

Effective case research in operations management: a process perspective

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Abstract

Despite many calls for case-based operations management research, the successful publication rate of such articles in top-tier journals has been less than stellar. A five step case-based research and dissemination process is presented. Guidance is given to future researchers for each step in the process. In addition, areas of weakness are examined and discussed in detail. Future potential research questions in operations management considered to be appropriate for the case-based method are highlighted. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Despite numerous calls over the years for case research (Meredith et al., 1989; Ebert, 1991; McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993; Samson and Terziovski, 1999; Meredith and Samson, 2001), few case studies appear to be getting published in the primary operations management (OM) research journals. For example, Wacker (1998) assessed and classified the predominant research methodology of over 2000 OM articles published over the previous 5-year-period; only 8% of them were case-based studies. A principal criticism from reviewers and associate editors is the papers' lack of rigor in the case research process. Typically, a paper reports on a few interactions with field sites and then sums up the observations and impressions, much as a consulting report might summarize a team's findings in a client

firm. Notably missing from the paper is a discussion of what the goal of the research was beforehand, what previous research work had been done in this and related areas, what protocol was used, how the sites were selected, what data were collected, how the data were analyzed, and how the findings were validated. In short, the criticisms point to fundamental weaknesses throughout the entire process of conducting case research, weaknesses that ultimately prove fatal during the journal review process.

The aim of this paper is to address these weaknesses in several ways. First, we examine the process of conducting case research, from its theoretical foundations to the eventual dissemination of the research findings. Concurrently, we examine several sources of common process errors with the hopes that, in future, OM researchers can take preventive measures, improving both their case research and publication success. Finally, we identify several critical gaps in the OM body of knowledge that appear likely candidates for the case research method. Our aim is to encourage researchers to follow a line of scholastic inquiry with a

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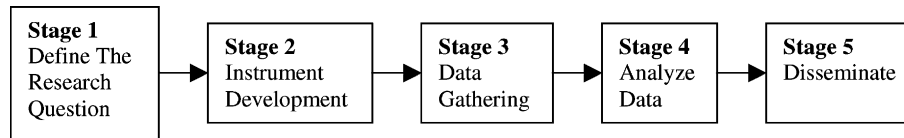


Fig. 1. The five stage research process model.

high degree of relevancy. By combining research relevancy with a more rigorous case research approach, future case research efforts should meet increased dissemination success. To start, we describe a generic model of the research process and use it to assess how a case-based research approach should be followed.

2. The case research process

In spite of many publications describing case research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; McCutcheon and Meredith, 1993; Eisenhardt, 1989; Lee, 1989; Meredith, 1993, 1998; Yin, 1993, 1989), it still appears that the case research and publication process is not well understood.¹ Generically, the research and dissemination process can be broken down into five critical stages as illustrated in Fig. 1. Conducting case research is no different.

2.1. Stage 1: defining the research question

The first stage of the research process involves defining the research question. Invariably, this involves contributing to building a body of knowledge and developing theory. Ultimately, good theory is parsimonious, testable and logically coherent, and can result in new, frame-breaking insights (Eisenhardt, 1989; Schmenner and Swink, 1998). The importance of theory-building is not just specific to our area. It is also necessary to ensure business survival, since “nothing is quite so practical as a good theory” (Van de Ven, 1989, p. 486).

¹ In this paper, we do not address the development process used for case studies intended for teaching purposes. Teaching cases may be a secondary outcome from the case research process but both the intended audience and the defining characteristics of a good teaching case are fundamentally different from case based research. For further reference on the case development for teaching purposes, please refer to: Leenders et al. (1989).

The role of research in any field is to gain knowledge and understanding including the creation of explanatory theory. It also includes discovery of previously unrecognized phenomena, classification and measurement as well as understanding of these phenomena (Meredith, 1998). Case studies contribute to theory building through observation of phenomena in the OM world that have not been empirically tested. As Nagel (1961, p. 79) points out:

Scientific thought takes its ultimate point of departure from problems suggested by observing things and events encountered in common experience; it aims to understand these observable things by discovering some systematic order in them; and its final test for the laws that serve as instruments of explanation and prediction is their concordance with such observations.

Case-based research represents the intersection of theory, structures and events (Gubrium, 1988). It is a scientific approach that attempts to ground theoretical concepts with reality. Weber (1947) and Thomas (1966) both assert that to understand experience and the “real” world, positivist tendencies should be put aside to appreciate what is really happening in the field. Schein (1967, 1986, 1987) suggests that only through such studies will we be able to examine and understand non-standard forms of behavior. For example, imagine how management knowledge might have evolved if Mayo, Roethlisberger and their associates (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1930) had never conducted the famous case study performed at the Hawthorne Works of Western Electric on the link between lighting and worker productivity. The well-documented case study, flawed though it may have been as a research experiment, laid the groundwork for incorporating sociology as a critical theoretical domain for our understanding of how work gets done through people. The branch of OM dealing with sociotechnical systems clearly had its roots in this and

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