Task: Policy Environment memo

File name: lastname_environment.doc or .docx or .rtf

Format: Briefing paper, 750 to 2000 words. The word count will depend on how much you rely on charts and graphs to tell the story, and how much text you use to amplify your points. A concise paper is better than a lengthy one, but the goal is to cover enough information that the reader understands the environment in which policy will be made.

Task description:

Write a briefing paper explaining the policy environment in which your organization operates. What trends in the social, economic, political, scientific, and technological environments will affect the work your organization will undertake to address the problem you isolated in the coming five to ten years? You need not cover all these aspects, just some of the most important ones. For example, in the runway incursion problem, I would discuss things like airport capacity, the numbers of planes taking off and landing, the number of passengers moving through our airports (which is only roughly related to the number of planes) and so on.

This memo can also be an opportunity to explain why the problem you isolated is harmful and requires attention, provided you use evidence to make your case. Or you can include that information in the rewrite of your problem memo.

Research Tools:

This is a very short list of possible data sources. Better papers will use the broadest available range of sources.


Office of Management and Budget, Historical Tables: [http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/historicals/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/historicals/) Data on the federal budget, including historical and projected government revenues, outlays, and deficits (or, less often, surpluses).


Bureau of economic analysis: [http://www.bea.gov](http://www.bea.gov) Economic data including GDP.

Hints and Tips:

1. This briefing paper will require considerable research on your part, so it’s good to start work on this as early as possible.
2. You may want to show a lot of statistical information, for which charts and graphs will be appropriate. Remember to use simple, informative and clear graphics. Following these tips is an example of good and poor charts.
3. You do not need to cover all the possible aspects of the policy environment that might affect your problem. It might be good to think of the old standby in strategic planning: SWOT analysis. In strategic planning, organizations “scan the environment” and assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that the environment and the organization pose to the organization’s mission. In this case, you should think of the threats in the policy environment (rising costs, the complex nature of your problem, political opposition, and so on) to the problem’s solution, and the opportunities (political support, demographic trends, technological changes and opportunities) that provide some hope for the problem’s amelioration or solution.
4. Are things getting better, worse, or staying the same in the policy environment? Questions like these can only really be answered using trend data over several years. It is good to use data that reflect the past trend up to this point, and data that forecast trends into the future. For example, the President’s budget does this every fiscal year.
5. Use the best possible data. Avoid using overtly partisan think tanks as sources of evidence—but, sometimes, this will be the only available evidence.
6. Good and poor charts:

Note: Increase in incidents in 2008 is partially due to FAA’s adoption of ICAO’s definition of runway incursion.

Reasons why this is a good chart:
2. Has a proper title
3. The vertical axis is properly labeled
4. The horizontal axis needs no label because the title of the chart indicates that these are fiscal years, but you could label it if you want.
5. Format of the chart contains no extraneous information, and all types of incursions are clearly indicated. The chart does not include the numbers for each data point in the chart—if I wanted to show these data, I would construct a table, and a figure would be superfluous.
6. Has a source note

Reasons why this is a poor chart:
1. The vertical axis is set with the minimum at 300 and maximum at 1100, thereby distorting the magnitude of the problem and the jump between 2007 and 2008.
2. Because of this dishonesty, and the 3D design, the chart obscures the various types of incursions in 2005-2009.
3. The 3D chart is fancy, but is misleading because there is no informational value to the third dimension. Display two dimensional values in two dimensions only.
4. The chart lacks a proper label for the vertical axis, and lacks a title.
5. The chart lacks a source note