

Ten vital elements of business revision

Ian Marcousé provides ten tips on how to revise for exams

1 Beware of the little boxes

Meaning: when you are taught a new concept, you open a new box in your brain, shovel in the new knowledge, then close the box when the bell sounds. The box may remain shut unless your teacher asks a direct question about the topic. Beware of revising in the same way: opening each box, shuffling through the contents, then closing it.

Implications: in an exam you need to have all the boxes open, so that you can freely select and use relevant concepts to build your answer. So when you revise, look for links between boxes (concepts) and keep all the lids open as you revise – for example, marketing as a whole, not just the bits within marketing.

2 Make revision active

Meaning: the passive way to revise is by re-reading notes or (really bad) re-reading and trying to memorise your higher-marked essays.

Implications: yes, your answers need to be based on sound knowledge, especially definitions of key terms – and you need to memorise the definitions you do not know – but passivity in revision means trying to rely on your memory in the exam. What is really needed is intelligent use of business knowledge.

3 Use past questions

Meaning: the single best way to revise is to tackle your exam board's past papers.

Implications: the big win here would be tackling the 12- or 20-mark questions and drawing ideas for your answer from various parts of your brain. Make sure to tackle the whole paper, but not necessarily as a timed written exercise. It is hugely useful to go through each question and sketch out notes for your answer.

4 Mind maps are good

Meaning: write the exam question in the middle of the page and draw arrows showing how business theory and the business scenario relate to the question.

Implications: this has the same benefit as answering past exam questions because it is encouraging you to think selectively about how best to develop an answer – that is the skill needed in the exam room.

5 Maths matters

Meaning: only 10% of the exam marks are given for questions involving maths, but those marks are often far more variable than those for written questions. Some will get 10/10, others will get 0/10 – and that difference can be worth two grades.

Implications: the more difficult you find business maths, the longer you need to devote to it. With maths, worksheets are a good start, then you must move on to past paper questions. Lots of practice is needed – and the payoff in grades can be huge.

6 Crosswords rock

Meaning: a business crossword puzzle forces you to think about your subject knowledge, which is perfect.

Implications: this is a simple but active way to revise. BUSINESS REVIEW started in September 1994 and there has been a crossword in every issue since then (I know – I've written them). That is more than 120 crosswords – many general ones but some on finance, or marketing and so on. Ask your teacher or library about past issues of the magazine or access to the electronic archive.

7 Nothing works better than revising together (with the right person)

Meaning: it is hard to keep going when revising and it is hard to keep pushing yourself towards the high-mark questions. If you have a friend or relative with the right temperament, revising together is very effective.

Implications: you have to be pretty ruthless here; revising with the wrong person could mean chats about anything but business. But if you know the right person, ask them to be your revision partner – and keep buying the M&M's.

8 On the other hand ...

Meaning: your examiners love a counter-argument, so make sure you have thought about them.

Implications: the easiest revision exercise is to put a concept at the top of a page, a line down the middle and work through the pros and cons. Concepts could include Herzberg's theory, Ansoff's matrix, high gearing, skimming pricing, and so on.

9 Be a leftie

Meaning: most specifications have the main headings on the left and the detailed content on the right. The closer you get to the exam, the more you want to think about the main topics (on the left) rather than the 2-mark detail (on the right).

Implications: you want to be thinking about the role and value (and pros and cons) of the Boston matrix, and not getting too bogged down in the four elements of the matrix. Questions worth 10, 12 and 20 marks tend to be focused on the left of the specification, not the right.

10 Do nothing the night before the exam

Meaning: play a game, watch a programme, even chat to your parents. And get to bed early-ish – a good night's sleep is a fine thing.

Implications: you do not want to go into the exam room and (excuse me) vomit knowledge onto the page. You want to calmly read the exam questions and write thoughtful, contextual and conceptual answers. Last-minute revision encourages vomit rather than wisdom.

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