

Course Outline

Course Code	RSM 496 H1 F (LEC0101)
Course Name	Catastrophic Failure in Organizations
Term, Year	Fall, 2025
Course Meets	M 11-1. Location: RT 142.
Web page URL	https://q.utoronto.ca

Instructor Details

Name	Email	Phone	Office Hours
András Tilcsik	andras.tilcsik@rotman.utoronto.ca	647-347-8951	Thursdays, 1:45-2:45 in RTL 7048, or by appointment

Course Description

Addressing the risk of major failures is a critical challenge for organizations. From environmental disasters to pandemics to costly technological glitches and corporate fraud to social media meltdowns, numerous events in recent years have exposed the vulnerabilities of firms to catastrophic failure. Rooted in complex human, organizational, and systemic factors, such failures have the potential to severely disrupt and even bankrupt firms. Thus, business continuity planning and the protection of critical company assets from such failures are now seen as a vital part of any enterprise. This course seeks to train students to recognize the inherent vulnerabilities of business organizations to catastrophic failure, to understand why the risk of such failure represents both a profound challenge and a potential opportunity, and to become more effective decision-makers in general. To do so, we examine biases in human cognition that prevent managers from thinking effectively about the risk of catastrophic failure; consider why even small errors can have devastating consequences in complex systems; and examine how organizational barriers to learning and communication can set firms up for catastrophic failure. Throughout the course, we will consider opportunities for managers and consultants to manage these challenges.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Recognize organizational vulnerabilities to unexpected failures
- Identify specific leadership actions that prevent failure and build resilient organizations
- Act as more thoughtful and effective decision-makers.

Course Prerequisites

Prerequisite: RSM260H1 or RSM270H1 or RSM392H1

Exclusion: RSM418H1 - Catastrophic Failure in Organizations

Course Materials

Required Readings

Links to all required readings will be provided on Quercus.

Electronic Course Materials

Course materials include case studies, newspaper and magazine articles, and videos. All materials are freely and publicly available, except for one case study, which is available in a course package on the Harvard Business Publishing website:

<https://hbsp.harvard.edu/import/1328788>.

These materials will cost a total of \$7 (4.95 USD). The use of these materials complies with all University of Toronto policies which govern fees for course materials.

Evaluation and Grades

Grades are a measure of the knowledge and skills developed by a student within individual courses. Each student will receive a grade on the basis of how well they have command of the course materials, skills and learning objectives of the course.

Work	Percentage of grade	Due Date
Class Participation	20%	Ongoing
Field Analysis	20%	11:59 p.m. on October 24
Consulting Case	60%	11:59 p.m. on Dec 2

Course Format and Expectations

Writing Assignments

Details of the written assignments will be posted on Quercus during the first week of the course. These are all individual assignments. While you may discuss the assignments with other students, your written reports should reflect your own experiences, ideas, and analysis. In your written work, it will be important to explain how you reached your conclusions and provide specific examples, observations, and evidence to support your analysis.

The purpose of the *Field Analysis* is to help you improve your ability to gather insights into risks and vulnerabilities through field observations. Drawing on course concepts and frameworks, you will collect original data through short interviews or artifacts and observations and use this evidence to identify potential weaknesses that could contribute to a future meltdown (broadly defined). The deliverable is a report that explains and integrates your findings, grounded in the real voices and practices of the group you studied.

In the *Consulting Case* assignment, you will step into the role of a consultant brought in to analyze an organization facing hidden risks. Working with a packet of raw, unstructured, and sometimes contradictory materials, your task will be to sift through the materials, separate signal from noise, and identify the organization's key vulnerabilities to future meltdowns. You will map vulnerabilities and consider how small issues could interact to cause a major failure, develop specific recommendations for reducing these risks, and reflect on the challenges of making sense of messy, incomplete evidence.

Together, these assignments are intended to help you develop your written communication skills. You should aim for clarity, strong organization, concision, and correct grammar. Sources should always be correctly attributed.

Support is available through the RC Centre for Professional Skills (CPS) for students who would like help or feedback on their writing or speaking (presentations). CPS offers both individual and group appointments with trained writing instructors and presentation coaches who are familiar with the RC program and common types of business assignments. You can also access your college Writing Centres for help with written assignments.

You can book an appointment [with a writing or presentation coach](#) through the RC Centre for Professional Skills Writing Centre. For more information about writing centres, student supports, and study resources, see the [Writing and Presentation Coaching academic support page](#).

Class Participation

Students are expected to prepare thoroughly and make every effort to attend every class. As class participation is a graded component of the course, students will be evaluated on the following:

- Thoughtful responses
- Understanding and analysis of topic
- Idea generation
- Promoting further discussion
- Respectful active listening
- Attentiveness

While attendance is necessary for students to participate in class discussions, attendance on its own will not result in a high participation grade. Students must actively contribute and participate by exhibiting the components listed above.

Rotman Commerce Attendance Policy **NEW**

Rotman Commerce students are expected to make every effort to attend each class. Infrequently, students may miss term work, e.g., quizzes, assignments, etc., due to unplanned and extenuating circumstances and must follow the Request for Special Consideration process as outlined in their course outlines. However, Rotman Commerce will not approve any Request for Special Consideration for participation marks for missed classes. Any such request will be denied.

Missed Tests and Assignments

Students who miss a term test or assignment for reasons entirely beyond their control (e.g. illness) may request special consideration **within 2 business days** of the missed midterm/test/assignment due date.

In such cases, students must:

1. Complete the Request for Special Consideration form: <https://uoft.me/RSMConsideration>
2. Provide documentation to support the request, eg. Absence Declaration from [ACORN](#), [Verification of Illness Form](#) etc.

Please note: As of September 2023, students may use the Absence Declaration on ACORN ***one time per term*** to report an absence and request consideration. **Any subsequent absence will require a Verification of Illness form or other similar relevant documentation.**

Students who do not submit their requests and documentation within 2 days may receive a grade of 0 (zero) on the missed course deliverable.

Late Assignments

All assignments are due on the date and at the time specified in Quercus. Late submissions will normally be penalized by 10% if the assignment is not received on the specified date, at the specified time. A further penalty of 10% will be applied to each subsequent day.

Statement on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

The University of Toronto is committed to equity, human rights and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where all members of our community can express themselves, engage with each other, and respect one another's differences. U of T does not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities.

Commitment to Accessibility

The University is committed to inclusivity and accessibility, and strives to provide support for, and facilitate the accommodation of, individuals with disabilities so that all may share the same level of access to opportunities and activities offered at the University.

If you require accommodations for a temporary or ongoing disability or health concern, or have any accessibility concerns about the course, the classroom or course materials, please [email Accessibility Services](#) or visit the [Accessibility Services website](#) for more information as soon as possible. Obtaining your accommodation letter may take up to several weeks, so get in touch with them as soon as possible. If you have general questions or concerns about the accessibility of this course, you are encouraged to reach out to your instructor, course coordinator, or Accessibility Services.

Plagiarism Detection

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to the University's plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the tool's reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of this tool are described on the [University's Plagiarism Detection Tool FAQ](#) page from Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation.

Generative AI / ChatGPT

Students may use artificial intelligence tools, including generative AI, in this course as learning aids or to help produce written assignments. However, students are ultimately accountable for the work they submit. If you use generative artificial intelligence tools as your work through the assignments in this course, I ask that you document this use in a brief appendix for each assignment. The documentation should include what tool(s) were used, how they were used (e.g., what were some prompts that you found most useful), and how the results from the AI were incorporated into the submitted work. I request this documentation solely for the purpose of improving my understanding of student engagement with these technologies. Revealing that you used generative AI will not affect your grade, but explaining how you used it will help me immensely as a teacher in future years.

Academic Integrity

Academic Integrity is a fundamental value essential to the pursuit of learning and scholarship at the University of Toronto. Participating honestly, respectfully, responsibly, and fairly in this academic community ensures that the U of T degree that you earn will continue to be valued and respected as a true signifier of a student's individual work and academic achievement. As a result, the University treats cases of academic misconduct very seriously.

[The University of Toronto's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#) outlines the behaviours that constitute academic misconduct, the process for addressing academic offences and the penalties that may be imposed. You are expected to be familiar with the contents of this document. Potential offences include, but are not limited to:

In papers and assignments

- Using someone else's ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgement.
- Submitting your own work in more than one course without the permission of the instructor.
- Making up sources or facts.
- Obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on any assignment (this includes collaborating with others on assignments that are supposed to be completed individually).

On test and exams

- Using or possessing any unauthorized aid, including a cell phone.
- Looking at someone else's answers.
- Misrepresenting your identity.
- Submitting an altered test for re-grading.

Misrepresentation

- Falsifying institutional documents or grades.
- Falsifying or altering any documentation required by the University, including (but not limited to) medical notes.

All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated by the procedures outlined in the [Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#). If you have any questions about what is or is not permitted in the course, please do not hesitate to contact the course instructor. If you have any questions about appropriate research and citation methods, you are expected to seek out additional information from the instructor or other U of T or RC resources such as the RC Centre for Professional Skills, the College Writing Centres or the Academic Success Centre.

Email

At times, the course instructor may decide to communicate important course information by email. As such, all U of T students are required to have a valid UTmail+ email address. You are responsible for ensuring that your UTmail+ email address is set up and properly entered on ACORN. For more information visit the [Information Commons Help Desk](#).

Forwarding your utoronto.ca email to a Gmail or other type of email account is not advisable. In some cases, messages from utoronto.ca addresses sent to Gmail accounts are filtered as junk mail, which means that important messages from your course instructor may end up in your spam or junk mail folder.

Recording Lectures

Lectures and course materials prepared by the instructor are considered by the University to be an instructor's intellectual property covered by the Canadian Copyright Act. Students wishing to record a lecture or other course material in any way are required to ask the instructor's explicit permission and may not do so unless permission is granted. Students who have been previously granted permission to record lectures as an accommodation for a disability are excepted. This includes tape recording, filming, photographing PowerPoint slides, Quercus materials, etc.

If permission for recording is granted by the instructor (or via Accessibility Services), it is intended for the individual student's own study purposes and does not include permission to "publish" them in any way. It is forbidden for a student to publish an instructor's notes to a website or sell them in any other form without formal permission.

Weekly Schedule

Session	Date	Topic	Readings
1	Sept 8	Introduction	Readings posted on Quercus.
2	Sept 15	Things Fall Apart	Readings posted on Quercus.
3	Sept 22	Small Errors, Big Failures	Readings posted on Quercus.
4	Sept 29	Wrongdoing and Hubris	Readings posted on Quercus.
5	Oct 6	Systems, Groups, Biases	Readings posted on Quercus.
No class	Oct 13	<i>Thanksgiving Day</i>	<i>University Closed</i>
6	Oct 20	Lessons of Aviation	Readings posted on Quercus.
No class	Oct 27	<i>Reading Week</i>	<i>No Class</i>
7	Nov 3	Culture, Crisis, and Communication	Readings posted on Quercus
8	Nov 10	Premortem	Readings posted on Quercus
9	Nov 17	Risk, Resilience & Artificial Intelligence	Readings posted on Quercus
10	Nov 24	Social Media Meltdowns	Readings posted on Quercus
11	Dec 1	Conclusion	Readings posted on Quercus
12	Dec 2	Consulting for Risk Management	No readings; work on your Consulting Report (due at 11:59 p.m. on December 3)

Please note that the last day you can drop this course without academic penalty is Nov 11, 2025



Other Useful Links

- [Become a volunteer note taker](#)
- [Accessibility Services Note Taking Support](#)
- [Credit / No-Credit in RSM courses](#)
- [Rotman Commerce Academic Support](#)
- [Where to find teaching assistant opportunities](#)

URL links for print

- ACORN: <http://www.acorn.utoronto.ca/>
- Email Accessibility Services: accessibility.services@utoronto.ca
- Accessibility Services website: <http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/as>
- University's Plagiarism Detection Tool FAQ: <https://uoft.me/pdt-faq>
- The University of Toronto's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters: <http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm>
- Information Commons Help Desk: <http://help.ic.utoronto.ca/category/3/utmail.html>
- Become a volunteer note taker: <https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/program/volunteer-note-taking/>
- Accessibility Services Note Taking Support: <https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/service/note-taking-support/>
- Credit / No-Credit in RSM courses: <https://rotmancommerce.utoronto.ca/current-students/degree-requirements/credit-no-credit-option/>
- Rotman Commerce Academic Support: <https://rotmancommerce.utoronto.ca/current-students/academic-support/>
- Book an appointment with a writing or presentation coach: <http://uoft.me/writingcentres>
- Writing and Presentation Coaching academic support page: <https://rotmancommerce.utoronto.ca/current-students/academic-support/writing-and-presentation-coaching/>
- Centre for Professional Skills Teamwork Resources page: <https://rotmancommerce.utoronto.ca/teamwork-resources>
- Book an appointment with a Teamwork Mentor: <http://uoft.me/writingcentres>