

COMM1170

Organisational Resources

Complete Course Notes

UNSW Business School | People, Technology, Capital and Accounting

Course Overview

What is COMM1170?

COMM1170 Organisational Resources is a core first-year course in the UNSW Bachelor of Commerce. It introduces students to the three fundamental resource categories that every organisation must manage -- People, Technology, and Capital -- and to the accounting systems that help measure, plan and control the use of those resources. The course is integrative: it shows how these resources interact to generate competitive advantage and organisational performance.

The central argument of the course is that leaders must be generalists. In modern organisations, decisions about people have implications for technology adoption; technology investments affect capital requirements; and capital structures influence what people and technology an organisation can attract and sustain. Managers who understand all three resource domains -- and how they interconnect -- are better placed to create and sustain competitive advantage.

The Overarching Framework: Identify, Mobilise and Combine, Measure

All topics in COMM1170 are organised around a three-stage management process applied to each resource type:

Stage	What it means	Toolkit tools used
Identify	Diagnose the resource need, issue or opportunity. Understand what the organisation has and what it requires. Apply the 5Ws	5Ws analysis; VRIO framework; resources audit; competitive advantage analysis.

Stage	What it means	Toolkit tools used
	(What, When, Where, Who, Why) to surface the problem.	
Mobilise and Combine	Source, deploy and integrate the required resources. Design the systems and processes that combine people, technology and capital effectively.	People: training, compensation, work design, culture. Technology: 5-component framework, As-Is/To-Be model. Capital: lifecycle funding, liquidity management, IPO, capital structure.
Measure	Assess whether the resource combination is delivering organisational performance. Evaluate and adjust.	Accounting: costing, budgeting (operating and cash budgets), performance evaluation. Finance: WACC, leverage ratios, TOE feasibility.

Competitive Advantage: The Strategic Context

Every resource decision in COMM1170 is made in the context of the firm's competitive advantage strategy. Three generic strategies are examined:

Operational Excellence	Providing customers with reliable products or services at competitive prices, delivered conveniently. Operational excellence is achieved through efficiency: lean processes, reliable supply chains, and scalable technology. People who are proficient and adaptable support this strategy.
Customer Intimacy	Personalising service or customising products to meet differing customer needs. Key features include detailed customer knowledge, operational flexibility to respond quickly to almost any need, and the ability to customise. People who are proactive and empathetic support this strategy.
Product/Service Leadership	Offering cutting-edge products and services that push the envelope of performance. Requires investment in R&D, innovation culture, and high-skilled talent. Covered more extensively in COMM1180.

VRIO: Conditions for Sustained Competitive Advantage

A firm is said to have a sustained competitive advantage when it is implementing a value-creating strategy not simultaneously being implemented by any current or potential competitor, and when other firms are unable to duplicate the benefits of that strategy (Barney 1991). For a resource to generate sustained competitive advantage, it must satisfy four conditions:

Valuable (V)	The resource enables the firm to exploit opportunities or neutralise threats in the external environment.
Rare (R)	The resource is currently controlled by only a small number of firms. If many competitors possess the resource, it cannot be a source of advantage.

Inimitable (I)	Competitors find it costly or difficult to imitate, substitute or obtain the resource. Inimitability is often due to history, complexity, or causal ambiguity.
Organised (O)	The organisation has appropriate systems, structures and processes to exploit the resource fully. Having the resource is insufficient; the organisation must be set up to capture the value it generates.

Course Structure and Assessments

Week	Topic	Resource Domain
1	Introduction to Organisational Resources; Harvey Norman case	Integration
2	People Toolkit: Intangible Resources; Training; Motivation	People
3	People Toolkit: Compensation; Work Design; Culture and Structure	People
4	Technology Toolkit: Digital Transformation; 5-Component Framework; As-Is/To-Be Model	Technology
5	Technology Toolkit: TOE Feasibility; CIO Role; Justifying Technology	Technology
7	Capital Toolkit: Forms of Capital; Finance Function; Liquidity; IPO	Capital
8	Capital Structure and Financial Risk: Leverage, Taxes, WACC, Distress	Capital
9	Accounting: Costing and Cost Allocation	Accounting
10	Accounting: Planning and Budgeting; Operating Budget; Cash Budget	Accounting

Assessment	Weight	Notes
Interview Skills Preparation	10%	Hurdle task -- must be completed to pass the course.
Interview Skills Video	30%	Video submission demonstrating interview skills.
Final Exam	60%	Covers all content from Weeks 1 to 10.

People Toolkit -- Weeks 2 and 3

The People Toolkit examines how organisations identify, mobilise and measure their intangible people resources. People resources are not the employees themselves -- they are the capabilities, motivations, and performance behaviours that employees bring to their work. These intangibles are what generate competitive advantage, not headcount.

2.1 The People Toolkit Framework

The People Toolkit has five interconnected components that leaders can design and adjust:

Leaders as Architects	Leaders at both strategic (senior management) and operational (front-line management) levels shape the people environment. Strategic leaders set culture, structure and resource direction. Operational leaders translate these into daily management practice.
Formal Organisation: Structure	The formal organisational chart and reporting relationships. Centralised structures concentrate decision-making power at the top. Decentralised structures distribute authority more broadly. Structure affects who is accountable, how information flows, and how quickly decisions are made.
Formal Organisation: Systems	HR systems including training, compensation, performance management and recruitment. These systems directly shape employee behaviour by determining what skills are developed, how performance is recognised and rewarded, and how career progression works.
Culture	The shared values, beliefs, assumptions, stories, rituals and norms that define 'how things are done around here'. Culture has visible components (rituals, symbols, stated values) and invisible components (taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions). Culture is powerful because it shapes behaviour without explicit instruction.
Work Design	The nature of the tasks people are asked to perform and the conversations they have. Well-designed work is stimulating (varied and challenging), enables mastery, gives people agency (autonomy), is relational (involves meaningful connection), and is tolerable (not overwhelming). Good work design directly increases motivation.

Key insight: Formal systems (training, compensation) operate on employee behaviour directly and are subject to legal requirements. Culture and work design operate more subtly but can be more powerful drivers of sustained competitive advantage because they are harder for competitors to copy.

2.2 Intangible People Resources

Intangible people resources are the capabilities and dispositions that employees contribute to organisational performance. The two main categories are performance behaviours and motivation.

Performance Behaviours (Gagné, Parker and Griffin 2021)

High-performing employees exhibit three types of performance behaviour simultaneously:

Proficient	Completing required tasks at or above the expected standard. For customer intimacy: product knowledge, customer service skills, procedural knowledge, digital skills. Proficiency is the baseline requirement.
Adaptable	Adjusting to different situations, customers, and needs. Multitasking effectively. Being flexible with solutions (not scripted responses). Adapting to changing work schedules. Adaptability is increasingly important as the pace of change accelerates.
Proactive	Going above and beyond without being asked. Taking ownership of problems. Being enthusiastic and engaged. Making a personal, empathetic connection with customers. Proactive behaviour is the most difficult to mandate; it depends heavily on motivation.

Motivation: Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 1985)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) identifies three fundamental psychological needs that, when satisfied, produce intrinsic motivation, higher engagement, better mental health, and proactive performance behaviour:

Need	Definition	What satisfies it	What undermines it
Competence	The need to feel effective and capable; to master skills and achieve expertise.	Challenging work, skill development opportunities, feedback tied to growth, meaningful training, career progression pathways.	Unrecognised skill development, poor training quality, inability to apply new skills, stagnant roles with no growth.
Autonomy	The need to feel empowered and self-directed; to have a sense that one's efforts lead to results; to have freedom to decide how to work.	Empowered decision-making, meaningful feedback, clear connection between effort and outcomes, freedom to explore.	Micromanagement, monitoring of social media and personal behaviour, difficulty moving between roles, perception that results depend on relationships rather than merit.
Relatedness	The need to feel connected, supported and part of something meaningful; to belong.	Supportive co-workers, supportive and appreciative leadership, meaningful work where the impact on others is visible.	Exclusionary culture, poor leadership, feeling disrespected or 'the lowest of the low', lack of genuine appreciation, work without visible impact.

Motivation, mental health and engagement: Research (Harter et al. 2002; Nielsen et al. 2017; WHO 2007) shows that motivation is closely linked to employee mental health and organisational engagement. Satisfied needs create a virtuous cycle: motivated employees perform better, generating better outcomes, which further satisfies needs. Frustrated needs create a vicious cycle: disengaged employees underperform, damaging outcomes and further eroding motivation.

2.3 Systems: Training

Training systems shape competence. Effective training must have a clear purpose: developing employees' careers and sustaining the organisation's competitive advantage. Common training modalities:

Training Type	Description	Key purpose
Onboarding / Induction	Initial training when an employee joins, covering culture, procedures, policies and role expectations.	Integrate employees into the organisation; establish baseline competence and cultural alignment.
Job Assignments	Deliberate rotation through different roles, teams or projects to broaden experience.	Build adaptability and cross-functional understanding; creates pathways for career progression.
Mentoring	Pairing an employee with a more experienced mentor who provides guidance, sponsorship and career advice over time.	Support long-term career development; transmit organisational knowledge and norms.
Coaching	Targeted support from a coach (internal or external) to address specific performance issues or development goals.	Improve specific skills or behaviours; address leadership challenges.
Online and F2F Courses	Formal learning programs in classroom or digital formats.	Systematic skill development; compliance training; professional qualifications.
Graduate Programs	Structured multi-year programs for new graduates, rotating across business units.	Develop future leaders; attract high-potential talent.

Legal dimension: Training systems have legal implications. Legal and ethical training for leaders is often compulsory -- not optional. Failure to train leaders on equal opportunity, workplace health and safety, harassment, and fair work obligations can expose the organisation to significant legal liability. HR systems must ensure appropriate training occurs, is documented, and is refreshed regularly.

2.4 Systems: Compensation