01
Investigating and researching HR issues

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This chapter should help you to:

- define what is meant by research in the context of HRM&D and how it can contribute to effective policy and practice;
- identify the different components of an effective research project and the skills needed;
- consider your role and influences as a researcher;
- compare different approaches to HR research and the opportunities presented by an investigation of a business issue;
- reflect upon the key relationships that will support and enhance your project;
- consider how to build on prior learning.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- Writing your research proposal
- Working with your supervisor
- Managing your research project
- Working as a practitioner-researcher
- Summary checklist
- Test yourself, review and reflect questions
- Useful resources

Researching HR issues

This book is aimed at people who are undertaking an HR research project as part of a qualification-related course. You may be a part-time student who is investigating a business issue in the role of a 'practitioner-researcher' or a full-time student who will be researching into an HR issue either inside or outside of a particular organisation or group of organisations. You may be studying in your own country or abroad. At the beginning of the project module some students will already have ideas of what they want to explore whereas others may not; this is fine and this text will help you to explore and plan the possibilities. Different centres also have varying requirements for projects; for example, some will require students to undertake primary research whereas others may direct students to focus on the analysis of data and information that already exists (secondary data).

The ability to undertake good quality research that leads to relevant practical outcomes and contributes to the knowledge base of the HR profession is an important skill. Qualified professionals should be able to research relevant topics and write reports that can persuade key stakeholders in the organisation to change or adopt a particular policy and practice. Most people who make use of this book are likely to be: final year undergraduate students of Management or HRM; students undertaking professional HR courses such as CIPD Intermediate or Advanced level programmes; or students undertaking a 'taught Masters' course (usually an MSc or MA in HRM or a related subject or an MBA).

Using this book to support your work

Making a start with a big piece of work like a research project is a daunting prospect and you may be tempted to 'put off' the moment of making a start. This book is intended to help you make a start and then to see the project through to a successful and rewarding conclusion. The book aims to be practical, accessible and relevant. It should provide you with ideas and resources to apply to your research. We hope that you will use it as a resource to develop knowledge, understanding and the practical skills you need to make best use of the research process you are undertaking and to communicate what you have learned in a convincing and credible way. The book is not a substitute for regular attendance at research methods classes nor does it replace the need to communicate with your supervisor or project tutor.

Research projects are rarely completed quickly and they compete for attention with many other important and urgent matters. Different chapters of the book will be relevant at different stages of your project from initial project idea and research proposal to submission of the final report or dissertation. You may find it useful to reread chapters as you tackle each section of your project.

When research is done well it can provide a 'win–win' opportunity for you and the organisation, or organisations, that have participated in some way. Your organisation(s) can learn from the findings and decide whether to implement your recommendations. You can gain valuable personal and professional development in a wide range of areas. Each chapter in this book ends with a self-test so that you can check your understanding and there is an opportunity to review and reflect on your achievements so far. This can inform any continuing professional development (CPD) record that you will maintain if you are a member of a professional organisation, such as the CIPD. Ideas about further reading are also included at the end of each chapter to enable you to go 'further' or 'deeper' as appropriate.

Why are you required to write a project or dissertation?

A project or dissertation gives you the opportunity to demonstrate all of the skills that you have been developing throughout your qualification. You will use your skills of problem-solving, literature-searching, critical review and data analysis to name but a few. It is also your chance to focus on an area that is of specific interest to you and enables you to be creative in a way that might differ from some of your previous assessments. A good project or dissertation can also be good for your career and gives you something to talk about in future interviews. As projects are usually worth 40 credits or more, they are likely to have a large influence on your final award classification.

Getting started

The research process and the skills you need

Activity 1.1

Making a critical decision for your future

Think back to when you decided that you would embark on your current studies. This was a big decision in terms of time commitment, cost and the ability to manage your work/study/life balance. You may have had several different push factors – perhaps to support a career change or as a means of getting promoted from your current position.

What were the key questions you asked yourself? Who did you talk to about this? How did you make decisions on where and how to study?

Feedback notes

Your key decisions might have included:

- What are the admission requirements? How do costs vary by centre?
- Which centres offer professional accreditations?
- What is the total duration of the programme? When do the classes take place and how does this fit with my other commitments?
- How many students achieve good degrees and go on to graduate level jobs?
- What do previous students say about each centre?

Information you might have consulted and might have included:

- key performance indicators and rankings;
- publications from your shortlisted institutions, for example, prospectuses and websites;
- talking to current students or alumni whom you know;
- your employer (if your employer has agreed to provide financial support).

As you are digesting this information and data you should have considered the legitimacy of the source. For example, university prospectuses are geared up to emphasise the strengths and positive aspects of their courses, whereas talking to past students may give you more impartial information. There is also a range of useful external benchmarks such as the results of the National Student Survey and ranking tables produced by *The Guardian* and *Times Higher Education* publications.

The research process

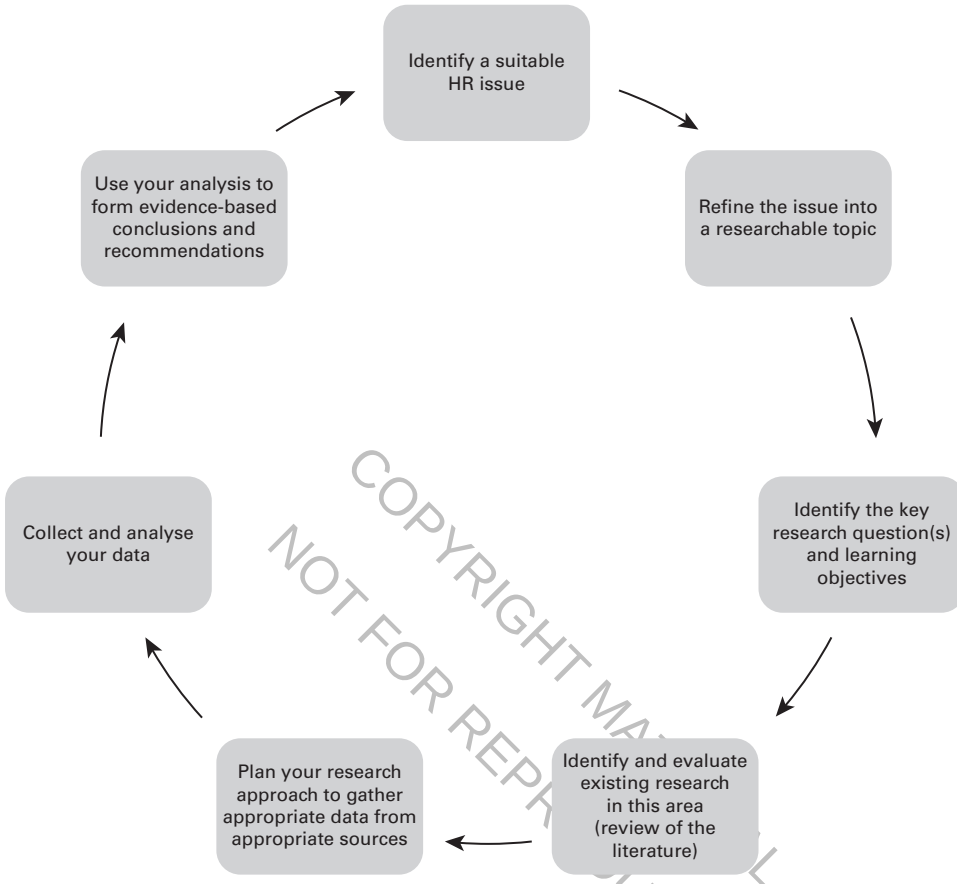
Activity 1.1 is, at a basic level, a small and personal research activity. It involves the systematic enquiry into an issue to increase knowledge and underpin effective decision-making. The activities it would involve are, however, indicative of the components of any research process (see Figure 1.1).

Often research is represented as a series of discrete and linear stages and this book is structured in a similar sort of way. However, the reality of organisational research is that each stage is often interrelated with the others and experiences in 'later' stages often leads to reconsideration of earlier ones (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Some of the best projects are those that are 'messy' and have some backwards and forwards movement from one stage to another. For example, where the data identifies unanticipated results that then leads to a further and extended review of the literature in your topic area.

For research undertaken to meet the requirements of CIPD Advanced level qualifications the current requirements for 'Investigating a business issue from an HR perspective' are:

- Identify and justify a business issue that is of strategic relevance to the organisation.
- Critically analyse and discuss existing literature, contemporary HR policy and practice relevant to the chosen issue.

Figure 1.1 Components of the research process



- Compare and contrast the relative merits of different research methods and their relevance to different situations.
- Undertake a systematic analysis of quantitative and/or qualitative information and present the results in a clear and consistent format.
- Draw realistic and appropriate conclusions and make recommendations based on costed options.
- Develop and present a persuasive business report.
- Write a reflective account of what has been learned during the project and how this can be applied in the future.

Each of these stages is considered in more detail in subsequent chapters of the book but an indication of the skills you need to carry out these different elements is provided now.

The effective researcher

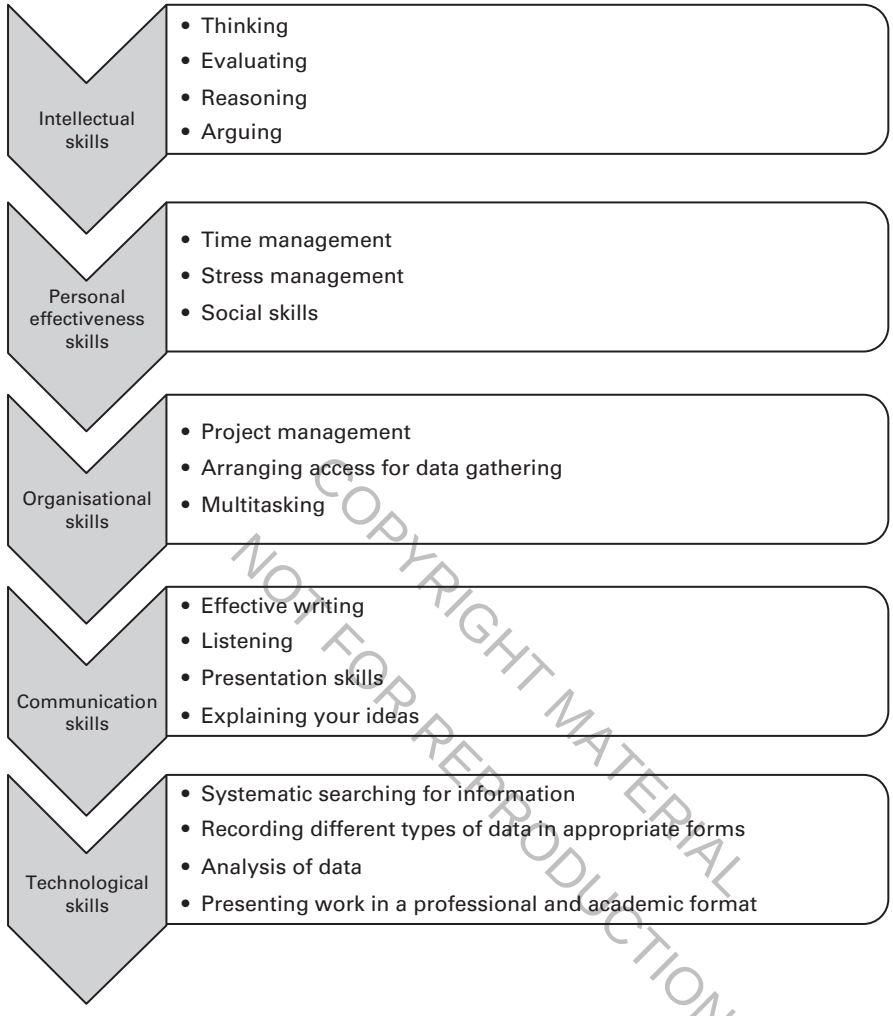
Five interrelated skills underpin any effective research project (see Figure 1.2). You will need:

- **Intellectual and thinking skills.** Knowing a lot about your topic is important but other skills will enable you to undertake a more successful project. When you undertake research you have to act as an 'independent learner' and this involves you being able to ask questions, probe deeply into issues and develop and justify your own thinking about the issues involved. We explore later in this book the advantages and challenges for those researching in their own organisation.
- **Personal effectiveness skills.** HR professionals are already aware of the importance of good interpersonal effectiveness in people management; the skills you have developed can be put to good effect in your research project, particularly your skills of time and stress management.
- **Technological/digital skills.** Throughout the duration of your project and particularly at the start, you will need to find information that has already been written on your topic area. Online journals provide a huge number of articles but not all will be relevant so you need to be able to assess usefulness and appropriateness of everything that you read. Technology can help you to record information and data, analyse it and then present it in an appropriate form and also provides useful opportunities to show your creativity. You may use digital resources for your online surveys, carrying out interviews and/or use of message boards or other platforms.
- **Organisational skills.** A research project is very like any other work-based endeavour: it has to be 'project managed'. Knowing how to break down components of a large piece of work, estimate the time requirements for different task areas, undertake more than one task 'in parallel' when appropriate, and keep track of progress are key skills that you can make use of and develop further.
- **Communication skills.** Much of your research project involves you working on your own but high-level communication skills are also necessary. In particular, you will need to orally articulate your ideas to your colleagues and tutors, listen actively (to get advice and also when gathering your data), share your findings within your organisation through effective presentations, and produce a lengthy and well-written research report or dissertation. You will also need to engage with your research participants.

Initial feelings about research

It is possible that you are very excited about getting started with your research project. However, most students have mixed feelings at best or strong doubts at worst about their ability to complete research alongside all the other practical issues and problems facing them in their 'out of study' life. Blaxter *et al* (2010) and Jankowicz (2005) identify some common objections to doing research:

Figure 1.2 The skills of an effective researcher



- just a way of proving what you already know;
- best left to academics or to experts;
- just a way of justifying what the CEO wants to do anyway;
- too difficult;
- too time-consuming;
- removed from reality;
- unable to change anything;
- too scientific and statistical;
- boring.

Here are some recollections by students about their feelings when they were just starting out on a work-based research project required for their CIPD course.

I felt overwhelmed; I had lots of good ideas but didn't know which one to pick. (Lucas)

I felt nervous and concerned about how to get started and what I should read. (Caitlyn)

I was looking forward to the challenge but was worried about maintaining a high level of motivation. (Mina)

I was worried that I would not be able to balance my studies with my full-time job. (Jorge)

If these sentiments reflect how you are feeling then read on to find out how much more positive the same students were once their projects had been completed.

I discovered that I can be very decisive once I have reviewed my task against the assessment criteria. I also realised that I needed to pick a topic that I would find interesting and my knowledge in this area now really helps me in my day job. (Lucas)

I learned that I am actually quite a good project manager, once I had worked out my timescales and factored in my other commitments I felt a lot more confident about the big task ahead. (Caitlyn)

I discovered what I was capable of! Self-determination, dogged enthusiasm and perseverance to achieve a significant challenge. (Mina)

I enhanced my relationship with my line manager as we negotiated a project that would benefit the organisation (and my day job) as well as my academic work, and they were impressed with the result. I also developed strategies to help my work–life balance. (Jorge)

It would be foolish to say that doing research in HR is easy; challenges are likely for even the most confident and experienced practitioners and researchers. Personal qualities like self-motivation, self-confidence and self-centredness will be important for your success (Biggam, 2011):

- **Self-motivation.** You will need to maintain your interest and enthusiasm over quite a long period of time. Choose a topic that you are genuinely interested in and try to tackle all the different stages in the process with a positive attitude and curiosity for what you can learn.
- **Self-confidence.** Self-doubt is an occupational hazard of all researchers at some point in the research process so remember that your ideas are just as valuable as those of an established researcher or a chief executive. If you are

able to learn from the advice of your tutor and student colleagues then there is no reason why your work should not be more than creditable when it is time for your work to be assessed.

- **Self-centredness.** The need to undertake your research over a sustained period means that, from time to time, you will have to turn down requests from family members and friends. Wise judgement is required in these circumstances but it is important to make clear to everyone from the beginning that your project is a priority and you will appreciate their understanding and patience for its duration. Of course, after it is all over you can repay their patience many times over.

Benefits from research

Activity 1.2

Identifying benefits from research

Imagine that you still have to decide what to do for your project. The chief executive of the organisation for which you work has been to a government-backed seminar on 'reducing sickness absence' and your manager thinks that reducing avoidable absences would be a good project for you to undertake.

If you feel it would be helpful to find out more about absence management before tackling this activity then you might:

- review some of the CIPD resources on absence management (accessible via searching on the homepage www.cipd.co.uk);
- evaluate the latest CIPD annual survey, which is available at: https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/latest-research.

Discussion questions

1 Identify three benefits of tackling a project like this from your own perspective.

2 Identify three benefits from the perspective of your employer.

3 What problems might you foresee if you were to take on this project?

Feedback notes

1 There are a number of benefits that may have occurred to you. Undertaking this sort of high-profile project might be good for your career prospects. Managing sickness absence is a 'hot topic' in HRM and may well sound like an area you could get interested in. There should be a good level of support for you from both managers and employees as both sets of stakeholders may feel they have something to gain. You know the organisation and can have access to a considerable amount of information. Some of the work could be

undertaken in 'work time' rather than at home at weekends (subject to line manager approval).

2. Your organisation also stands to benefit from such a project. Interest in reducing employee absence is high owing to all of the direct and indirect costs that are associated with it. Your work might also look at some of the issues of employee well-being, which is a highly contemporary subject with a relatively small research base. However, it is important to manage expectations as you are unlikely to be able to completely solve the 'problem'.
3. In spite of some benefits there are also some problems that could occur to you in this sort of situation. Practical issues such as your own time constraints may be of concern as well as the extent to which this would be a project that is interesting to you personally. Other questions you might pose may include:
   - **a** Over what timescale would the employer expect you to work on this project?
   - **b** Would you be able to gain access to sensitive data around sickness absence and in what format? This might depend on what information you need; that is, you would not need to know about the absence records of individual employees.
   - **c** If you work within a unionised organisation, what would the issues be around gaining their buy-in?
   - **d** Is it possible to satisfy both your employer and the requirements for your qualification? If not, how will you approach it?
   - **e** Given that you are (probably) not a senior manager, how would you go about identifying 'urgent actions' for senior people in the organisation?
   - **f** Is the organisation 'really' interested in this project?

Perhaps these concerns might be summed up with four questions:

- What exactly would this project involve and what is the required commitment from the organisation?
- Is it feasible as a topic for a student project?
- How would it 'add value' to HR practice in the organisation?
- How might it 'add value' to the HR community beyond your specific organisation?

The purpose of this chapter is to explore these general questions so that you are in a better position to understand the contribution of research to real organisational situations and consider the role of the 'practitioner-researcher'. This should help you to work out how to use this book to plan and execute your own research project.

What is research in HR?

In our daily lives we are exposed to 'research' on a regular basis; when we read our daily newspaper, check our online newsfeed, review what is trending on social media or watch the news on TV many of the features are based on real empirical

research. Sometimes this is formal, academic research; for example, to demonstrate the consequences of specified interventions. Sometimes the subject may seem a little more lightweight. Consider, for example, when you read news stories about how researchers explain a mathematical formula for making the perfect slice of toast!

As students you will have been exposed to research within your modules to date; hopefully you will have been encouraged to read journal articles and developed the ability to critically evaluate findings and their implications on theory and practice.

From a business and management academic perspective, there are many different ideas about what 'research' actually is (see, for example, Yin, 2017; Silverman, 2015). A useful and simple definition to start with is: **finding out things in a systematic way in order to increase knowledge**. Research is a key function of higher education and informs much of what goes on in organisations.

As a result universities and colleges as well as professional bodies are increasingly requiring elements of research-based or enquiry-based learning at all levels of study.

HRM involves practical application of up-to-date understanding in the context of 'real world' organisations. Reliable knowledge built on accurate information is needed. In order to undertake effective HRM it is important that good quality information underpins decisions and informs the actions of those involved in the employment relationship, such as trades unions, individual employees, outsourced service providers and professional organisations. The definition of research in HR in this book is: **the systematic enquiry into HR issues to increase knowledge and underpin effective action**. The focus on a 'systematic' approach is critical; through your work the reader needs to be able to understand how and why you have designed and followed your research process and they will be looking for evidence to demonstrate that you have achieved your research objectives.

HR research – the value of applied research

Many writers about research methods distinguish between 'pure' and 'applied' research (see, for example, Saunders *et al*, 2019) although the distinction is not always clear-cut and is best seen as a continuum relating to the purpose and context in which the investigation occurs. The main focus of pure research (sometimes referred to as 'Mode 1 research') is on gaining knowledge to describe and explain phenomena, develop and test generalisable theories and make predictions (van Aken, 2005; Burgoyne and Turnbull James, 2006). Applied research (sometimes referred to as 'Mode 2') by contrast, is more concerned with developing knowledge that can be used to solve problems, predict effects, and develop actions and interventions that are applicable in particular organisational contexts. Although applied research is not always accorded high academic prestige it may require greater skill across a broader range of areas than pure research demands (Figure 1.3).

Most HR research that is undertaken as part of a taught course of study is at the 'applied research' end of the continuum, involving a relatively 'small-scale' investigation in one organisation or using information from a relatively small sample of people or organisations. This book works from the position that, in HR at least, applied research is at least as valuable as pure research. HR research that is carried out in a rigorous way can lead to more effective practice than decisions based mainly on intuition, common sense or personal preferences. Common sense tends to take many features of organisational situations for granted. A systematic process of

Figure 1.3 Pure and applied research

Applied research		Pure research
problem-solving	----------	gaining new knowledge
seeking to understand	----------	seeking to change
predicting effects	----------	establishing causes
concern for action	----------	assessing relationships between variables
specific	----------	generalisable
time/cost constraints	----------	'as long as it needs'
'client' orientated	----------	'academic' orientation
relevant	----------	rigorous

(Robson and McCartan, 2016; Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2018; Cameron and Price, 2009; Saunders *et al*, 2019)

research, however, makes it possible to challenge 'taken for granted' assumptions and so generate new ways of understanding situations that can form the basis for innovative approaches to solving complex problems. A key capability for effective HR practitioners is the analysis of HR situations and the use of systematic investigative techniques to underpin decision-making and problem-solving.

The basis of this book is that HR research is about 'advancing knowledge' in a way that is relevant to changing organisational priorities, solution of HR problems and the continuous development of organisations involved in the research process itself. It is important to remember that you are not writing a PhD and the limited word count of a project means that gaining 'new' theoretical knowledge is neither required nor needed.

Activity 1.3

Web-based activity

Visit the website of an HR magazine such as *People Management* (http://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk), *Personnel Today* (http://www.personneltoday.com), *HR Zone* (http://www.hrzone.com) or *HR Magazine* (http://www.hrmagazine.co.uk). Run a search using the word 'research'. If you can, limit the dates of the search to the most recent one or two calendar months.

Feedback notes

An activity such as this demonstrates how important research is to the development of HR practice. Research evidence is used to justify why certain HR practices are beneficial and is also used to evaluate the success (or otherwise) of HR policies and practices. Research contributes to the development of HR at strategic, policy and operational levels. It also enables new ideas about the 'Future of Work'.

What kind of researcher are you?

Models of the research process and diagrams showing skill requirements can lead to an assumption that there is 'one right way' to undertake research. This is not the case and every individual HR practitioner or student is likely to undertake research in his or her own unique way.

Indeed, research in the HR and management arena is characterised by diversity and it is important, at an early stage in your project planning process, to clarify for yourself a response to the question: 'What kind of a researcher are you?' This will help you to think more clearly about potential topics that you might investigate and how you might go about it (Brown, 2006; Fox *et al*, 2007). It would also be useful to think about your preferred learning style (for example, using Honey and Mumford's learning styles questionnaire) and consider how you can use this information to maximise the effectiveness of your project.

Insider or outsider?

Are you an insider or an outsider? There are two possible types of insider. One type is the person who will be involved in researching their own area of work in their own place of employment. The second type of insider is the researcher who is keen to find out what is going on 'inside' the people whom they are researching; their meanings and understandings. Two types of outsider are also possible. Outsiders are those who will be involved in researching in their own organisation but in a different place or part of it, or those who will undertake research into situations and/or organisations where they truly are outsiders. Your position as an insider or an outsider will have implications for your research. Outsiders may find it easier to establish facts and to discuss 'universals' rather than particulars. Insiders, by contrast, may be led to research that contains more 'narrative' than numbers. Examples of the different ways that a topic might be taken forward by people who are insiders or outsiders are shown in Table 1.1. The examples in this table use the illustration of 'talent management' but the same principles would apply to most HR projects.

Detective, doctor or explorer?

In addition to the distinction between research as insiders or as outsiders, most HR researchers have different mental pictures of the purpose of their research. Brown (2006) characterises three different ideal types, which are depicted in Table 1.2. Many researchers find that they identify with more than one type. Which of these are you **most** like?

Table 1.1 Insiders and outsiders – examples of different options for research projects

Insider/Outsider	Example of Research Project Topic
Insiders – who are undertaking research into their own organisation	An evaluation of employee engagement at XYZ Ltd
Insiders – who want to know about what is 'inside' the people whom they are researching; their meanings and understandings	An assessment of perceptions and attitudes towards an employee engagement programme at XYZ Ltd
Outsiders – who will be researching in a different part of their own organisations	An investigation into the implementation of employee engagement in the Information Systems division
Outsiders – who will research into situations and/or organisations where they have little or no connection	Research into the application of employee engagement programmes in digital service organisations in the UK

Table 1.2 Researcher similes

Researcher as Detective	Researcher as Doctor	Researcher as Explorer
You have a clear idea about the research **problem**; for example, 'employee engagement programmes favour younger workers over older employees'. The researcher as detective gathers relevant information in order to get the clues needed to solve the problem and then marshals the evidence to prove that the solution that the researcher has reached is the correct one.	The researcher as doctor recognises the need to work from the symptoms he or she is presented with in order to diagnose the **cause** of the situation before any appropriate 'treatment' can be prescribed. The researcher as doctor looks for the reasons behind the research issue; for example, 'what factors lead employees to be negative about employee engagement programmes?'	The researcher as explorer loves to enter 'unknown territory' and keep a record about what she or he finds; for example, 'what happens in an organisation that has been acquired and is required to implement the employee engagement programme of the new parent company?'

(Brown, 2006)

Descriptive research

If you see yourself mainly as a detective or perhaps as an explorer then it is likely that you will be interested in carrying out **descriptive** research where you set out to provide an accurate profile of situations, people or events. A descriptive research project focuses on 'what, when, where and who'. Having investigated and described

the issue you can then go further and analyse the data to ask, 'why' and 'so what'. Both qualitative and quantitative data are useful in descriptive studies.

Explanatory research

If you see your role as a researcher to be like that of a doctor or perhaps as a detective then it is likely that you will undertake **explanatory research** by setting out to explain a situation or problem, usually in the form of causal relationships. Your focus will be on 'why' and 'how'; seeking to explain organisational problems and, through assessment of the causes, to recommend changes for improvement. Both qualitative and quantitative data may be useful for achieving these research purposes.

Exploratory research

If you see your role as a researcher as more like that of an explorer then **exploratory** research will appeal to you. The purpose of exploratory research is to seek new insights and find out what is happening. There is an attempt to ask questions and assess phenomena in a new light. A more qualitative approach often (but not always) underpins this sort of research and the focus is on obtaining new insights into new or current situations and issues.

Activity 1.4

How real is reality TV?

Reality TV (as distinct from documentaries or other non-fictional TV programmes like sports coverage and news) is a form of television programming that has become prevalent in almost every TV network since the beginning of the 21st century. Examples from UK channels include talent searches such as *The X Factor*, and documentary-type programmes such as *The Only Way is Essex* and *Masterchef*. Reality TV shows claim to show ordinary people in unscripted and real situations. Identify and think about three different reality TV shows that you know about. If you do not watch reality TV shows yourself then you can find out about them from friends or from broadcasters' websites.

Discussion questions

1. How real is reality TV?
2. In what ways is reality TV 'real' and in what ways is reality TV 'not real'?
3. To what extent is heartbreak real?
4. In what sense are dreams real?

Feedback notes

Discussion about reality TV can evoke strong reactions. Some people watch reality TV programmes with enthusiasm and commitment; they want to decide for themselves about the qualities shown by those involved and may also identify strongly for or against one or more of the participants. Other people might describe reality

TV as 'tedious', 'worthless' and 'manipulative'. The extent to which the programme that is broadcast is 'contrived' or the effect of the editing process on what we watch might, however, be seen to make reality TV less 'real' than its name would imply. The discussion about the reality of reality TV makes us wonder how we can **know** about **reality** and this is an important issue for everyone who aims to carry out research in the real world.

When discussing the extent to which heartbreak is real your opinion might be different depending on your current emotional circumstances and relationships. For others their view would not depend on their context or circumstances – they would argue that heartbreak is a feeling rather than a real thing. Others might say that they know what is real when they come across it and are able to distinguish between what seems real (dreams and/or heartbreak) and what actually is real as evidenced by the behaviours that they experience. Even those of us who prefer to rely on the evidence of our senses to identify what is real find ourselves challenged by the digital and technological opportunities of the 21st century to 'remaster' or alter what we see and hear. This can lead us to wonder whether reliance on the evidence provided by our senses or on our experience is a sufficient basis from which to know about the real world (Saunders *et al*, 2019).

What is your real-world view?

Work in HR, and this includes research work in HR, takes place in the real world and is about real-world issues (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Most of the time most of us do not trouble ourselves with thinking much about the nature of the real world; we just get on with our lives and our jobs. Before you start with your research, however, you will need to think about your own 'take' on the nature of the real world.

When addressing the question about 'what is real?' there are three prominent options (Brown, 2006; Fox *et al*, 2007). One answer is that reality is **out there** and this corresponds to what is termed an **objective** world view. If your view is that reality is **in here** (ie a feature of your perceptions and feelings) then you may feel more comfortable in what might be called an individually **constructed** world view. You might think that reality is **in here** but influenced by **out there**. This would be represented by what is often called a **socially constructed** world view.

The extent to which you subscribe to an objective, socially constructed or individually constructed world view may well be influenced by your own personal and professional background. Economists, for example, tend to operate within an objective world view; social and care workers tend to be most comfortable with a socially constructed world view. HR researchers are difficult to generalise about: some adopt a socially constructed world view and others work from an objective world view. Your assumptions about these issues, therefore, may well be different from other HR practitioners and researchers whom you come into contact with. The nature of your thinking in response to these issues, however, is likely to be important for the way that you tackle your project.

If you are most comfortable with an objective world view it is likely that you will want to establish objective facts that can be generalised independently of the beliefs, perceptions, culture and language of different individuals and groups. This perspective is often associated with what is termed a **positivist** approach to research, which

is outlined in Chapter 2. If you are more comfortable with a socially constructed world view it is likely that you will value information from observation or interviews mostly gathered in the form of words and meanings, pictures and other artefacts and value qualitative rather than quantitative data. This world view is often associated with the **interpretivist** approach, which is also introduced in Chapter 2.

Case Example 1.1

Research into retention of nurses

Jake was a part-time student working for an NHS Trust in its HR Department. The organisation was concerned that it was losing a significant number of nurses and that its retention rates were lower than others in the region. Anecdotal evidence led Jake to be concerned about the way nurses were being managed and supported by their line managers and that morale in general was very low with weak levels of employee engagement. For his research project Jake decided to measure a number of variables including employee engagement, organisation citizenship behaviour, intention to leave and supervisor–subordinate relationships. He achieved this through the adaptation of existing scales and particularly the work of Shacklock and Brunetto (2011). Jake set out to gather and analyse data from a range of nurses from across the Foundation Trust via a self-completion questionnaire, in order to provide generalised conclusions around some of the key factors associated with turnover.

Ying was also interested in taking forward research into nurse retention after recognising the significant cost to the organisation. However, she took a different approach. She focused on finding out about the experiences and perceptions of nurses through a series of in-depth interviews. Ying wanted to find out about the different feelings people might have even if they worked in jobs at the same level and in the same organisation. Through conducting interviews, therefore, Ying set out to gather information that was grounded in the experiences and perspectives of those involved in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the issues from the different participants' perspectives.

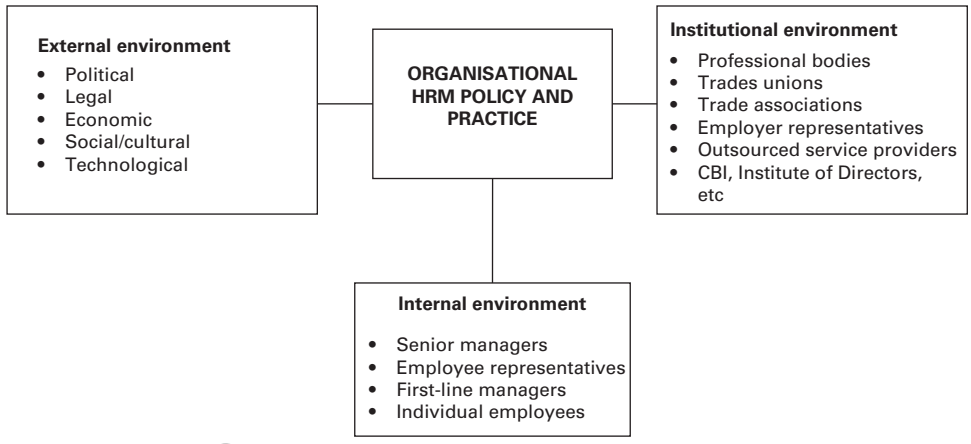
Discussion questions

1. What world view underpinned the approaches to their research adopted by Jake and Ying?
2. To what extent (and why) is it possible to decide which approach is 'superior'?

Feedback notes

The approach adopted by Jake was indicative of the 'objective' world view. He sought to measure variables that are often associated with intention to leave work (and therefore nurse retention) as indicated through generalised patterns of questionnaire responses. Ying's approach was indicative of the 'constructed' world view

Figure 1.4 Factors affecting the employment relationship



and she was interested in the perspectives of different nurses on the basis of their unique experiences and contexts.

The different research world views described here are distinct but you may also have highlighted that there are overlaps between them. No experience (of employee engagement) is wholly individually and uniquely experienced; some aspects will be shared between individuals and groups. Also 'socially derived' views (about executive pay, for example) can become so universally accepted that it can be researched as an objective fact.

You may feel that both objectivist and constructivist perspectives are useful ways forward and research that works from more than one world view is quite common (although not required or compulsory) within HR. The important thing is to be clear about your world view, to yourself and to those who will read your work, so that this can be taken into account in making sense of your research and the conclusions that you draw. This will influence the design decisions that you make (this is explored later in this book). You may well be reflecting at this point that you can see the benefit of both objectivist and constructivist world views and you may be thinking about incorporating both approaches into your research. Within research in HR there is a strong tradition of what is sometimes called a 'mixed methods' approach, characterised by elements of both world views within a project. Such approaches are discussed in Chapter 2. However, bringing insights from both world views together can have implications for your research project that can be very time-consuming and difficult to express within a word limit of 7,000 words (which is often applied for CIPD management or business research reports).

Activity 1.5

What kind of a researcher are you?

Think about yourself: your situation, your world view, your preferences and your interests. Write your comments to the questions on the left in the spaces provided on the right.

About you	Response
Are you likely to undertake research in your own organisation or one where you might be considered an outsider? What are the key issues in gaining access for research purposes?	
Are you interested in general facts and universal trends or are you more interested in getting inside the meanings behind particular issues and experiences?	
To what extent is your preferred research role similar to that of a doctor/explorer/detective (or a combination)?	
Which world view do you feel most comfortable with: objectivist world view or constructivist world view?	
Are you interested in individual stories and experiences or the overall picture of a group or organisation?	

Your responses to these questions might be useful to share with your tutor or supervisor as you discuss potential research topics and the way you might take your research project forward. You will explore world views in more depth later in this book.

The audiences for HR research

Activity 1.6

Audiences for HR research

1 Use Figure 1.4 as a prompt and write down a list of different groups of people who may be interested in the implications of research into HR issues in your organisation (or one you are familiar with).

2 For each group of people that you identify, try to work out how they might find out about relevant research that has been undertaken.

Feedback notes

Your list of likely audiences for HR research might include:

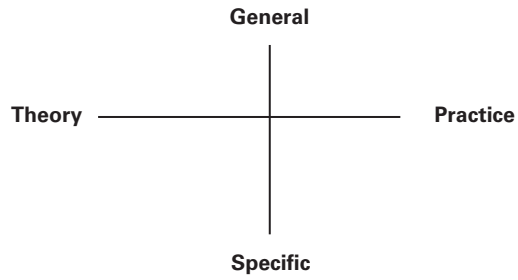
- individual practitioners;
- individual managers;
- members of trades unions;
- people in central government departments;
- members of your local authority;
- specialist organisations/pressure groups;
- professional associations;
- academics;
- consultants;
- employer/trade bodies;
- trades union members;
- students;
- providers of outsourced HR services.

When it comes to finding out about research, there is an equally wide range of publications and opportunities that different groups might use. These include:

- newspapers;
- web pages;
- specific reports (may be internal or external);
- books;
- trade journals;
- professional journals;
- social media feeds (for example, Twitter and LinkedIn);
- webcasts and YouTube;
- attending conferences/seminars;
- academic journals;
- white and green papers;
- social networking sites;
- unpublished research (dissertations, projects, etc).

Each of these different vehicles for communicating knowledge will do so in a different way in order to meet the needs of its audience. As a result they will engage to different extents with both theory and practice and with the general or the specific.

Figure 1.5 Orientation of different research outputs



Activity 1.7

Assessing different research publications

Study one copy of the following types of HR publication:

- academic peer-reviewed journal (eg *Human Resource Management Journal*; *Human Resource Development International* or *International Journal of Human Resource Management*;
- professional journal (eg *People Management* or *Personnel Today*);
- practitioner report (eg IDS Report or a CIPD Research Insight Report (https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/latest-research).

Skim-read the publications and try to plot each of the features of the research articles/reports on the two axes shown on Figure 1.5.

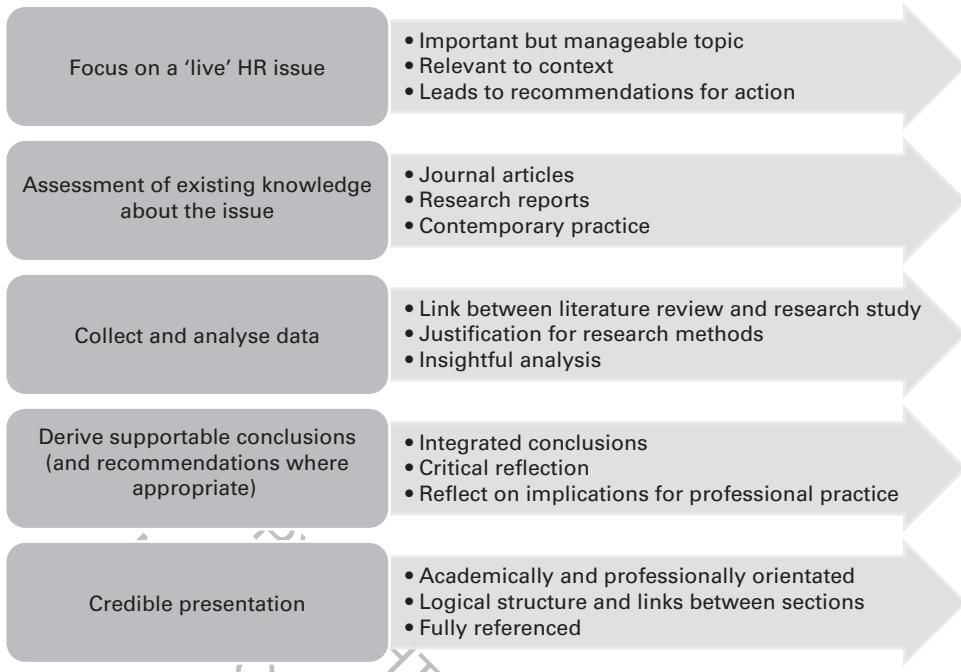
Feedback notes

It is likely that different articles from each of the first two types of publications may need to be plotted differently. Some studies, even within one publication, are very concerned with one specific situation and others are more general. It is easier to characterise the different levels of engagement with theories, models and concepts. Papers in a peer-reviewed academic journal such as *HRMJ*, will be significantly concerned with evaluating theories as well as with practically focused investigations. Practitioner reports, by contrast, are more concerned with describing practice, than with explicitly locating it within any conceptual framework. Feature articles in practitioner journals vary somewhat, although theory is rarely a major feature. This is a factor of the audience or readership of these publications.

Requirements for student projects

If you are working towards a professional and educational qualification then the principal readers of your work will be interested in its academic features as much as the practical outcomes for the organisation(s) in which your research project was

Figure 1.6 Characteristics of a research project in HR



situated. Therefore, it is important that your work corresponds to the characteristics shown in Figure 1.6.

Focus on a 'live' HR issue

Choosing a topic can be a challenging decision for first-time researchers and this issue is addressed in Chapter 2. A good project will be interesting for you to undertake and will provide the opportunity for 'added value' to those who will read about your results (HR practitioners, student colleagues and academic tutors). Choose something that will be manageable (not too big – your time is short) but something that is challenging enough to merit an academic qualification and be interesting to those who will find out about your work. If you are in need of some inspiration, ask your centre's library if they have any examples of past dissertations or projects that you can review. You can also check out the research page on the CIPD website for details of their most recent research projects.

Assessment of existing knowledge about the issue

Most published HR research, particularly reports that are produced for a practitioner audience, do not engage explicitly with theories, models and frameworks. Research written for an academic audience found in academic journals, by contrast, is **explicit** about theory. If your research forms part of a qualification-bearing course then an explicit use of theory is expected. You must take a constructively critical approach to the current state of knowledge in your topic area and work out how your project fits into the wider context. It is worth finding out now about the expectations of

your tutors about the balance between theory and practice for your research report or dissertation. Looking at past projects may also be helpful.

Collect and analyse data

All projects undertaken as part of an HR programme of study usually require the collection and analysis of data. This may be secondary data (that has already been generated for some other purpose) as well as primary data (that you will gather in order to answer your research questions). If you are undertaking a CIPD course then usually you must collect and analyse primary data as part of your research. In many cases your data will come from one organisation but in some circumstances data will be gathered across a range of individuals or organisations. Some HR research involves a new analysis of secondary data sources. A popular example is the use of the dataset from the Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS), which is regularly analysed by academics looking at different aspects of the work.

Derive supportable conclusions

Once you have gathered your data and analysed it in order to 'make sense' of what you have found you will need to draw some overall and integrated conclusions. This will require you to reflect in a critical way about the limitations of your data as well as the insights you have achieved. You may find it useful to read through the limitations sections of journal articles to understand the range of potential challenges. Most HR research projects fall into the category of 'applied research' and so you will also be able to reflect on the implications of your research findings for professional practice.

Credible presentation

Your research report or dissertation may be the longest document you have ever written and you will expend a lot of time and energy in producing it. The final product must be persuasive to those who read it; academic and professional credibility are important. The way the report is presented; the quality of your written communication; careful proofreading; helpful graphics and charts; and the quality of referencing and citation you exhibit will all make a difference to both the persuasiveness of your report AND to the mark your work achieves. It is crucial to follow the presentation guidelines provided by your centre.

Writing your research proposal

Whether you are undertaking a dissertation, business research report or other form of investigative inquiry it is likely that your study centre will require you to write a research proposal. This is an important but helpful process as it forces you to articulate your plan and consider some of the key issues in order to demonstrate that it is appropriate and achievable within your timeframe. Positive feedback on your

proposal will give you the confidence to start tackling your project; it also helps your supervisor to support you in identifying areas for further thought or development. The more detailed your proposal is, the more helpful the feedback will be. The requirements of the proposal will be confirmed by your centre; you should refer to your course information to find the answers to the following questions:

- How long must the proposal be?
- What are the key components?
- Is there a required format for the proposal?
- Is this a formative or summative activity? If it is a summative activity it means you will receive a mark that contributes to your overall grade for your project. Proposals typically account for 10 per cent of the final mark.

Whatever the expected length of the research proposal most students find this a daunting document to produce, but there are good reasons to overcome any natural tendency to put off the moment of writing. Your research project is an independent piece of work. As you undertake it you will benefit from the advice of your tutor as well as others in your study cohort and work organisation.

Table 1.3 provides an indication of issues you will typically need to address in a proposal.

Key stakeholders and sources of support during your project

Working with your supervisor/advisor

A dissertation or a business research report is something for which you take personal responsibility. You will find it helpful to discuss your ideas and your progress with colleagues at work and study-buddies. However, the key source of advice, guidance and encouragement will be your project tutor or research supervisor. Different study centres make different supervisory arrangements and it is important to find out about the practices in your university. The key support your supervisor will provide will be around the process of constructing and writing up your project; the emphasis will usually be on the process rather than your specific subject area. Figure 1.7 depicts the main areas that your supervisor will be able to discuss with you.

Figure 1.7 shows what a crucial contribution your supervisor can make. Establishing a good working relationship can help you to manage the research process in an effective way. The supervisory relationship is different from other tutorial arrangements as, in most cases, supervisors will work with their students on a one-to-one basis. Different supervisors will have their own backgrounds, experiences and preferred ways of working just as you will also have your own preferences. If you want to work effectively with your supervisor then consider the list of 'hints and tips' shown in Table 1.4. It is particularly important that you understand your centre's rules around what supervisors can and cannot do to help you. For example, some centres may allow supervisors to read a draft of only one full chapter.

Table 1.3 Overview of information usually provided in proposals

Topic area; aims and objectives	Provide an overview of the problem or issue you plan to address. Explain why this topic was chosen (What was the catalyst or trigger of the project? What is the value of the project?). Explain what you hope to achieve through the research. You should formulate an initial aim or 'big question' and more specific objectives or questions (see Chapter 2 for help with this).
Literature review plans or progress	This part of the proposal shows how your research is positioned in the existing literature and where your study fits within existing knowledge about the topic. Requirements of study centres vary. Some require you to indicate the main areas for your literature search and key sources of information you are already aware of. Other centres require an initial review of the most important literature sources and an assessment of where your research would contribute to filling a gap in knowledge. At this stage it might be helpful to identify your seminal journal articles.
Research design and methods	This section identifies the way in which you are going to investigate the issue or problem and your world view as a researcher. Your proposal should set out what type of data you intend to collect, your sampling strategy, the research methods you plan to use and your proposed approach to data analysis.
Ethical issues	Indicate here what particular ethical issues or problems you will need to address; in particular obtaining informed consent of any organisations in which you plan to gather data as well as access to individual participants. In particular you will need to explain the approach you will take to issues of confidentiality and anonymity for your research participants. Consider whether there are any additional requirements within the industry or sector in which you work; for example, NHS-based studies are likely to need further external approvals.
Suggested timetable	Present a clear and realistic timetable for the completion of your research and the production of your report. Indicate when important tasks will be carried out. Set achievable targets and time-planning contingencies and build in time for continuous review of different stages by you and your tutor. Consider your personal and professional time commitments.

Managing the research project

A research project is like any other project that you undertake: it has a natural progression, following a series of different stages. To undertake any project successfully you will need to undertake the following steps. Remember that this process will not necessarily follow in such a smooth sequence and you will need to keep continuously evaluating and monitoring progress. However, these stages that are illustrated in Figure 1.8, which also shows the logic of the chapter construction of this book, do act as a reasonable 'road map' and none of them should be left out.

Figure 1.7 Key areas for discussion with your supervisor

Research topic	Have you identified something suitable to investigate? Is it achievable and specific rather than very general?
Research question(s)	Are your initial questions achievable?
Literature	Have you been able to identify suitable literature upon which to base your work? Is there a reasonable balance of academic and practitioner/professional sources?
Research design	Is the chosen research design practical? Is it likely to enable you to answer your research questions? Is it realistic in terms of time and resources that you have available? Is the planned size reasonable?
Collecting data	Do you have a robust plan for collecting data? Have appropriate access arrangements been made?
Ethics	Have you followed the centre's regulations on obtaining ethical consent? Have appropriate arrangements been made to store and process the data? Has appropriate information been shared with the key stakeholders?
Analysis	Has an appropriate means of data analysis been used? Is the analysis presented clearly? Have the data been explored and linked back to the literature?
Conclusions and recommendations	Do the conclusions derive from the findings? Have the research objectives been met? Are relevant and appropriate recommendations offered?

Figure 1.8 Stages in your research project

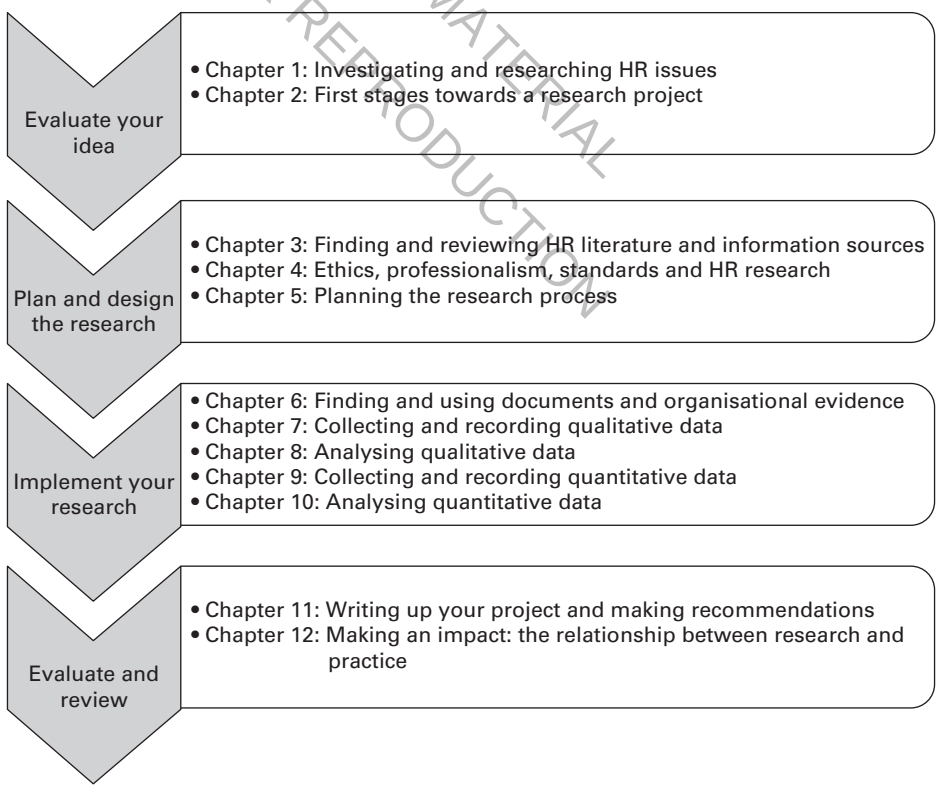


Table 1.4 Constructive working with your supervisor

Establish the format, basis and frequency of meetings	Your centre is likely to have guidelines on how many supervision sessions each student will receive. You may agree to meet face-to-face and have a few long meetings or shorter, more frequent meetings. You may prefer to communicate by Skype, telephone, e-mail, etc if these media are more appropriate. Agree when you need to send the agenda and anything that you would like your supervisor to read.
Identify times when either of you will not be contactable	Check out when your supervisor may be away; let him or her know about your planned absences (holidays, weddings, etc). Don't send work to your supervisor just before any planned leave – your supervisor won't look at it until he or she gets back.
Identify the key areas you feel you will need support with and discuss these at the beginning of the research process	Discuss with your supervisor your strengths and skills that are relevant to the research process and the areas that you feel less confident with. Use feedback from previous modules to identify these areas. Agree an action plan to develop in these areas and seek feedback as appropriate.
Establish project milestones and deadlines by which you will submit draft work for comment	Your supervisor will be able to advise you about realistic time targets. Don't be too ambitious but, once you have established your milestones, make sure you stick to them.
Be honest about your aspirations and priorities for the research project	Discuss what you hope to achieve with your supervisor. If you are aiming for a distinction then commit to this with your supervisor and discuss what will make this more likely to be achieved. Alternatively, if you will be happy with a 'solid' pass then discuss this. If you are hoping to follow up your dissertation with producing a journal article you should definitely discuss this in advance with your supervisor.
If you cannot attend a meeting or meet a deadline then make sure you let your supervisor know in advance	Nothing annoys a supervisor more than waiting around for a student who does not arrive or does not submit work at the agreed date. If you anticipate a change in your circumstances then let your supervisor know sooner rather than later.
Don't prevaricate	Even if you are not fully satisfied with your draft work try to submit it on time and then learn from the feedback you get.
Don't bluff	If you do not understand something or have not actually done something then talking about it means you are more likely to get advice on moving forwards.
Allow time for your supervisor to read your draft work carefully	Although you will undertake a lot of work at weekends do not expect your supervisor to do this as well. If your supervisor is to read your work carefully he or she will need a sensible period of time (there may be many other tasks to fulfil in addition to working with you). Your centre may have agreed timescales for receiving feedback.
Don't ask your supervisor what mark your project/dissertation will achieve	Even if your supervisor will be one of the markers of your report or dissertation the assessment process is different from, and separate to, the supervision process.

It is also wise to reflect upon the feedback that you have received so far on your programme so that you can consider if there is anything that would also be relevant to your project.

Activity 1.8

Review your most recent feedback and make a list of any learning that you can transfer to your project. For example, if you have received feedback that your work should be more *critical*, this is something that you would need to concentrate on when writing your review of the literature.

- **Evaluate your ideas.** At this early stage you make a research proposal and refine your thinking on the basis of feedback you receive. Issues like the length of time available, any cost implications and achieving necessary permissions to undertake the research need to be considered at this stage.
- **Plan and design the project.** This is where you will think in detail about key activities and tasks within each of your main milestones. Careful planning is required about access to data and ethics, literature searching and literature review, and plans relating to data gathering and analysis. Research projects where the researcher just 'jumps in at the deep end' without careful planning and design are less likely to be successful.
- **Implement your research.** This stage will involve processes of data gathering, review and analysis. This stage will involve you in finding and using documentary and organisational evidence, collecting and recording your data and then analysing them to make sense of them.
- **Evaluate and review.** This is an important stage of any project and with research it is essential that you undertake a careful review of your analysis and formulate meaningful conclusions. At the same time it is important to reflect on learning points to enable you to develop your practice as both a researcher and an HR professional as your career develops.

It is likely that most investigative enquiries will be undertaken within a specific organisational context and will be focused on the solution of a particular HR problem or issue. In this sense an action orientation is more likely and the implications of this for the practitioner-researcher are now explored.

Working with your peers in action learning sets

Many centres formally recognise the support that students can provide to each other when they share thoughts, ideas and experiences. Usually the sets will take the form of groups of six to eight students who will be encouraged to meet on a regular basis to discuss either set topics (related to the stage of the project that the students are in) or to address specific issues from the group. The groups are often facilitated

by a project supervisor or tutor who will help students to support and challenge each other and debate potential solutions to problems. Another approach involves students swapping draft chapters and providing feedback to each other based on the marking criteria. Used effectively, this can be a great way of gaining feedback on thoughts and ideas and benefiting from the experience of others. Some centres may allocate a percentage of the projects' final marks to engagement in the process. Participation in the learning sets can also provide some fruitful learning for the reflective pieces that often form the end of the project or dissertation.

Within this section we have looked at the relationship with supervisors/advisors as well as peer groups. In the next section we consider the concept of practitioner-researcher and reflect on how to make this work as effectively as possible.

Working as a practitioner-researcher

A practitioner-researcher is someone who is employed in a job and, at the same time, carries out a research project, which is of some relevance to the person's current role as a practitioner. Some students may choose to undertake a topic that is related to their day-to-day responsibilities or current projects, or they may wish to select a new topic in an area where they can also obtain useful information and data. In the context of this book this definition embraces three types of people:

- Part-time students undertaking research within their employing organisation. In this case the student may be a regular employee or, alternatively, may be someone who is undertaking some form of consultancy assignment in the organisation. Of course, a practitioner-researcher may also be someone who is undertaking an investigative enquiry within the organisation (or that of a client) for which there is no link with the achievement of a qualification.
- Full-time students who have a part-time job in an organisation in which they undertake their research project.
- Full-time students for whom a work placement forms part of their course and they will be undertaking a research project within the placement organisation. If this best describes the situation you are in there are some additional issues for you to consider. Ideally, you will have discussed this with your placement employer prior to the end of your work period and will have agreed what you will research and agree the access arrangements.

Regardless of which type of practitioner-researcher you are, it is important to agree boundaries with the employer at the earliest opportunity.

There are advantages and disadvantages of being a practitioner-researcher. The difficulties that are often encountered relate to:

- **Time.** When the project has to be undertaken in addition to normal workloads it is difficult to give it the attention it deserves.
- **Potential bias.** As you are already familiar with the organisation it can be more difficult to be detached and see things in an objective manner; sometimes you will have a lot of unconscious knowledge so you will need to

explore how you can unpick this so that the reader of your work can see the full picture.

- **Status issues.** Often practitioner-researchers are not in senior positions within the organisation. This can make it difficult for their project to be taken seriously. Alternatively, they may have high status within the organisation. This can make it difficult for subjects of the research to express themselves freely.
- **Confidentiality issues.** In the normal course of your day job you may have access to a wide range of data, some of which may be confidential or information that the organisation would not want in the public domain. It is important to agree carefully what can and cannot be referred to within your work; this should be captured as part of the ethics process (which is explored in more detail in Chapter 4).
- **Being critical.** Although undertaking a research project involves adopting a critically evaluative approach to both theory and practice, in some organisations taking a critical approach is not encouraged. This is a particular challenge when researching in your own organisation. Consider what you will do if you uncover information that is challenging for the organisation and how this balances against your ethical obligations.
- **Being instrumental.** A further danger, from the perspective of the organisation, is that where projects are linked with gaining a qualification, research can become more of a vehicle to achieve the student's purposes than being motivated by the resolution of a problem or issue.

There are also significant advantages to being a practitioner-researcher:

- **Insider opportunities.** If you know the organisation and are a part of it, you have access to a range of knowledge and experience that someone from outside would find difficult to achieve.
- **Practitioner opportunities.** As an experienced practitioner within the organisation it is more likely that actions that you recommend can and will be implemented.
- **Synergy between theory and practice.** As a researcher who engages with theory and also knows the context of the organisation it is more likely that you will be able to design and carry out useful studies that contribute to enhancements in both knowledge and practice. A key challenge for students undertaking a project is to provide sufficiently detailed conclusions and recommendations; where you have the inside knowledge of an organisation and its constraints you may find it easier to be able to identify appropriate recommendations.

In summary, undertaking research projects in organisational situations provides a number of advantages but there are also dangers. A key issue for students is avoiding the temptation to merely repeat established organisational 'mantras' and making every effort to ensure that their project leads to new insights. In order to achieve this, practitioner-researchers must endeavour to:

- explicitly consider the wider context of the problem or issue that is being researched, both within the organisation and with regard to practice and developments outside of the organisation;

- manage the expectations of your internal stakeholders right from the start of your project;
- draw clear boundaries around information and data that can be used specifically to inform your project;
- critically engage with theories, models and concepts at all stages of the research process;
- encourage, where possible, the dissemination of the findings of studies so that they can inform the development of practice and understanding in other organisations and contexts.

Some more ideas about how this can be achieved are listed below:

- Where possible, negotiate a time allowance to carry out the research OR agree specific times when you can carry out your research and access the relevant organisational resources.
- Be prepared to pitch the idea of the research within the organisation. Identify the potential benefits and how it might contribute to organisational objectives.
- Try to establish a difference of procedure between activities connected with your research and your normal day-to-day practitioner activities. Be clear to yourself and to others about when you are wearing the 'hat' of a researcher and when you are acting as a practitioner.
- Be explicit in your thinking about methods and sources of information. This will allow you to reflect proactively about the strengths and limitations of your research and so improve on it. It will also enable others to make an appropriate assessment of your work.
- Ensure that your research procedures are systematic and can be justified by more than convenience. If you cut corners (and you probably will) you must be explicit about the impact of the short cuts on your findings and how you have interpreted your information (these issues can be discussed as limitations of your work).

CHECKLIST

- HR research involves systematically enquiring into HR issues to increase knowledge and underpin effective action.
- Most HR enquiry can be characterised as 'applied research' being concerned with solving problems, considering effects, and developing actions and interventions.
- Effective research processes involve: formulating a research topic; evaluating what is already known; obtaining information of good quality; interpreting the information; and formulating conclusions.
- Effective HR researchers require a range of skills including: intellectual and thinking skills; personal effectiveness skills; organisational skills; and

communication skills. Personal qualities like self-motivation, self-centredness and self-confidence are also required.

- Different research world views (eg constructivist and objectivist) can be seen as distinct ways of making sense of the world but there are overlaps between them.
- Projects undertaken to fulfil the requirements of an academic qualification are expected to make appropriate use of theories, models and concepts as well as primary and secondary data.
- Preparing a research proposal allows you to put down your initial ideas in writing: share them with your tutor, and get feedback about the strengths and possible difficulties of your idea.
- Establishing and maintaining a good working relationship with your project supervisor will enable you to benefit from feedback and discussion of your ideas throughout the life cycle of your project.
- There are advantages and disadvantages to being a practitioner-researcher but organisational research, properly undertaken, can lead to new insights into HR issues, problems and situations.

TEST YOURSELF

1 What is the first stage of the research process?

- **a** Designing a questionnaire.
- **b** Identifying a suitable topic.
- **c** Completing the literature review.
- **d** Evaluating secondary data.

2 When should ethical issues be considered?

- **a** When you develop your conclusions.
- **b** Before you start your project.
- **c** At the same time as you collect your data.
- **d** When you analyse your primary data.

3 The role of a supervisor is to…

- **a** Tell you exactly how to get a distinction or first-class mark.
- **b** Read drafts of every chapter.
- **c** Organise your time between now and the submission date.
- **d** Provide advice, guidance and support.

4 What type of publication is CIPD (2019) *Rotten Apples, Bad Barrels and Sticky Situations: An evidence review of unethical workplace behaviour*?

- **a** Professional journal.
- **b** Practitioner report.
- **c** Green paper.
- **d** Academic peer-reviewed journal.

5 Which of the following describes 'researcher as doctor'?

- **a** The researcher has a clear idea about the research problem.
- **b** The researcher likes to enter unknown territory.
- **c** The researcher likes to replicate existing studies in a new context.
- **d** The researcher recognises the need to work with the symptoms that are presented.

Review Questions

Carefully study the information your centre provides about the requirements for your research project or dissertation. Look closely at the assessment criteria that are provided. Study the indicative structure that may be described. Make sure that you can answer all the questions below. If you cannot, then make sure you find out the answers from whoever is responsible for projects in your study centre:

1 What is the submission deadline for the final report?
2 What is the indicative word limit?
3 Over what timescale should the project be undertaken?
4 What level of engagement with theories, concepts, frameworks of best practice etc is expected?
5 How important is it to gather primary data?
6 Does the research have to be based in an organisation?
7 Are implementable recommendations a requirement for the project?
8 What support is available to students when undertaking their project and how can that support be accessed?

After you have considered these questions from your centre's perspective, you should also consider your personal and professional constraints by thinking about the following:

9 What are your busiest times at work and how do they coincide with deadlines for your project? How will you manage this process?
10 What personal commitments do you have during the year? How can you build this into your timeline?
11 Are there any time-sensitive elements to your project? For example, in being able to obtain data produced on an annual basis.

Questions for reflection

These questions are designed for two purposes:

1 **Project planning.** Answering these questions should help you to identify actions and priorities that will be important in undertaking your project. The answers you make to these questions may influence:
   – which chapters of this book you need to study particularly closely;
   – which sources of further reading will be relevant to you;
   – the extent to which you need to get further advice on features of the research process.
2 **Demonstrating reflective practice.** If you are a member of a professional body like CIPD then you will need to undertake continuing professional development (CPD). There are many benefits to a process of reflection about your professional development and a commitment to developing your skills and knowledge. Taking this approach to CPD as part of your research process can help you to be more productive and efficient by reflecting on your learning and highlighting gaps in your knowledge and experience. This will enable you to build confidence and credibility, track your learning, see your progress and demonstrate your achievements.

Taking stock

1 What influence might your professional, organisational or personal background have

on the way you approach your research? Do you see your role as a researcher as being like a detective, a doctor or an explorer? Will you be working as an outsider or as an insider? What are the implications of your responses to these questions for your choice of topic and the extent to which your research may set out to achieve a descriptive, explanatory or exploratory purpose?

2 How feasible is it for you to undertake research in one organisation? For how long do you expect to be a part of the organisation in which your research may be based? What other options may be open to you?

3 What access issues might there be in your chosen organisation? What are the likely timescales for obtaining permission?

4 How clear are you about a topic for your project? Who do you need to discuss your ideas with to decide about the feasibility of the project? (Chapter 2 is particularly relevant to these questions.)

5 What resources or expertise and advice are available to you from your project supervisor? How can you make best use of these resources?

Strengths and weaknesses

6 How confident are you about the process of undertaking a literature search to enable you to critically evaluate what is already known about your topic? What are the skills you will need to search and critically review theories, models and concepts within the literature? (Chapter 3 is particularly relevant to these issues.)

7 How aware are you of sources of secondary data that would be relevant to your project? What skills will you need to obtain and analyse the secondary data you have in mind? (Chapter 7 is particularly relevant to these issues.)

8 What options might you consider to obtain primary data? What are the skill implications of the data generation options that you are considering?

9 What skills and competences have you already developed that you can utilise in the process of undertaking your project?

Being a practitioner-researcher

10 What are the status or 'political' issues within your organisation that may affect the process of undertaking your project? How might you be able to manage these effectively?

11 What are the timescales for your project that are required by: a) your study centre; b) your organisation? What are the implications of this for the process of doing your project?

12 What opportunities can you identify to 'sell' your project ideas to: a) your manager and colleagues; b) others in the organisation?

Finally…

13 Describe how you will feel when you have completed your project. Hold on to that feeling!

Explore Further

It is very important to carefully read any handbooks or guidance notes relating to project work provided by your study centre. Most students skim through these at the beginning of their project process and only read them carefully at the very end of the process, when it is almost too late. Your tutor will usually provide a copy of the detailed marking criteria right at the start of your project – this is an essential document that should be referred to on a weekly basis so that you can understand the requirements of all of the different sections of your project. Use this as a key tool in ensuring your project will meet the criteria.

One of the best ways to learn about research methods is to read and critique good quality, peer-reviewed, research-based articles. You can tell if a journal is peer-reviewed by glancing at its notes for contributors, which will indicate that potential contributions will go through a 'blind peer review' process.

Useful Resources

Bell, E, Bryman, A and Harley, B (2019) *Business Research Methods,* 5th edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Coghlan, D and Brannick, T (2014) *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organisation,* 4th edn, Sage, London

Collis, J and Hussey, R (2014) *Business Research: A practical guide for undergraduate and postgraduate students*, Palgrave, Basingstoke

Gill, J, Johnson, P and Clark, M (2010) *Research Methods for Managers*, Sage, London

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Kirton, B (2011) *Brilliant Dissertation,* Pearson Education, New York

Silverman, D (2015) *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, Sage, London

White, B and Rayner, S (2014) *Dissertation Skills,* Cengage Learning, Hampshire

Yin, RK (2017) *Case Study Research: Design and methods*, 6th edn, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA

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Burgoyne, JG and Turnbull, JK (2006) Towards best or better practice in corporate leadership development: Operational issues in mode 2 and design science research, *British Journal of Healthcare Management*, **17** (4), pp 303–316

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Robson, C and McCartan, K (2016) *Real World Research: A resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers*, Wiley, Oxford

Saunders, M, Lewis, P and Thornhill, A (2019) *Research Methods for Business Students*, 8th edn, Pearson Education, New York

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