

Examiners' Report/ Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2016

Pearson Edexcel GCE
in Applied Business (6916)
Unit 1: Investigating People At Work

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General Comments

Following the style and format established in previous series, this question paper had the same Assessment Objective (AO) and Mark Band (MB) weightings. This was the tenth assessment for 6916 to be based on the revised specification Issue 2 - May 2009 which introduced the assessment of the quality of written communication (QWC) in papers for this unit. Questions which carry marks for QWC were indicated by an asterisk (*) shown next to questions 2a and 3a and a statement on the front of the question paper. The structure of the paper also matched the sample assessment material issued June 2009, which included exemplars for the extended writing questions that are now an integral part of the assessment for this unit. In every other way the requirements of the question paper should be directly comparable with previous series.

Based on the work seen from candidates in June 2016 the main issues are as follows:

Handwriting. As reported in past series, the handwriting produced by many candidates continues to deteriorate, to the point that some papers were barely readable. This is not just a subjective comment made by myself, but is repeated in reports back from the marking team, and can be quantified by the marked increase in the number of answers that are sent for 'review' because the markers cannot decipher what has been scrawled across the paper. Linked to the bad handwriting issue is the standard of presentation that many candidates think is acceptable - words just randomly scribbled across the spaces on the question paper. Despite the fact that candidates are expected to demonstrate a reasonable level of QWC in this paper, lettering is often formed badly, words spelt incorrectly (even words which are copied from questions or a given scenario); answers are scribbled quickly and consequently difficult to read. This is an 'applied business' paper, and candidates should be reminded that a certain standard of written communication will be expected should they enter the world of business. The issue of poor handwriting does not appear to concern the candidates themselves, or they would be some attempt to improve matters. There is an apparent assumption amongst some candidates that it is acceptable, and no disadvantage, to produce handwriting that is hard for others to read - they will be in for a harsh realisation when they try to progress to higher education or enter the workplace where communicating in the written form is still used widely.

All examiners will make an effort to decipher poor handwriting, but there is a danger that candidates may miss vital marks if the handwriting is so bad that it cannot be read. The danger of producing answers in poor handwriting is that it is sometimes impossible to mark some answers, and marks may be lost as there is no way of reading the knowledge or application that they may contain.

Generic answers. Another issue that was apparent in this paper was the tendency for some candidates to give generic statements about the topic of a given question, rather than apply their answer to the given scenario or the situation described in the question. As a result, some answers may have been accurate in terms of general business practice, but were totally inappropriate for the given situation, and consequently missed-out on marks. Generic answers are a particular issue with the 'own business' questions - 1f), 1g), 2d), 2e), 3d), 3e) - where candidates gave answers which could have been applied to any business rather than a business that they claim to have studied, and named before they started their answer. It is good practice for candidates to read back their answer to confirm that a) it is actually answering the question asked, and b), that the answer actually makes sense in the context of the question or scenario given.

As noted in previous reports, some candidates seem to treat this paper as a general knowledge quiz, and assume that general answers, peppered with a few business terms, concluding with '...to maximise profit', will suffice for an answer. Candidates need to understand that the insertion of the word 'profit' into every answer is not the way to gain additional marks, and although important, profit is not always the answer. In fact it would be useful if candidates were clear what is meant by 'profit' in a business context - some candidates seem to use the terms 'profit' and 'sales' interchangeably, assuming that an increase in sales will inevitably mean an increase in profit. Linked to this is a tendency in questions which ask for 'one example...' to give a range of examples and expect the marker to select - what? - the correct one? the one which produces most marks?

Candidates should also be told that just stringing together a few meaningless business terms such as '...this will increase...profit, turnover, sales, employees, savings, motivation...' is not an acceptable answer, and markers will not pick out the correct answer or appropriate word on behalf of candidates in some kind of multiple choice exercise. Candidates also need to be reminded that this is an AS level examination and most answers are expected to show some development and application. This means that unless specifically asked for, simplistic answers at the level of single words such as 'easier', 'cheaper', 'quicker', 'faster', etc. are not really acceptable and unlikely to score any marks.

Choice of organisation for 'business you have studied' questions - 1f), 1g), 2d), 2e), 3d), 3e)

There were instances where the business chosen was inappropriate, candidates just writing what they know about the subject of the question with no application to named business ignoring the context that a 'chosen business' should provide, and just basing answers on the subject of the question. As a result, these answers were not appropriate to the chosen business. Using the same business for all 6 x 'own choice' questions rarely works in the candidate's favour, as quite often the business is not appropriate for every question, so candidates struggle to try to make the business fit the question, usually resulting in a response that does not answer the question. This is an applied paper and the spec states that candidates should cover a range of different businesses:

'It is, therefore, important that learners study the nature of work within a wide range of business types and environments. This range should include businesses in or from public and private sectors, primary, secondary and tertiary areas, profit-oriented and not-for-profit environments and the main forms of private sector ownership (sole traders, partnerships, franchises and limited companies). It is important that learners consider business aims, objectives and organisation in context, and they should, therefore, be encouraged to study real businesses.'

It has been observed that candidates who choose smaller, local businesses tend to produce better answers than candidates who choose large national or international 'famous name' businesses. It was also obvious, from the depth and quality of answers, where a candidate had work experience - the answers were much more applied, and somehow 'in the business' rather than just based on theory.

This report is designed to help future teaching and learning, and I hope that it does not come across as unduly negative. Judging from the many papers and answers that I have seen, most candidates have indeed worked hard on their studies and the paper is just designed to give candidates the opportunity of demonstrating, within the terms of the Assessment Objectives for this Unit, just how much they have learned. I offer my congratulations to all students, whatever grade they may ultimately achieve.

The theme of this paper is based on the work involved a partnership, Chloe and Jack, engaged in the up-cycling and sale of vintage furniture. Candidates were given information which explained how the business was set up and run. Despite the focus on one type of business in one sector, none of the questions needed specialist subject knowledge, and the subject does not appear to have caused any problems for candidates.

Comments on individual questions

1a. Most candidates answered this question well, and were able to state four advantages to Chloe and Jack forming a partnership. However, many candidates seemed to think that partnerships have limited liability, whilst this is true for limited companies; in the case of partnerships it only applies to 'limited liability partnerships'. Also, many candidates giving 'shared liabilities' as an advantage - in practice shared liability can be a distinct disadvantage for one partner if the other absconds or cannot pay debts, as they are jointly responsible for their partner's liabilities, and the remaining partner will have to pay all debts.

1b. Most candidates had good knowledge of what objectives are and what they mean for the success of a business, the majority of answers being aligned to the main aim. There was however quite a lot of repetition of this point worded slightly differently. Other responses put employee motivation as being important for the business forgetting there were just two people involved in the partnership.

1c. This question was answered quite well, with most candidates suggesting recycling targets or some other objective related to the environment. Any objective that was explicitly about increasing sales was presumed to be linked to profit, so was not considered to be correct in the context of this question. Some responses that started off well, suggesting improve quality of service to customers, but were then developed into a 'bring in more customers and more sales' type approach. This limited the potential for developing an answer that was not linked directly to profit and which made it difficult to get beyond 2 marks. Better answers stuck to the 're-cycling side' or even 'donating to charity' type responses or to 'the community'. Profit 'spin offs' were too evident on some objectives.

1d. Some candidates responded to this question by giving detailed definitions of what is meant by the term 'external stakeholder', without actually answering the question of how external stakeholders could influence Chloe and Jack. Some candidates gave abstract answers, describing a potential influence, but without actually saying which particular external stakeholder would have the effect described; this is an Applied Business paper - the questions are based on a real situation and the answers expected should also reflect reality, rather than some abstract, textbook, stakeholder. Some candidates alternated the term 'stakeholder' with 'shareholder', which in the context of the business outlined in the scenario for this paper would not apply, as there are no external shareholders mentioned.

1e. Question asks 'How does each role contribute to the success of the business?' The roles are outlined in the scenario, so there are no marks for simply restating what each partner does - candidates needed to explain how the (given) role contributes to the success of the business. Only a small proportion of the responses managed to get full 4 marks showing more analysis and depth of understanding of the creative elements to Chloe's role and also the persuasive nature of Jack's skills needed to ensure success. Many answers tended to be generic, answers which could be applied to any business, rather than the named business. Lots of repetition - having stated an area of responsibility, the descriptions were sometimes very similar, rather than distinctive for the responsibility stated.

1f. Asked to outline the organisational structure of their chosen business, many candidates named the organisational structure - then listed the merits, advantages and disadvantages - rather than outlining how the (named) structure was organised. Other candidates gave reasons for choosing a particular structure, again without actually outlining how it was structured. Candidates need to answer the question asked to gain marks, rather than just writing what they know about a particular topic, in this case organisational structures. Choosing a large organisation like a retail business or school gave candidates the opportunity to write about 'tall structures' and 'hierarchies'. However, candidates who based most of their 'own choice' answers on small, sole trader organisations found it difficult to develop an answer for the question.

1g. In the main, candidates gave full and detailed answers to this question, but weaker candidates tended to give generic lists of management responsibilities rather than actually giving day-to-day responsibilities which would be in context for the business named. Six marks could be gained by the students who went through, listing all the day-to-day activities, but many tended to focus on just one activity, with a long explanation why this was done, limiting the potential for marks for naming other activities. This comes down to reading the question properly, and responding accordingly.

2a. This was the first of the extended writing questions on this paper, and it asked candidates to consider how an unequal financial investment could affect the partnership. Most candidates could see the potential for conflict, stronger candidates started to outline the likely areas of conflict, giving reasonably balanced answers, only the strongest candidates took an overview and came up with a conclusion or solution to the situation, gaining marks in Level 4. Level 2 marks were often present because of an imbalance in the response - only mentioning the negatives for Jack and some negatives for Chloe. When the approach of advantages and disadvantages was taken by the candidate, there appeared to be better depth to the responses as some analysis was taking place and being applied to the partnership.

2b. This question was poorly addressed as many candidates simply did not read what the question was asking for in response. The question just asks for the main steps in the interview process - many described the recruitment process or the selection process, at length - treating the entire recruitment process as 'interview' rather than focusing on the point of the question.

2c. Many candidates just listed a string of different pieces of legislation - the question only asks for one. Some candidates misread the question and switched the focus of legal responsibility from Chloe and Jack to the driver that they recruit, this is not what was asked in the question, so candidates missed marks. Health and safety seemed to be the main response to this question alongside the minimum wage and Working Time Directive.

2d. Candidates asked for the main reason why their chosen business needs to recruit employees - many listed several potential reasons such as retirement, maternity, leaving and so on, but did not develop an outline for any particular reason. This made it difficult to score good marks. There was a tendency for weaker candidates to produce mirror answers for this question e.g. 'the main reason why this business needs to recruit employees...is because it needs employees...' This approach did not score high marks.

2e. In general, candidates showed low levels of knowledge and understanding of 'consumer protection' - often using the term synonymously with Health & Safety, just guessing, presuming that H&S means consumer protection. There was a similar confusion with data protection and employment legislation, with a lot of candidates using these as the basis for their answer. However, it was evident from some answers that some centres are teaching 'consumer protection', based on responses that referred to the Sales of Goods Act or Trade Description Act.

In the Specification for this Unit, section 1.4 How people are influenced at work, learners are told that they will need to consider how the external issues affect different businesses and the people who work in them, legal and self-regulatory constraints, including competition law, consumer protection, the work of trade unions, employment protection and health and safety. As it is listed separately, learners need to understand that consumer protection is distinctly different from and other legislation.

3a. This was the second of the extended writing questions on this paper, and it asked candidates to discuss the different roles of a job description and a person specification in the recruitment and selection process. This question produced many good answers, mainly descriptive of the two documents, but stronger candidates developed their answer to discuss how each document would be used in the recruitment and selection process. The majority of responses were at the top end of Level 2 or into Level 3, giving some advantages to the 'use side' of the documents within the whole process. Candidates who were clear on the aspect of the person specification being able to save time and effort in trying to ensure the 'right candidates' were being interviewed and compared, were marked at the top of Level 3. To achieve Level 4, candidates need to demonstrate not only a thorough understanding of the different roles of a job description and a person specification, but to discuss, with accuracy, these different roles and how each document is used.

3b. Most candidates had good knowledge of motivation theories - Taylor was the example used by most candidates, followed by Maslow, McGregor, Mayo and Herzberg in that order. Stronger candidates had a better understanding of the theories, and were able to outline how the management theory influences the management of employees. The candidates could generally give the name of the Theorist - with Taylorism being a big favourite and Maslow. Many students just gave Theory X or Theory Y as their whole answer. The main difficulty with this question was often a lack of any comment on the influence of how a business manages its employees. The better ones came from using McGregor and picking up on the approach of theory X and Y. Some candidates gave Herzberg's hygiene factors and motivators, as well as Mayo and team working aspects.

3c. Most candidates gave good reasons for why it is important for Chloe and Jack to motivate the new driver, the stronger candidates offered some explanation to develop given reasons. Overall well answered question, marks gained easily by candidates who understood that keeping the driver happy would assist with deliveries, developing the answer further onto customer service, retaining the employee and so on.

3d. Question only asks for one example of how working conditions are used (by named business) to retain employees. Many candidates listed out a range of examples of good working conditions, but did not outline any single example - this limited marks. Also, some candidates wrote generically about working conditions and the effect on motivation, rather than staff retention, again missing the point of the question and limiting markers' ability to give marks. A lot of responses had 'Google' as the inspirational 'working conditions', but often the responses picked up on just the safety aspect which was sometimes linked to motivation. A proportion of responses just repeated working conditions which are statutory rights, making it more difficult to identify the particular working conditions used by the named business. Some weak responses just repeated parts of the question such as 'working conditions are good' but said little else to justify any marks.

3e. Most candidates seemed to be extremely familiar with the use of financial incentives in general. In contrast, there was some misreading of the question which resulted in answers that focussed on the use of finance or budgets, or the use of financial incentives to influence customers, which in the context of this paper (Investigating people at work) is incorrect use of the term. Some had 'sponsorship incentives' and others had 'non-financial incentives' which they gave as a response. The most common responses related to bonus payments or promotion incentives of greater pay, and some to do with piece rate payments. Discounts were also often a second incentive as free meals and other 'perks'. Answers based on larger organisations which had a structured financial incentive scheme tended to produce better 6 mark answers, whilst the small sole trader type business such as shops, hairdressers or 'fish and chip' shops did not offer quite the same opportunity for comment to gain full marks. This reflects that Centres need to include advice to candidates to read the question and then choose a business which will offer the most scope for the answer to the particular question.

Grade Boundaries

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:
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