BusinessSpotlight

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Points of contact

Level: Upper intermediate +

Time: 90 minutes

Summary: This lesson is about interface management and all the points of contact involved in a logistical process. In this lesson, students:
1. explain the concept of interface management after reading a definition;
2. study a text about boats taking goods and tourists to the islands of the Bahamas, with all the logistical issues that involves;
3. explain a process they are familiar with at work, detailing all the points of contact involved;
4. talk about logistical challenges they have encountered.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student; a map showing the Bahamas (optional; see Preparation note)

Group size: Any

Note: This lesson plan for both pre-experience and in-work business students is based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 2/2017.

Preparation

It would be helpful if students had the opportunity to look at a map of the Bahamas. You can prepare one to show them before they read the text or ask them to look up a map of the islands on their smartphones.

Warmer – explaining a business practice

Students read the information in the box and briefly discuss it to make sure that they have understood it fully. Then they should decide how to explain this business concept to a trainee or new colleague who has just started in their department. In monolingual groups, allow students to do this in their own language.

Key words

At this point, explain that the text is about the Bahamas and show students the map of the Bahamas that you

prepared (or get them to look up a map on their phones). Then, get students to read the definitions and scan the article to find the key words. The clues are given in the order that the words appear in the article.

Key:
1. freight
2. pallets
3. quay
4. imminent
5. commodities
6. accident-prone
7. disrupted
8. holding company
9. bridged
10. far-flung
11. oddly
12. realm

Understanding the article

Students work together, discussing the answers to the questions. You could ask them to do this without looking at the text at first and then, only checking the text if they cannot remember all the information they read.

Key:
1. *The Bahamas are situated between the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean. The official name is the Commonwealth of the Bahamas and it was British colony from 1718 to 1973. It is now an independent realm within the British Commonwealth and Queen Elizabeth II is still its monarch. The Bahamas are made up of more than 700 islands, of which only 35 are inhabited. The islands are spread over an area of 750 by 650km. The capital, and commercial centre, is Nassau. See section 4 of the article for further information.*
2. *Delivering goods to businesses in the far-flung islands of the Bahamas and transporting tourists to where they want to get to comes with enormous logistical challenges, making the area perfect for a case study on interface management.*
3. *There are around 20 mailboats, which are owned and run by local families. These run from Nassau to the other islands and provide the islanders and their businesses with the items they need as well as providing transport for the tourists who are trying to reach their destinations within the Bahamas. After these items have been delivered, the boats return to Nassau, carrying excess farm produce and other goods that the islanders want to send to the markets in the capital. The boats also deliver letters and packages to the islanders.*
4. *A bag and a box that were supposed to be delivered to one island were put on a mailboat going to a different island. The captains of the ships communicated with each other via radio and arranged a meeting at sea where the items would be passed from one boat to the other in order to reach their intended destination.*

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Multiple interfaces

Ask students to reread the first paragraph of section 3. If they work in the same company or department, they can continue this task in pairs. If they come from different companies, they should do part a of the task individually. After they have listed all the points of contact in their process, they should explain their process to another student and also discuss the questions in part b.

Logistical challenges

Students discuss logistical challenges and how they overcame them, using examples from the company that they work for and from their own personal experience.

Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all of the new and useful vocabulary they have learnt during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

Related topics on onestopenglish

This Business Spotlight lesson is on the related topic of the smooth transportation of goods worldwide.

www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/
the-container-story/554792.article

Points of contact

1 **Warmer – explaining a business practice**

Read the text in the information box. Then, explain the concept of interface management to a trainee or colleague that you are mentoring.

> **What is interface management?**
>
> Interface management is a key component of project management within organizations and in the logistics industry. It involves managing, in a structured way, all the different points of contact in a project – that is, the boundaries between various parties, such as different contractors.
>
> Interface management requires the clear definition of roles and responsibilities, optimal information sharing and collaboration. One definition, from InterfaceManagement.org, puts it very simply: interface management is "making sure that nothing gets lost in the middle".
>
> Effective interface management is essential to the success of large capital projects and can lead to shorter production times, lower costs, increased flexibility and increased competitiveness.

2 **Key words**

Scan the article to find the words that match the definitions. The article section numbers are given to help you.

1. goods that are carried by vehicles (section 1) _____

2. flat wooden or metal surfaces used for moving or storing heavy goods (section 1) _____

3. a hard surface next to a sea or river, where boats can stop (section 1) _____

4. likely or certain to happen very soon (section 2) _____

5. things that are bought and sold, especially basic food products or fuel (section 2) _____

6. likely to hurt yourself or break something as a result of an accident (section 2) _____

7. interrupted and prevented from continuing by creating a problem (section 2) _____

8. a company that owns the majority of the shares in another company (two words, section 3)
   _____

9. (differences between two or more groups) made smaller or less significant (section 3)
   _____

10. existing in many different places within a very large area (section 4) _____

11. strangely (section 4) _____

12. a country ruled by a king or queen (section 4) _____

Points of contact   by Franz Marc Frei

To optimize transportation, logistics companies use interface management. Join Franz Marc Frei in the Bahamas to see how this works.

1 Since I boarded the boat New G some two hours ago, there has been intense activity on the quay. Deliveries are arriving every few minutes. Vans stop in front of an open container that functions as a temporary office. Men carrying boxes are discussing something with the loadmaster, a young Bahamian wearing a "Yo, Relax" T-shirt. There's laughter and nodding. Money, boxes and freight papers change hands. A firm handshake seems to seal the deal. The freight is then placed on one of three pallets on our boat – one for each of three different destinations.

I look down at the quay again and again to see whether we are about to leave. New G is moored at Potter's Cay dock, the part of the Port of Nassau reserved for the mailboats that service the Out Islands of the Bahamas. The boat regularly connects the main island of New Providence with Long Island and, on its way back, with the islands of Rum Cay and San Salvador. Passengers are welcome on these trips; I paid $65 for my ticket to Long Island, with dinner and breakfast included. The airfare to Long Island would have cost three times the price and wouldn't have been nearly as interesting.

2 **No sign of departure**

According to the timetable, we should have left two hours ago, at 14.00. But there is no sign that our departure is imminent. Watching all the activity on the quay, I realize that what I am observing is a typical interface – part of a complicated network of interconnecting systems. In this case, the network involves the sender, the carrier and the receiver, and it links transport over land and sea.

Major international container terminals, such as the one in Hamburg, are of a different scale but the systems and structures here are similar. In Hamburg, the containers all have to be loaded on to the correct ships. Here, it is the parcels, boxes, letters and commodities for the local population of the Bahamian islands.

An interface is a point of contact in a network, the boundary between different parties. Interfaces are often accident-prone, which is why effective interface management is so important. At every point of contact, something can go wrong. Think of transport interfaces such as airports or railway stations, which can be disrupted by weather, technical problems, terrorism or strikes. Or think of technical interfaces, such as routers. In November, 2016, some 900,000 customers of Deutsche Telekom were unable to use their phones, internet or TV for days, following a hacker attack.

3 **A world of interfaces**

The global economy is connected via countless interfaces: within a department of a company, university or government; within the hierarchy of an organization; between departments and production units of a company; and between the multiple organizations in a holding company. Whenever people work together, communication problems arise. Differences in language, culture, mentality, education and age need to be bridged. Miscommunication and the resulting loss of information not only slow down processes but also endanger economic success.

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<tr><td>Points of contact</td><td>by Franz Marc Frei</td></tr>
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Here, at Potter's Cay, there is also considerable potential for disruption. Freight could get damaged, be delivered to the wrong island or simply get lost. Yet even if the loading of goods looks unplanned and at times hopelessly chaotic, there is a system in place and there are rules.

4 **Logistical challenges**

Still waiting to leave, I study a map of the Bahamas, which is made up of numerous far-flung islands, round or oddly shaped, in the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Caribbean to the west. My guidebook tells me that the "Commonwealth of the Bahamas", as it is officially known, is made up of more than 700 islands, 35 of which are inhabited. A British colony from 1718 to 1973, the Bahamas is now an independent realm within the British Commonwealth, with the queen as its monarch. Its two most important industries are tourism and offshore finance.

The territory of the Bahamas is spread over an area of 750 by 650 kilometres. Some of the islands are hundreds of kilometres away from a doctor, hospital, high school or supermarket. According to the latest census, the Bahamas had a population of just over 350,000 in 2010, with around 250,000 living on New Providence. On the smallest islands, such as Ragged Island and Rum Cay, the population is under 100.

The islands make up a grid of countless interfaces and are the source of enormous logistical challenges. Some 20 mailboats, owned and run by Bahamian families, provide the islanders and their businesses with the goods (and tourists) they need. On their way back from the islands, the mailboats transport the surplus agricultural production and other goods to the markets in Nassau. The mailboats also transport the post, of course, and the captains take care of paperwork with banks and authorities in Nassau.

An exception, not the rule

5

After finally departing from Potter's Cay, we are on our way to Long Island. "Mr Yo, Relax" receives a radio message. It is from the captain of a sister ship that has just left the port of Cockburn Town on San Salvador and is on its way to Nassau. A bag and a box that were supposed to be delivered to Long Island had been placed on the wrong palette. To get the freight to the correct recipient as quickly as possible, a meeting at sea is scheduled for the next morning.

The next day, I witness the freight changing boats. I ask "Mr Yo, Relax" how often this happens. "There are more than 900 mailboat tours and many hundred thousand shipments each year," he explains. Then, he assures me: "This is the exception, not the rule."

FRANZ MARC FREI is a travel writer and photographer who likes to look at ordinary things differently.

Points of contact

3 **Understanding the article**

Answer the questions with information from the article.

1. What do you know about the Bahamas?

2. Why do you think the author chose to write about this area?

3. What do you know about the mailboats in the Bahamas?

4. What example of a typical logistical problem is described in the article and how is this problem dealt with?

4 **Multiple interfaces**

a. **Choose a process from your work and list all the interfaces, or points of contact, that are involved in that process.**

For example:

•   the production of an item (until the point that it leaves the company);

•   arranging a meeting (from booking the room and providing refreshments, to making sure everyone attends);

•   applying for, and receiving confirmation of, annual leave.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

b. **What could potentially go wrong at each point of contact? What processes are in place to minimize the likelihood of something going wrong?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Points of contact

5 **Logistical challenges**

Talk about …

1. … complicated logistical challenges your company has to deal with, for example sending particular goods to other countries;

2. … complicated logistical challenges you have personally had to deal with, for example moving house or sending money abroad.

Answer the questions below.

*   Who did they/you have to deal with at each interface?

*   Who was responsible for overseeing the process and making sure everything ran smoothly?

*   Did anything go wrong?

*   Was anything easier than you expected?

*   What lessons were learnt from the experience?

*   If you had to do this again, what would you do differently?

Points of contact

Vocabulary record: Points of contact

verb	noun	adjective	adverb
load			
	logistics		
		connected	
			oddly