



Consortium benchmarking: Collaborative academic–practitioner case study research

Holger Schiele ^{a,*}, Stefan Krummaker ^{b,1}

^a University of Twente, School of Management and Governance, P.O. Box 217; NL-7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands

^b Leibniz University of Hannover, Institute for Organizational Behavior and Management, Koenigsworther Platz 1; DE-30167 Hannover, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 September 2007

Received in revised form 1 May 2009

Accepted 1 November 2010

Available online 22 December 2010

Keywords:

Consortium benchmarking

Case study

Collaborative research

Relevance

Rigor

ABSTRACT

Consortium benchmarking is a scholar–practitioner collaborative case study approach joining rigor and relevance in management research. In consortium benchmarking practitioners and academic researchers form a consortium and together benchmark best-practices. Consortium benchmarking includes practitioners as co-researchers, facilitating research relevant for both academics and practitioners. Rigorous research informs the entire process since consortium benchmarking collects evidence from multiple sources and uses various comparison techniques. This paper introduces the concept of consortium benchmarking and then illustrates its application with a case study that identifies the nature of innovative suppliers. The study shows how consortium benchmarking supports the production of relevant knowledge for both academics and practitioners in a rigorous way. In order to evaluate these contributions, the study develops criteria for assessing rigor as well as theoretical and practical relevance. Finally, the study compares consortium benchmarking with multi-case research and presents five aspects either not accounted for or neglected in “traditional” multi-case research.

© 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The much lamented separation of management research and management practice stimulates a multitude of debates on rigor and relevance in management since at least 50 years (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005; Tushman et al., 2007). Researchers warn that a rift between research and practice is “likely to result in irrelevant theory and in untheorized and invalid practice” (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 391).

Several studies address the question of how to overcome this “double hurdle” (Pettigrew, 1997, 2001) of rigor and relevance in management research. Numerous editorials call for making management research of more interest to practitioners (Bartunek et al., 2006) and several presidents of the Academy of Management insistently postulate breaking up the closed self-referential loops of management research in order to bring more relevance to research (e.g., Bartunek, 2003; Hambrick, 1994).

The relevance gap is a knowledge production and knowledge transfer problem (van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). While some authors regard theory and practice as distinct forms of knowledge that are hard to bridge (Kieser and Nicolai, 2005), others argue that producing relevant knowledge depends on how researchers translate theoretical

knowledge into the language of practice (Shapiro et al., 2007) or how to integrate practitioners in the research process (Vermeulen, 2007).

Even though literature on collaborative research (see Shani et al., 2008 for an overview) suggests some promising avenues of joint academic–practitioner knowledge production, some academics remain skeptical about the contribution of practice-grounded knowledge to scientific progress or doubt that rigor plays a part in the creation of such knowledge (e.g., Kieser and Leiner, 2009). This skepticism seems to result in endless discussions on the “ifs” of combining rigor and relevance on a conceptual level on the one hand or on a philosophy of science perspective on the other, hindering work on the necessary “hows” in terms of what methods can be used to produce relevant knowledge for both academics and practitioners in a rigorous way. Ironically, academics who provide methods used in academic–practitioner collaborative research projects find themselves being pushed back to “if discussion” to justify their methodological approach (e.g., Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009).

Consortium benchmarking can be a promising and powerful approach to successful academic–practitioner collaboration since the collaboration produces rigorous knowledge relevant for both groups. The consortium is a body of practitioners and academics who work together to define the research questions and search for answers. The practitioners finance the project and send delegates on benchmarking visits. This practitioner–academic collaboration assures that the questions are relevant to the practitioners, are theoretically sound, and have methodological rigor. A large research team of practitioners as well as academics visits and benchmarks each best-practices firm. They listen to presentations, conduct topical discussions, talk to managers, visit the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 53 489 5615; fax: +31 53 489 2159.

E-mail addresses: h.schiele@utwente.nl (H. Schiele), stefan.krummaker@ufo.uni-hannover.de (S. Krummaker).

¹ Tel.: +49 511 762 4985; fax: +49 511 762 5637.

firms' installations and review internal documents. After each visit, the consortium jointly analyzes the data, discusses emerging concepts and examines relationships between diverse concepts and/or variables.

Consortium benchmarking advances traditional multi-case approaches by including practitioners, not only as key informants but as co-researchers. Furthermore, since consortium benchmarking is a team-based approach focusing on best-practices cases, relevant discussions between academics and practitioners, or "meta-discourses", are likely to emerge and flourish.

This study contributes to management research in four ways. The study introduces consortium benchmarking, a collective benchmarking approach originally developed by practitioners which has gained most attention in German-speaking countries (this paper offers the first comprehensive introduction to consortium benchmarking in an English language journal); it suggests enhancing this approach by explicitly and systematically including academics in the consortium, turning consortium benchmarking into a method of joint academic-practitioner knowledge creation; demonstrates how consortium benchmarking can enhance traditional multi-case study research and narrow the "practitioner-academic divide" (Brennan and Ankers, 2004); and contributes to the discussion of how to conduct rigorous and relevant research in academic-practitioner collaborations. An example illustrates how a consortium benchmarking project works and can produce, in a rigorous way, findings that are relevant for both academics and practitioners.

The first section of the paper describes how management research defines rigor and relevance and discusses the benefits of case study research for producing relevant knowledge, the second section presents four steps in conducting a consortium benchmarking project, and concludes with an illustration and discussion of the application and its contributions to the field.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Defining rigor and relevance in management research

Rigor is a soundness or exactness "in theoretical and conceptual development, its methodological design and execution, its interpretation of findings, and its use of these findings in extending theory or developing new theory" (Zmud and Ives, 1996, p. xxxvii). This research conceives consortium benchmarking as an innovative multi-case study method that uses the operationalizing rigor quality indicators of case study research that Yin (2003, p. 34) suggests, namely (1) construct validity: establish proper operational measures for the concept being studied; (2) internal validity: establish robust causal relationships; (3) external validity: establish a domain in which the study's findings can be generalized; and (4) reliability: demonstrate that the operations of the study can be repeated with the same results.

Relevance of management research outcomes should not be limited to practical usefulness of research, but needs to include theoretical relevance (Daft and Lewin, 2008). If research is of interest only to practitioners, researchers will likely refrain from building collaborations with practitioners and vice versa.

In assessing both practical and theoretical relevance, this study combines the following aspects of practical usefulness (Shrivastava, 1987) and characteristics of theoretical relevance (Vermeulen, 2007): introduction of a novel construct (innovativeness); concrete consequences in terms of findings that matter in management decision making/managerial action or understanding of management-related processes; variables under managers' control; and identification of trade-offs, that is, decisions made for one reason that may have contrary consequences in other domains.

Rigorous management research needs to include all four of these quality indicators; nevertheless, research suggests that management

research can be relevant for both academics and practitioners even when meeting only some of the relevance criteria.

2.2. Interaction of rigor and relevance in management research

The rigor/relevance debate yields endless either/or discussion on rigor and relevance but largely neglects the bridging activities between these two camps (Gulati, 2007). One argument is that when academics and practitioners come together, they separate again like oil and water (Simon, 1967), or that academics and practitioners operate in different closed social systems that cannot be integrated (Kieser and Leiner, 2009). Some authors emphasize that the scholarly quality of research and relevance can be merged into a "pragmatic science" approach high in both rigor and relevance (Anderson et al., 2001; Tushman et al., 2007) by re-aligning stakeholders in the research process (Hodgkinson et al., 2001; Starkey & Madan, 2001), thus bridging the rigor-relevance gap in management research (Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009). To avoid centrifugal forces pushing academics and practitioners "back to their camps" (Anderson et al., 2001), the knowledge creation process is both rigorous as well as focused on managerial phenomena rooted in practical contexts.

Following the notion of mode 1 and mode 2 knowledge production proposed by Gibbons et al. (1994), collaborative research needs to combine mode 1 (rigorous discipline-based and university-centered knowledge production) with mode 2 (practice-grounded production of knowledge for application) to form what Huff (2000) calls Mode 1.5 knowledge creation process. Including both academics and practitioners, mode 1.5 creates a self-reinforcing process that produces rigorous and relevant knowledge. Academic-practitioner conversations define and elaborate important issues and academics' skills are useful in developing definitions, analyzing data and proposing generalizable concepts, frameworks and theories. Conversations between academics and practitioners do not end after one round of investigation, but instead continue and participants set their own further agenda. Mode 1.5 minimizes the weaknesses of mode 1 and mode 2 strategies while utilizing their respective strengths and "incorporate a role for faultfinders as well as facilitators" (Hodgkinson et al., 2001, p. 45). Mode 1.5 is not a compromise between rigor and relevance, rather "a difficult but desirable position 'above' these modes of production" (Huff, 2000, p. 292). Consortium benchmarking appears to be a promising approach to bridge the rigor and relevance gaps in management research, and consequently supports mode 1.5 knowledge creation.

2.3. Potentials and criticisms of case studies in management research

Although case study research is supposedly in a crisis since decades (Yin, 1981), study research includes powerful methods for producing knowledge in the field of management (e.g., Halinen and Tornroos, 2005; Stake, 2006; Larsson, 1993; Weick, 2007; Wilson and Vlosky, 1997; Zott and Huy, 2007). Case study research allows investigation of the "hows" and "whys" of a phenomenon within a real-life context (Woodside and Wilson, 2003; Yin, 2003). As a result, cases form the basis of building new theories (Eisenhardt, 1989) or refining existing theories (Siggelkow, 2007).

Since case study research does not focus on abstract constructs or concepts but on real-world aspects or questions, this paper views the case study methodology as a means to produce knowledge relevant for both theory and practice. More than 40 years ago Glaser and Strauss (1967) pointed out that the intimate connection of case study with empirical reality allows the development of relevant, valid and testable theories. Moreover, Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) note that the academic community sees studies that build theory from cases as the most interesting pieces of research.

However, "traditional" case study approaches typically see practitioners not as the co-researchers but as more or less passive

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات