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The case for case competitions

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Understanding a case company's problem is the best way of cracking a case

Stephan Schablinski is the Chief Executive Officer of Green Freight Asia (GFA), a not-for-profit organisation of private companies seeking to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from road freight movements in the Asia Pacific region. These companies include those that manufacture and transport goods to consumers (shippers), and transport companies who do the physical moving of goods from one location to another (carriers). GFA was incorporated in August 2013, and its first major challenge was to

engage companies in the Green Freight Asia Label program which involved the collection of data such as companies' fleet statistics, the use of green technologies, the consideration of green aspects in the carrier selection etc. GFA needed to develop a systematic approach to ensure data security and integrity.

"How do we make this system credible so that people trust the output?" Schablinski told Perspectives@SMU. "We could come up with the perfect IT system but if nobody believes in the credibility of the Green Freight Label scheme, and nobody submits data, it'd be useless. That's the bigger problem that the teams had to solve."

Understanding the problem

The "teams" that Schablinski refers to are those from the 22 universities that participated in this year's APEX Business-IT Global Case Challenge organised by Singapore Management University (SMU). Following the competition's tried and tested format, this year's edition again had teams working on a solution within 24 hours of getting the case. Carlos Calao, mentor of the Perspective Consulting team from Canada's Kwantlen Polytechnic University, explained how he instructed his team to tackle the case.

"I tell them to understand the goals of the organisation, and once you determine that, try to figure out what processes and resources you need to put in place to support the strategy to deliver the goals. Once you understand that, the rest is about research to find the specific tools within the context of the systems and processes to execute the strategy."

In the case of GFA, the goal was to promote the adoption of the GFA Label. A main problem that Schablinski faced was the fragmented nature of the carrier industry, in that there are many small trucking companies that had neither the budget nor manpower to pursue green initiatives. Furthermore, because of the numerous and diverse countries in Asia-Pacific, co-ordination was a challenge.

"It's more difficult for smaller companies because they may not have the resources to work on this," Schablinski explains. "They might ask themselves if it makes sense to spend time and money on Green Freight. In a way, it starts with the bigger companies, and over time it will involve more and more smaller companies as the green freight movement creates value for them."

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Schablinski, whose day job is the Director of DHL Sustainable Supply Chain Solutions, intends to promote the adoption of the GFA Label, which identifies companies that demonstrate a commitment to – and progress toward – the adoption of green freight practices. "If a shipper wants to attain this label," Schablinski says, "they have to prove that they've given a certain amount of their business to carriers who have attained this label. Therefore, having this label becomes a means to get more business from the big manufacturers. That's the big carrot that we can give to trucking companies to join the Green Freight movement."

The real world

It will be crucial to attract a sufficient number of companies to make the GFA label an attractive proposition. GFA currently runs on membership fees paid by its members, such as DHL, UPS, IKEA, Infineon, Heineken, Hewlett-Packard, Lenovo, and Procter & Gamble. The membership fee depends on a company's annual revenue and ranges from free to US$10,000 per year.

"The Green Freight Asia Label presents a strong value proposition as it can help companies to attract business, improve productivity and lower CO2 emissions and air pollution in Asia Pacific, but only if we manage to get a critical mass to sign up and use the label in their transport procurement process," says Schablinski.

It was a real world problem that members of Perspective Consulting had to deal with.

"I used to look at a case and get stressed out," said **Jason Faria**, a business undergraduate at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. "After this, I can be strategic and look at it and go, 'This is what needs to be done.'

"You learn so much from this, be it working under pressure, working together, and coming up with a solution when you don't necessarily agree on something. Getting to the common goal at the end is an invaluable experience."

Perspective Consulting garnered an Honorable Mention in this year's competition, which was won by Nexus from SMU. While no single team came up with a complete solution to GFA's problem, Schablinski is nonetheless impressed with what he saw, and views the event as a potential recruiting exercise.

"It's a great opportunity to meet and get to know students from different universities and how they approach a problem. When I look at IT problem these days, it's no longer about looking at a problem and coming up with an IT tool. I expect people that I hire to think beyond the surface, and understand how the IT solution fits into the bigger picture. I want them to think about the new processes, change management, things of that nature. It's about thinking not just in IT terms."