain into a Collins glass filled with ice cubes and top with ginger ale. Garnish with a few raspberries.</p>	<p>No. 8</p> <p>GIN RICKEY</p> <p>2 oz GIN 1 oz LIME JUICE ½ oz SIMPLE SYRUP</p> <p>Build ingredients over ice. Garnish with lime wheel.</p>	<p>No. 9</p> <p>GRAPEFRUIT COLLINS</p> <p>2 oz GIN ¾ oz LEMON JUICE ¾ oz SIMPLE SYRUP 1 ½ oz GRAPEFRUIT JUICE</p> <p>Combine all ingredients except soda in a cocktail shaker with ice and shake. Strain into a chilled Collins glass and fill with ice. Top with soda. Garnish with grapefruit slice.</p>
<p>No. 10</p> <p>MAPLE BOURBON SMASH</p> <p>2 oz BOURBON 1 oz LEMON JUICE 1 oz MAPLE SYRUP</p> <p>Add all ingredients into a shaker with ice. Shake, and strain into an old fashioned glass with a single large ice cube. Garnish with lemon peel.</p>	<p>No. 11</p> <p>FALL INTO ITALY</p> <p>¾ oz COGNAC ¾ oz AVERNA AMARO ¾ oz JAMAICAN AGED RUM ¾ oz FRESH LEMON JUICE ¾ oz SIMPLE SYRUP (1:1) 2 DASH MOLE BITTERS ORANGE SLICE</p> <p>Shake all ingredients together and strain into an Old Fashioned glass with crushed ice. Garnish with an orange slice.</p>	<p>No. 12</p> <p>ARMY & NAVY</p> <p>60 ml GIN 15 ml LEMON JUICE 7 ½ ml ORGEAT</p> <p>Shake all ingredients together and double strain into coupe glass. Garnish with a lemon twist.</p>	<p>No. 13</p> <p>BLUE HAWAIIAN</p> <p>3 oz PINEAPPLE JUICE ½ oz BLUE CURAÇAO 1 oz GOLDEN RUM 1 oz CREAM OF COCONUT 1 LIME WEDGE</p> <p>Fill a highball glass with ice and pour the first 4 ingredients into the glass. Cover with a cocktail shaker, shake to blend, and drop in the lime wedge. #Tiki</p>	<p>No. 14</p> <p>STAY UP VERY LATE</p> <p>1 ½ oz GIN ½ oz COGNAC ¾ oz LEMON JUICE ¾ oz SUGAR SYRUP 1 DASH ABSINTHE SODA LEMON WEDGE, TO GARNISH</p> <p>Add all your ingredients except soda into a shaker with ice and shake. Strain into a chilled Collins glass and fill with ice. Top with soda. Garnish with a lemon wedge.</p>
<p>No. 15</p> <p>FORT DEFIANCE G&T</p> <p>3 CARDAMOM PODS 2 oz NAVY STRENGTH GIN 1 oz FRESH PINEAPPLE JUICE ¾ oz SIMPLE SYRUP ¾ oz LIME JUICE TONIC WATER</p> <p>Place cardamom pods in a shaker and crack with a muddler. Add remaining ingredients except tonic and fill shaker with ice. Shake and fine strain into a tall tiki mug over fresh ice. Top with tonic. Stir gently and garnish with pineapple leaves.</p>				

3-digit lock riddle to accompany the cocktail booklet (to open the small box): when combined with the cocktail booklet, produces an answer phrase. The mention of this phrase to the instructor, allows the latter to open the small box.

I met this amazing professor! She is all about riddles, so if you see her and if you were able to solve the lock combination below, let her know. She may have something you need.

Make sure to give her **the answer in cocktail terms**.



Answer: **Grapefruit Collins; Backseat Boogie; Sidecar** (042)

The small box contains the Blue light as well as a riddle note. These two artifacts (see below) answer question 3.

(3) *Who was hired: Vera B.* Artifacts:

Invisible ink message: when combined with the calendar with names, “Seven” riddle, answers Question N0. 3 (Vera B).

Written anywhere on the calendar:

Hello! Look at the list in June. Open the small box to get the answer to question N0. 3.

“Seven” Riddle: when combined with the invisible ink message, answers Question N0. 3.

“Add one letter to me and I go from even to odd. What am I?”

Answer: **seven** (points to the candidate N0. 7 on the June calendar as the one selected for the position).

(4) What type of Performance evaluation was used to assess Kim Lee's performance:

Graphic Rating Scales. Artifact:

Employee Performance Appraisal
XYZ Company

Employee's Name _____
Title _____
Department _____

Please put an X in the area which best describes this employee's performance.

Attribute	Above Average	Average	Below Expectations
Dependable			
Shows problem solving ability			
Works well in a team			
Takes initiative			
Produces high quality work			
Shows leadership within department			
Communication ability			

Please provide specific comments which describe the ratings for each category.

Date _____
Signature of employee _____
Signature of manager _____

Appendix 4: Activity Debrief

Slide 1:

Can we use Escape Room activities for recruitment?

• How?

- Demonstrate leadership potential
- Demonstrate communication, logic
- Demonstrate problem-solving skills
- Demonstrate ability to work in a team
- Demonstrate how a person deals with pressure
- Show the REAL candidate
- PR for the company

Slide 2:

What are some of the advantages of internal recruitment?

- PR
- Builds morale
- Encourages qualified ambitious employees
- High probability of good selection (available information)
- Promotes cost savings
- Candidates know the organization
- Referrals:
 - employee's motivation to make a good recommendation
 - availability of accurate job information for the recruit
 - helps to locate applicants for hard-to-fill positions
 - tend to have more acceptable applicants, to be more likely to accept an offer, and to have a higher survival rate.

Slide 3:

What are some of the disadvantages of internal recruitment?

- Possible inferiority of internal candidates against better ones
- Potential inbreeding
- New job gap (created by the person who got the new job)
- Referrals:
 - Possibility of friendship being confused with job performance
 - Infighting and morale problems
 - Potential for nepotism

Slide 4:

Can we use Escape Room activities for training?

- Basic skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Civility
- Ethical training