Strategic & Innovative Project

The Strategic and Innovative Project (SIP) is an application-in-context of knowledge garnered over the course of the EPFL EMBA program. Generally speaking, a master’s thesis is a novel application of existing knowledge, so the project must have some novel element to it. It could be an analysis of a new process, product or service or it could be the analysis of taking an existing product or service into a new market. One can also do a detailed analysis of a business’s existing or planned strategy to project future performance and offer alternative solutions. Most importantly, it must have practical relevance to the partner firm.

Most people conduct the SIP at the company in which they are currently employed. They, together with a manager or supervisor within the firm, decide upon a project that would both benefit the firm and be suitable for the SIP. Most of the time, the proposals work right off, but other times, they may go through an iteration process of comment and modification in conference with the EPFL EMBA organization.

For people who choose not to work on a project within their organization or are in transition, we encourage you to be active in seeking out a project. There are several options: one can offer to work within a company as a sort of internship position, one can work on a project as a start-up, one can work in tandem with another EPFL EMBA, or, in rare occasions, one can work with a university lab to do a business-case workup of a new technology. In any of these cases, it is important for the person undertaking the SIP to secure a credible industry supervisor. In the case of a start-up situation, the supervisor may be an expert in the field or a potential client of the prospective firm.

Whenever feasible, review/discuss with the enterprise the Strategic & Innovative Project Proposal document before it is submitted for approval and it becomes your SI Project. This is the best time to ask for a change of its content, if you believe it is needed. Ensure that the project is feasible in the defined timeframe. Once the proposal form has been submitted to the EPFL EMBA organization, an academic mentor will be assigned to the project.

Initiate a first meeting with each of your two mentors as soon as possible in order to understand their expectations, the scope and limits of the project, the key questions to be answered, the appropriate methodology, and also in order to develop/review your project plan. Your project plan should identify the key activities to be performed for the SI Project and includes milestones. It can be illustrated by a Gantt chart. It is wise to summarize the key points discussed during your initial meeting as well as to send to both of them your current project plan by early September.

All along the SI Project, keep excellent relationships and honor the deadlines. It is your responsibility to maintain, throughout the project, regular and pleasant relationships with your faculty mentor by mail/phone and with your enterprise mentor who is usually located nearby. After a meeting with each, it is advisable to briefly summarize what has been discussed and agreed during the meeting, with emphasis on specific upcoming actions.

Your approach to the project should encompass these activities:

- Develop a problem/goal statement to be addressed + relate it to both internal & external context
- Take into account the state of the art in the domain concerned, + compare/analyze theory and practice
- Evaluate the alternatives to address it, determine the most appropriate methodology, be it sequential or parallel
- Perform the work in a traceable form and analyze the results of your work using well defined criteria
- Develop recommendations, state impacts and risks; identify the limitations of your work and next steps.
Produce an intermediate progress report no later than June 30 containing:

- Your methodology; the scientific approach you have used so far and will use later
- What you have done so far, results obtained, highlighting the potential value added for the enterprise
- What are the obstacles, constraints encountered, if any, and the proposed actions to circumvent them
- What you intend to do/achieve by the end of the SI Project
- A list of references used so far + those you intend to use later
- An updated project plan as well as an outline of your final report

Request feedback from your mentors by mid-July and make sure you integrate their feedback. It is your responsibility to gently and kindly remind your mentors to provide feedback.

Your first draft must be sent to both mentors no later than August 31. This should be at least the makings of a full document, although there may still be sections as yet undeveloped.

Your final report must contain a 1-2 page executive summary style abstract with methodology and particularly key results, the approved SI Project description, and a table of contents. Your report should include an exhaustive description of the current state of the art related to the focal topic as well as explanation of the foundational theory and/or constructs. It also needs to present your methodological approach, findings and recommendations. They should be placed in a global context beyond the situation immediately at hand and preferably include benchmarking. It is usually appropriate to indicate decision and/or success criteria, and to test assumptions. You should evaluate the impact of your recommendations, to identify the limits of your findings and the next steps/future work to be done. If you were not able to complete one part of your SI Project as initially defined, specify it and explain the reasons why.

When using knowledge/materials of others or presenting facts, always reference it in the correct manner. Include and sign the official declaration of authorship in your report. Glossary, bibliographies as well as an acknowledgement note are usually appropriate.

The final presentation is approximately 15 minutes; spend minimum time presenting the company (unless it is your start-up), instead concentrate on your methodology, your specific findings and recommendations, etc. A presentation outline at the beginning is appreciated. Anticipate questions and thus have back-up slides. Questions could be:

- Why did you use these criteria?
- What are the assumptions you made that are most critical for this project?
- What is crucial to make this project happen?
- What are the risks and what can be done to reduce them?
- Now that you have done it, what would you do differently if you had to redo it?

Before you present, hand out a copy of your numbered slides to each member of the panel.

Keep in mind the evaluation criteria you received from your mentors and that will be used to assess your work. The two mentors may have different criteria, so try to accommodate both perspectives; if they have contradictory criteria, address this prior to the presentation. The committee is made up of the two mentors and one of the directors of the EPFL EMBA Program. The purpose of the EPFL EMBA director is to mediate and negotiate a final evaluation and is generally not evaluating the project directly; however, at times, the director may find it necessary to add an assessment in order to bring discussions to a conclusion. This means it is primarily important to address the concerns of both mentors.

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