



# INSEAD Capstone A virtual experiential education at scale

## First-person action oriented team experience

The Capstone is designed to bring together everything students have learned during their MBA year into an intensive, integrative, immersive, and inspirational three day experience. As part of a management team, students take on a series of real-life business challenges confronting a young, relatively resource-scarce organisation operating in an opportunity-rich environment.

The business challenges require the management team to integrate knowledge learned from the core courses, divide the work, coordinate contributions and thus sharpens the team's ability to adapt and learn in a dynamic environment. Because MBA's learn about the functions in the core curriculum one at a time, they must integrate what they know in order to successfully lead their organisation.

They can choose one of two quite different entrepreneurial scenarios for their Capstone experience. Scenario #1 involves running an Internet of Things (IoT) company in China after it has been purchased by a private equity firm that hired them to manage it. Scenario #2 involves growing a "born-global" new venture in the software as a service (SaaS) space, that has received Series A funding from a top-tier VC.

The course is not a computer simulation where students enter numbers into a model; it is a complex case using a next-generation digital platform that students experience in the first person as a team, processing information, carrying out strategic analyses to make recommendations, and interacting with other teams and with external role players who represent different types of stakeholders.

## From gradual to breakout virtual acceleration

The course was redesigned to be academically cutting-edge on the basis of the well-known 'Your First Hundred Days' elective that was perfected over many years - we are standing on the shoulders of giants. In the beginning, the course was only offered as an in-person experience but over the years we started to include virtual aspects to take into account evolutions in the workplace. We had tried many different virtual communication technologies and actually started using Zoom for certain role play experiences for a number of years now, partly based on our experience in Executive Education where the virtual Break-out-Room features proved to be very powerful.

So when COVID-19 hit the world, one could argue that we had some experience and a feeling for what the course could be like in a complete virtual setting. We still had to make the fateful decision to offer the

course in this way with limited time left - basically four weeks to change all of our original plans. We were convinced we could manage this but that it would take a lot effort to get there - which it has but for a great outcome.

We mobilised the faculty and supporting staff globally to re-design aspects of the course and manage a complex set of logistical issues.

We have a series of surprise events (you will need to take the course to find out what those were - sorry) that we were worried would be difficult to replicate online. We not only found imaginative virtual solutions to replicate the in-person version but actually introduced new virtual ones that would be hard to do in-person. We were able to create an emotional engagement with memorable moments.

One central pillar of the experience is the role plays that bring realism to the challenges and an opportunity for the students to hone in important behavioural and leadership skills. Will the training kick-in or is their intuition running with them?

For the China scenario, students get to meet a demanding commercial banker worried about the company's financial situation, a mayor who can unlock or not incentives for new investments, or a leading member of the union with worker demands. In the New Venture scenario they meet an employee with whom they need to have a difficult conversation with and an investor who just sent them a disagreeable term sheet.

In both scenarios, following an early morning (some might describe as middle of the night) phone call because of some dramatic incident at the company, they get invited to a filmed interview by a TV Journalist who will have some tough questions to ask the management team. They also will need to present their strategy, execution plan and role in society going forward to a probing board member. Finally, they get to sell their products, vision and values at a global trade fair where students need to be creative and resourceful (no PowerPoints allowed).

We had big worries going online with the Journalist and Trade Fair experience points. As it turned out, not only are news broadcasters today conducting their interviews virtually (so we are replicating the real world) but we managed to create a live studio feel with breaking news. For the trade fair, like many conferences globally, we went 'virtual' there again too. To do this in the office is difficult, but do it remotely (as must happen in real life today), with both structure

and creativity, is a challenge that our students have brilliantly risen to. They created artful short TV Adverts for online marketing. The rest of the class voted on their favorites like an audience score would have it. We all felt the energy and had a great time enjoying the final moments of the course together before a final debrief and announcement of awards and winners.

### **Alumni, Instructors and supporting staff**

The role plays are conducted by volunteering alumni. Thankfully, they responded to the call to arms. Some 120 of them joined in to cover different stakeholders. They played the part beautifully and their feedback to the students provides an important link between what is taught in class and how to apply it in the real world. They also had some fun.

The course also relies on expert instructors who guide the students through their difficult journey. They both challenge and support the students in their decisions and effectively also become masters of ceremony. They are helped by a wonderful and supportive staff that make sure the course runs smoothly and that was no small feat.

On the logistical side, we had to manage some 450 students spread around the world (the campuses were closed so a lot of them were now home or abroad with many different time zones). Faculty, instructors and support staff were also distributed globally, working from home with the advantages and disadvantages that engenders and from sometimes difficult time zones (two instructors in Australia covering France and one from San Francisco covering Singapore). We all learned to work continuously using most of the communication technologies used today: Microsoft Teams internally, Telegram with student groups, WhatsApp with external stakeholders and of course a lot of Zoom (we will venture to say that we uncovered all the cracks there). We were a connected collective working hard and at odd hours to ensure our students got an experience to be remembered.

### **What did they say**

In the Capstone, students get to apply the learning, practice team work, get creative and get feedback from alumni role players, the expert instructors and faculty and were supported by dedicated staff who went above the call of duty.

We worked hard and didn't sleep much but in the end, we all felt that we had accomplished something exceptional - in the original sense of the word. The next few quotes gives us comfort that after the course ended, we could indeed celebrate.

Student: "I think it's been one of the best classes I've taken at INSEAD."

(Please note this is a student who had both in-person and Zoom only courses so this is quite a testament to the power of online teaching when done right)

Alumnus: "The course is really an outstanding addition to the curriculum and to strengthening the INSEAD experience and community."

Alumnus: "I wish we had Capstone when I did my MBA"

Lecturer: "Even as an exercise in learning to use online tools, there is added value for MBAs to do this course online even when we return to an offline world."

And one student even took to writing her comments online: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/capstone-caracal-ac-20j-simulation-articulating-leadership-zhao>

Of course we made some mistakes and will aim to rectify those. The day after, we took a well deserved rest. We are now going to learn from this great experience and see how we can improve the virtual only version and include what we think worked well back to an in-person one.

Virtual experiential education is not only possible but is going to be with us going forward.

**by Antoine Duvauchelle**

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