

Chapter 1

Business and management research, reflective diaries and the purpose of this book

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should:

- be able to outline the purpose and distinct focus of business and management research;
- be able to place your research project on a basic–applied research continuum according to its purpose and context;
- understand the utility and importance of keeping a reflective diary;
- understand the stages you will need to complete (and revisit) as part of your research process;
- have an overview of this book’s purpose, structure and features;
- be aware of some of the ways you can use this book.

1.1 Introduction

This book is designed to help you to undertake your research project, whether you are an undergraduate or postgraduate student of business and management or a manager. It provides a clear guide on how to undertake research as well as highlighting the realities of undertaking research, including the more common pitfalls. The book is written as an introductory text to provide you with a guide to the research process and with the necessary knowledge and skills to undertake a piece of research from thinking of a research topic to writing your project report. As such, you will find it useful as a manual or handbook on how to tackle your research project.

After reading the book you will have been introduced to and explored a range of approaches, strategies, techniques and procedures with which you could tackle your research project. Of equal importance, you will know that there is no one best way for undertaking all research. Rather you will be aware of the choice you will have to make and how this choice will impact upon what you can find out. This means you will be able to make an informed choice about the approaches, strategies, techniques and procedures that are most suitable to your own research project and be able to justify this choice. In reading the book you will have been introduced to the wealth of data that can be obtained via the Internet, techniques for collecting your own data and procedures for analysing different types of data, have had a chance to practise them, and be able to select and justify which to use. When selecting and using these

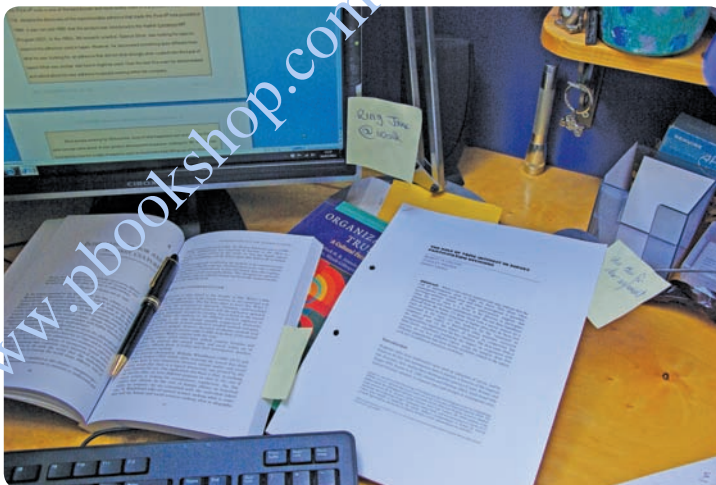
techniques procedures you will be aware of the contribution that the appropriate use of information technology can make to your research.

However, a word of caution before you continue. In your study, you will inevitably read a wide range of books and articles. In many of these the terms 'research method' and 'research methodology' will be used interchangeably, perhaps just using methodology as a more verbose way of saying method. In this book we have been more precise in our use of these terms.

The Post-it® note is one of the best known and most widely used office products in the world. Yet, despite the discovery of the repositionable adhesive that made the Post-it® note possible in 1968, it was not until 1980 that the product was introduced to the market (Post-it 2011). In the 1960s 3M research scientist Spence Silver was looking for ways to improve the adhesive used in tapes. However, he discovered something quite different from what he was looking for, an adhesive that did not stick strongly when coated onto the back of tapes! What was unclear was how it might be used. Over the next five years he demonstrated and

talked about his new adhesive to people working within the company.

Most people working for 3M know the story of what happened next and how the Post-it® note concept came about. A new product development researcher working for 3M, Art Fry, was frustrated by how the scraps of paper he used as bookmarks kept falling out of his church choir hymn book. He realised that Silver's adhesive would mean his bookmarks would not fall out. Soon afterwards the Post-it® note concept was developed and market research undertaken. This was extremely difficult as the product was revolutionary and was, in effect, designed to replace pieces of torn scrap paper! However, despite some



Post-it® notes in use

Source: © Mark Saunders 2011

initial scepticism within the company, Post-it® notes were launched in 1980. One year after their launch, they were named 3M's outstanding new product.

Whilst your research project will be within the business and management discipline rather than natural science (such as developing a new adhesive), our introductory example still offers a number of insights into the nature of research and in particular the business and management research you will be undertaking. In particular, it highlights that when undertaking research we should be open to finding the unexpected and how sometimes the applicability of our research findings may not be immediately obvious. It also emphasises the importance of discussing your ideas with other people.

Throughout the book we use the term **methods** to refer to techniques and procedures used to obtain and analyse data. This, therefore, includes questionnaires, observation and interviews as well as both quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (non-statistical) analysis techniques and, as you have probably gathered from the title, is the main focus of this book. In contrast, the term **methodology** refers to the theory of how research should be undertaken. We believe it is important that you have some understanding of this so that you can make an informed choice about your research. For this reason, we also discuss a range of philosophical assumptions upon which research can be based and the implications of these for the method or methods adopted.

1.2 The nature of research

When listening to the radio, watching the television or reading a daily newspaper it is difficult to avoid the term ‘research’. The results of ‘research’ are all around us. A debate about the findings of a recent poll of people’s opinions inevitably includes a discussion of ‘research’, normally referring to the way in which the data were collected. Politicians often justify their policy decisions on the basis of ‘research’. Newspapers report the findings of research companies’ surveys (Box 1.1). Documentary programmes tell us about ‘research findings’, and advertisers may highlight the ‘results of research’ to encourage you to buy a particular product or brand. However, we believe that what these examples really emphasise is the wide range of meanings given to the term ‘research’ in everyday speech.

Walliman (2011) argues that many of these everyday uses of the term ‘research’ are not research in the true meaning of the word. As part of this, he highlights ways in which the term is used wrongly:

- just collecting facts or information with no clear purpose;
- reassembling and reordering facts or information without interpretation;
- as an esoteric activity with no or little relevance to everyday life;
- as a term to get your product or idea noticed and respected.

The first of these highlights the fact that, although research often involves the collection of information, it is more than just reading a few books or articles, talking to a few people or asking people questions. While collecting data may be part of the research process, if it is not undertaken in a systematic way, on its own and, in particular, without a clear purpose, it will not be seen as research. The second of these is commonplace in many reports. Data are collected, perhaps from a variety of different sources, and then assembled in a single document with the sources of these data listed. However, there is no interpretation of the data collected. Again, while the assembly of data from a variety of sources may be part of the process of research, without interpretation it is not research. The third emphasises how despite research often appearing abstract, it influences our daily lives and creates our understanding of the world. Finally, the term ‘research’ can be used to get an idea or product noticed by people and to suggest that people should have confidence in it. In such instances, when you ask for details of the research process, these are either unclear or not forthcoming.

Based upon this brief discussion we can already see that research has a number of characteristics:

- Data are collected systematically.
- Data are interpreted systematically.
- There is a clear purpose: to find things out.



Box 1.1 Focus on research in the news

FT

Business slow to assess Olympics impact

According to a survey, with just over a year to go until the games more than half of Britain's large businesses have yet to assess the impact the Olympics will have on their operations. Research by Deloitte, the professional services group, showed that 53 per cent of UK businesses have not examined the challenges and opportunities of hosting the world's largest sporting event.

Heather Hancock, lead London 2012 partner at Deloitte, said businesses needed to recognise that the Olympic Games is an immovable deadline and 'time is starting to run out'. Rick Cudworth, head of business continuity and resilience at the consultancy, said any excuses for not starting to plan yet – because of a lack of information, for example – were 'disappearing'. Companies are becoming more aware of the potentially disruptive effects of the games – on issues from transport to supply chain concerns – with some 42 per cent having assessed the ramifications, compared with 15 per cent in October last year. But Mr Cudworth said businesses were still not 'doing enough early enough'. It typically takes at least 12 months for companies to be 'thoroughly prepared' for the knock-on effects of an event of this magnitude, he said. Companies that fail to do so could fall short on key supplies, such as hotel vacancies. Mr Cudworth said even small changes, such as encouraging staff to cycle to work, took time because this also required companies to provide shower facilities and a place to store bicycles.

Lack of available staff was cited as the biggest concern for companies surveyed, with 43 per cent saying

they thought it could cause the most disruption to their operations. Security was second at 37 per cent. Despite Transport for London's warning that the games will have 'some form of transport impact' for about 100 days, only 35 per cent of respondents, and 32 per cent in London, thought it posed the greatest risk of disruption to them. Mr Cudworth said companies should track staff holiday levels and absences, and their intentions during the games, adding, '[companies need to] make sure your policies, your plans, your staff intentions, match your ability to maintain business throughout the periods of the day you need to operate'. Only 18 per cent of businesses surveyed – and 15 per cent in London – said potential disruptions to the supply chain were a key risk to their operations, a level Mr Cudworth described as unrealistic.

The survey also revealed a 'relatively widespread' trend among businesses of a lack of involvement in planning by senior leadership. 'If I have a fear it is that for some businesses, [planning for the Olympics] is still an underground movement, so it's operating somewhat below the senior executive level,' said Mr Cudworth. Twelve per cent of senior business leaders said they did not intend to assess the impact the Olympics would have on their businesses. Mr Cudworth said executive involvement would produce more 'appropriate and proportionate' plans to operate during the games and he urged executives not to leave planning 'to be run under the covers'.

Mark Prisk, minister for business and enterprise, said: 'Frustrating events like late running transport, sickness, supplier delays, computer crashes, accidents and fraud can cause nuisance or disruption but if something similar happened during London 2012 the impact could prevent you from conducting business and damage your reputation.'

Source: Article by Vanessa Kortekaas, *Financial Times*, 25 June 2011.
Copyright © 2011 The Financial Times Ltd

We can therefore define **research** as something that people undertake in order to find out things in a systematic way, thereby increasing their knowledge. Two phrases are important in this definition: 'systematic way' and 'to find out things'. 'Systematic' suggests that research is based on logical relationships and not just beliefs (Ghauri and Grønhaug 2010). As part of this, your research will involve an explanation of the method or methods used to collect the data, will argue why the results obtained are meaningful and will explain any limitations that are associated with them. 'To find out things' suggests there are a

multiplicity of possible purposes for your research. It is therefore an activity which means it has to be finished at some time to be of use (Becker 1998). This will undoubtedly be true for your research project, which will have a specific deadline. Purposes may include describing, explaining, understanding, criticising and analysing (Ghauri and Grønhaug 2010). However, it also suggests that you have a clear purpose or set of 'things' that you want to find out, such as the answer to a question or number of questions.

1.3 Business and management research

Using our earlier definition of research we can define business and management research as undertaking systematic research to find out things about business and management.

Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) argue that four things combine to make business and management a distinctive focus for research:

- The way in which managers (and researchers) draw on knowledge developed by other disciplines.
- The fact that managers tend to be powerful and busy people. Therefore, they are unlikely to allow research access unless they can see personal or commercial advantages.
- The fact that managers are educated. Many now have undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and, as such, tend often to be as well educated as those conducting research about them.
- The requirement for the research to have some practical consequence. This means it either needs to contain the potential for taking some form of action or needs to take account of the practical consequences of the findings.

Ongoing debate within journals has explored the nature and purpose of business and management research, its relevance as well as the purpose and future status of business schools where much of this research is located (Cassell and Lee 2011). These debates have, at times, been reflected in the media (Box 1.2). One feature, which has



Box 1.2 Focus on research in the news

FT

Academia strives for relevance

Are business schools relevant? Given the expansion of management education in recent years, the question may seem moot. But, with critics continuing to query the real-world value of research and teaching, relevance has remained an issue for school administrators.

This month, David Willetts, the UK universities minister, criticised business schools for focusing on peer-reviewed research at the expense of applied studies. 'I am very aware we have inherited a structure of rewarding research excellence in particular that can



have a very damaging practical effect on the work of a business school,' he said. British academics, he added, should concentrate more on teaching rather than publishing research in US journals. 'We have created a





system in which research has much greater incentives and rewards than teaching, which I think is very bad for our universities.’ Though it is rare for a minister to question the role of business schools, the comments were familiar to deans and other academic staff. Dan LeClair, senior vice president at the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), which accredits more than 500 institutions worldwide, says deans are under more pressure than ever to justify what they do. ‘The deans have been telling us that major donors are asking tough questions like “you have all these faculty members who you are very proud of, but can you tell me how this research has made a difference?”’, he says. ‘It’s also the alumni and even the provosts and presidents of the institutions. They are all asking schools to not only describe what they are trying to achieve, but also to demonstrate it.’

Business schools are frequently criticised for over-emphasising academic rigour over relevance to practice. And many believe the structures of the business school world feed the tendency: that promotion is based on articles few managers read; and that accreditation bodies and rankings providers count journal entries, and citations, to assess worthiness. Mr LeClair says the Florida-based AACSB has sometimes encouraged research that is ‘narrow and theoretical and more mathematical’ because it is easier to quantify. ‘By focusing on that it takes some of the uncertainty away about whether a school is creditable. It gives us something to count. Applied research is more difficult to measure.’

Following a 2008 report calling for schools to have greater contact with business, the AACSB has been studying how to measure the impact of ‘faculty intellectual contributions on targeted audiences’. Ten schools are taking part in a study where they self-assess their work against five criteria – each taken from mission statements. Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, for example, is assessing whether it meets the needs of ‘key industries and strategic niches’, contributes to the practice of management and teaching and upholds its Jesuit values. Although the exercise is not finished, Mr LeClair said it has helped to develop measures for impact in areas such as executive education and the work of research

centres. In future, it may be possible to assess how customised teaching programmes, for example, help companies reach their objectives. Other schools are framing similar exercises. The Erasmus Research Institute of Management (ERIM) in Rotterdam is introducing a ‘dual impact’ system where it measures both academic influence (through journal articles and citations) and managerial relevance (consultancy requests and advisory board memberships). ERIM is also beginning to collect ‘stakeholder’ data from government agencies and even the general public. Scientific director Ale Smidts estimates that ERIM faculty are now appraised 80 per cent by standard academic criteria and 20 per cent by managerial relevance. He notes the influence of the national funding agency, the Netherlands Organisation of Scientific Research. ‘It used to be that you only had to focus on originality and rigour, and if you had a relevant aspect it counted as a plus. Now it [relevance] is more of a necessity. If you can’t show relevance, you get a negative on that aspect,’ he says.

Robin Wensley, director of the UK’s Advanced Institute of Management and professor of policy and marketing at Warwick Business School, says it is vital that academics become ‘more engaged’ with business, seeing businesspeople as ‘knowledgeable actors in situations, as much as thinking we have all the answers’. He is also in favour of changing incentive structures to promote more relevant research. But he cautions against academics becoming the ‘the same people’ as the subjects they are trying to analyse.

Mr LeClair stresses that the AACSB’s relevance initiative is designed for schools to meet their own criteria for relevance, rather than a general standard. And Esade dean Professor Alfons Sauquet argues that it is vital for schools to have a mixture of practice-focused and more theoretically minded staff. ‘As deans we cannot fall too much into either camp. If we follow the business side position we would end up as consultants. If we followed just the academic research, we would be ivory tower people. I think we have to play both roles, and that’s the tricky thing.’

Source: Adapted from ‘Academia strives for relevance’, Ben Schiller, *Financial Times*, 25 April 2011. Copyright © 2011 The Financial Times Ltd

gained considerable support, is the transdisciplinary nature of such research. While this has similarities to Easterby-Smith et al.'s (2008) point regarding the use of knowledge from other disciplines, it also emphasises that the research 'cannot be reduced to any sum of parts framed in terms of contributions to associated disciplines' (Tranfield and Starkey 1998: 352). In other words, using knowledge from a range of disciplines enables management research to gain new insights that cannot be obtained through all of these disciplines separately. Another feature of management research highlighted in the debate is a belief that it should be able to develop ideas and relate them to practice. In particular, that research should complete a virtuous circle of theory and practice (Tranfield and Starkey 1998) through which research on managerial practice informs practically derived theory. This in turn becomes a blueprint for managerial practice, thereby increasing the stock of relevant and practical management knowledge. Thus, business and management research needs to engage with both the world of theory and the world of practice. Consequently, the problems addressed should grow out of interaction between these two worlds rather than either on their own.

An article by Hodgkinson et al. (2001) offers a useful four-fold taxonomy for considering rigour and relevance in relation to managerial knowledge. Using the dimensions of theoretical and methodological rigour and of practical relevance they identify four quadrants (see Table 1.1). Hodgkinson et al. argue that pedantic science is characterised by a focus on increasing methodological rigour at the expense of results that are relevant and can sometimes be found in refereed academic journals. In contrast, popularist science is characterised by a focus on relevance and usefulness whilst neglecting theoretical and methodological rigour, examples being found in some books targeted at practising managers. Consequently, whilst findings might be useful to managers, the research upon which they are based is unlikely to be valid or reliable. Puerile science both lacks methodological rigour and is of limited practical relevance and, although unlikely to be found in refereed academic journals, can be found in other media. Finally, pragmatic science is both theoretically and methodologically rigorous and relevant.

In the past decade debate about the nature of management research has focused on how it can meet the *double hurdle* of being both theoretically and methodologically rigorous, while at the same time embracing the world of practice and being of practical relevance (Hodgkinson et al. 2001; Wensley 2011). Much of this debate has centred around the work by Gibbons et al. (1994) on the production of knowledge and, in particular, the concepts of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge creation. **Mode 1** knowledge creation emphasises research in which the questions are set and solved by academic interests, emphasising a fundamental rather than applied nature, where there is little if any focus on utilisation of the research by practitioners. In contrast, **Mode 2** emphasises a context

Table 1.1 A taxonomy for considering the 'relevance gap' in relation to managerial knowledge

Theoretical and methodological rigour	Practical relevance	Quadrant
Higher	Lower	Pedantic science
Lower	Higher	Popularist science
Lower	Lower	Puerile science
Higher	Higher	Pragmatic science

Source: Developed from Hodgkinson et al. (2001)

for research governed by the world of practice, highlighting the importance of collaboration both with and between practitioners (Starkey and Madan 2001) and the need for the production of practical relevant knowledge. Based upon this, Starkey and Madan (2001) observe that research within the Mode 2 approach offers a way of bringing the supply side of knowledge represented by universities together with the demand side represented by businesses and overcoming the double hurdle.

Drawing upon these debates, it could be argued that business and management research not only needs to provide findings that advance knowledge and understanding, it also needs to address business issues and practical managerial problems. However, this would negate the observation that Mode 2 practices develop from Mode 1. It might also result in business and management research that did not have obvious commercial benefit not being pursued. This, Huff and Huff (2001) argue, could jeopardise future knowledge creation as research that is currently not valued commercially might have value in the future. Building upon these ideas, Huff and Huff, rather like Fukami (2007) who found a third road in addition to the two academic career roads of research and teaching, highlight a further form of knowledge production: Mode 3. **Mode 3** knowledge production focuses on an appreciation of the human condition as it is and as it might become, its purpose being to 'assure survival and promote the common good at various levels of social aggregation' (Huff and Huff 2001: 53). This emphasises the importance of broader issues of human relevance of research. Consequently, in addition to research that satisfies your intellectual curiosity for its own sake, the findings of business and management research might also contain practical implications, and these findings may have societal consequences far broader and complex than perhaps envisaged by Mode 2. This, Syed et al. (2010) argue, is particularly important now given the major concerns about the behaviour of organisations and their impacts on society and the environment:

- breaches of legitimacy and trust such as Enron and some UK members of parliament;
- human rights violations and collaboration with repressive regimes such as by some energy companies;
- power of multinational corporations, a number having greater economic and political influence than some governments;
- reluctance to accept the reality and consequences of global warming.

Tranfield and Denyer (2004) draw attention to concerns resulting from the separation of knowledge producers from knowledge users. This has introduced a schism, or what Starkey and Madan (2001) call the 'relevance gap', which has been the subject of considerable debate for more than a decade. Rousseau (2006) has drawn attention to ways of closing what she terms the prevailing 'research-practice gap' – the failure of organisations and managers to base practices on the best available evidence. She extols the virtues of 'evidence-based management' which derives principles from research evidence and translates them into practices that solve organisational problems. Research findings do not appear to have transferred well to the workplace. Instead of a scientific understanding of human behaviour and organisations, managers, including those with MBAs, continue to rely largely on personal experience, to the exclusion of more systematic knowledge. This has been discussed in articles and entire special issues of journals including the *Journal of Management Studies* (2009, volume 46, number 3) and the *British Journal of Management* (2010, volume 21, supplement) as well as in volumes such as Cassell and Lee's (2011) *Challenges and Controversies in Management Research*. Within these debates some maintain that the gap between rigour and relevance is fundamentally unbridgeable because management researchers and the researched inhabit different worlds, are engaged in different activities and have different research orientations, whilst others disagree. Hodgkinson and Rousseau (2009), for example, argue that

Table 1.2 Practitioner and management researcher orientations

Management researcher		Practitioner
Basic understanding	Focus of interest	Useable knowledge
General enlightenment		Instrumental
Theoretical explanation		Practical problem solutions
'Why' knowledge		'How to' knowledge
Substantive theory building		Local theory-in-use
Theoretical and methodological rigour	Methodological imperative	Timeliness
Academic publication	Key outcome	Actionable results with practice impact
Disdain of practitioner	Views of other	Deprecate or ignore
Desire to make a difference to practice		Belief research can provide relevant fresh insights to managers' problems

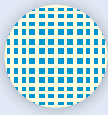
Source: Developed from Saunders (2011)

the research–practice gap is due to more than differences in style and language, and that management researchers can generate knowledge that is both socially useful and academically rigorous.

Not surprisingly, many managers and academics perceive the gap between research undertaken by academics and the practice of management as a problem. Saunders (2011) categorises these as differences between academics and practitioners' orientations in relation to their foci of interest, methodological imperatives, the key outcomes, and how each views the other. These we summarise in Table 1.2, the contrasting orientations indicating where tensions may occur.

However, perhaps the most telling comment on the so-called 'relevance gap' is from Tranfield and Denyer (2004: 13), who assert that ignoring such a gap would be 'unthinkable in other professional fields, such as medicine or engineering, where a national scandal would ensue if science base and practice were not inextricably and necessarily interlinked'. This links to the idea of conceptualising management as a design science rather than a social science. From the design science perspective, the main purpose of academic management research is therefore only to develop valid knowledge to support organisational problem solving (Box 1.3). Whilst many researchers would probably agree that the mission of management research, like other social sciences, is description, explanation and prediction, taking a design science mission therefore focuses upon solution-orientated research to develop valid knowledge which supports practitioners in solving business problems (Van Aken 2005).

Within the boundaries of advancing knowledge, addressing business issues, solving managerial problems and promoting the common good, the purpose and the context of your research project can differ considerably. For some research projects your purpose may be to understand and explain the impact of something, such as a particular policy. You may undertake this research within an individual organisation and suggest appropriate action on the basis of your findings. For other research projects you may wish to explore the ways in which various organisations do things differently. In such projects



Box 1.3 Focus on management research

Management research as design science?

An article by Pandza and Thorpe (2010) in the *British Journal of Management* considers the notion of management as a design science and whether it offers a genuine alternative to management as a social science. Within this they argue that if the design science notion represents the production and verification of problem-solving methods and technological rules to guide planned interventions in

organisations then it does offer something different to management. However, they also comment that, if this is the case, it is only applicable in some situations and so represents an umbrella term for some methodologies.

Pandza and Thorpe believe that management practice is characterised by a wide variety of organisational phenomena which are often ambiguous and not suited to prescriptive (rule-like) explanations offered by design science. They argue that researchers are better at explaining such phenomena rather than rigorously guiding them. They conclude (2010: 183): 'There needs to be, in our view, balance between the domains of explanation and application. We recognize this is difficult to achieve simultaneously, since the study of management is the study of practice – not a practical science.'

your purpose may be to discover and understand better the underlying processes in a wider context, thereby providing greater understanding for practitioners. For yet other research projects you may wish to place an in-depth investigation of an organisation within the context of a wider understanding of the processes that are operating.

Despite this variety, we believe that all business and management research projects can be placed on a continuum (Figure 1.1) according to their purpose and context. At

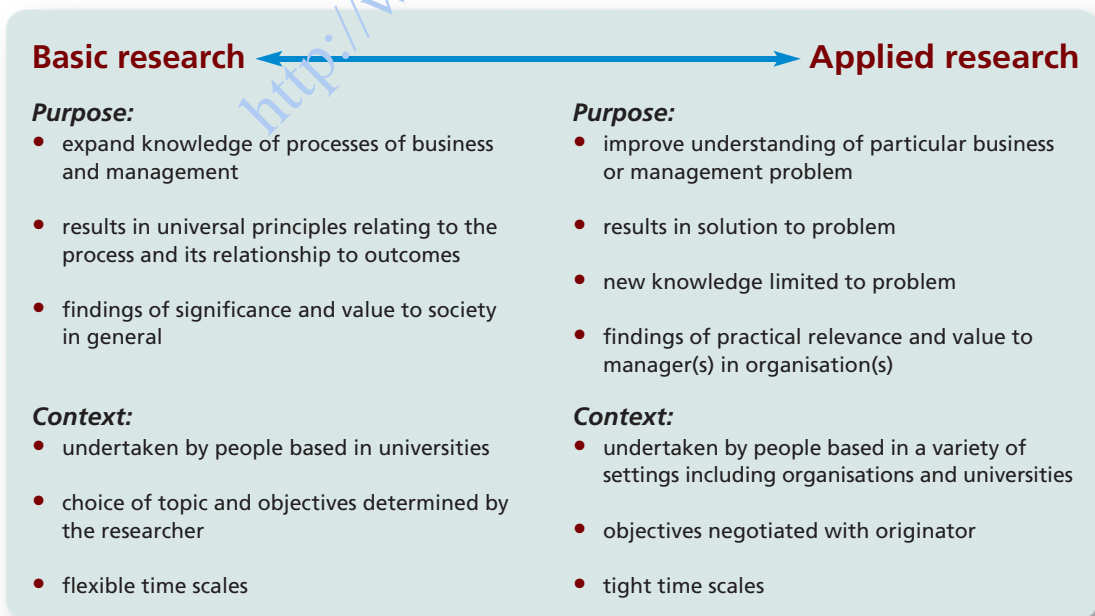


Figure 1.1 Basic and applied research

Sources: Authors' experience; Easterby-Smith et al. (2008), Hedrick et al. (1993)

one extreme of the continuum is research that is undertaken purely to understand the processes of business and management and their outcomes. Such research is undertaken largely in universities and largely as the result of an academic agenda. Its key consumer is the academic community, with relatively little attention being given to its practical applications. This is often termed **basic, fundamental** or **pure research**. Given our earlier discussion, it is unlikely that Mode 2 and Mode 3 business and management research would fulfil the criterion of being undertaken 'purely to understand' due to at least some consideration being given to the practical consequences of what has been found out. Through considering the practical consequences, the research would start to move towards the other end of the continuum (Figure 1.1). At this end is research that is of direct and immediate relevance to managers, addresses issues that they see as important, and is presented in ways that they understand and can act on. This is termed **applied research**. In our view applied research can be very similar to consultancy, particularly when the latter is conducted in a thorough manner.

Wherever your research project lies on this basic–applied continuum, and for each of the orientations in Table 1.2, we believe that you should undertake your research with rigour. To do this you will need to pay careful attention to the entire research process.

Inevitably, your own beliefs and feelings will impact upon your research. Although you might feel that your research will be value neutral (we will discuss this in greater detail later, particularly in Chapter 4), it is unlikely that you will stop your own beliefs and feelings influencing your research. Your choice of what to research is also likely to be influenced by topics that excite you, and the way you collect and analyse your data by the skills you have or are able to develop. Similarly, as hinted by 'timeliness' in Table 1.2, in Chapter 2 we discuss practical considerations such as access to data and the time and resources you have available, which will also impact upon your research process.

1.4 The research process

Most research textbooks represent research as a multi-stage process that you must follow in order to undertake and complete your research project. The precise number of stages varies, but they usually include formulating and clarifying a topic, reviewing the literature, designing the research, collecting data, analysing data and writing up. In the majority of these the research process, although presented with rationalised examples, is described as a series of stages through which you must pass. Articles you have read may also suggest that the research process is rational and straightforward. Unfortunately this is very rarely true, and the reality is considerably messier, with what initially appear as great ideas sometimes having little or no relevance. While research is often depicted as moving through each of the stages outlined above, one after the other, this is unlikely to be the case. In reality some stages will overlap and you will probably revisit each stage more than once. Each time you revisit a stage you will need to reflect on the associated issues and refine your ideas. In addition, as highlighted by some textbooks, you will need to consider ethical and access issues during the process.

This textbook also presents the research process as a series of linked stages and gives the appearance of being organised in a linear manner. However, as you use the book you will see that we have recognised the concurrent and iterative nature of the research process you will follow in the examples of research by well-known academic researchers, student research, how research is reported in the news and case studies as well as our extensive use of cross-referencing. As part of this process, we believe it is vital that you spend time formulating and clarifying your research topic. This we believe should

be expressed as one or more research questions that your research must answer, accompanied by a set of objectives that your research must address. However, we would also stress the need to reflect on your ideas continually and revise both these and the way in which you intend to progress your research.

We believe that writing is an intrinsic part of developing your ideas and understanding your research. Indeed, we and our students have found that it is not until we write our ideas in prose on the computer screen that we discover where our arguments need further clarification. Often this will involve revisiting stages (including research question(s) and objectives) and working through them again. There is also a need to plan ahead, thereby ensuring that the necessary preliminary work for later stages has been undertaken. This is emphasised by Figure 1.2, which also provides a schematic index to the remaining chapters of the book. Within this flow chart (Figure 1.2) the stages you will need to complete as part of your research project are emphasised in the centre of the chart. However, be warned: the process is far messier than a brief glance at Figure 1.2 suggests!

1.5 Keeping a reflective diary or research notebook

You will notice in Figure 1.2 on p. 14 that we included a series of arrows labelled 'reflection and revision' During your research project you will find it helpful to keep a separate **reflective diary** in which you note down what has happened and the lessons you have learnt both from things that have gone well and things that have not gone so well during the research process. Some researchers incorporate their reflective diary into a **research notebook** in which they record chronologically other aspects of their research project such as useful articles they have read, notes of discussions with their project supervisor and other interesting conversations alongside their emergent thoughts about all aspects of their research. We have also found this helpful.

You will almost certainly remember from your earlier studies the work of Kolb and of Honey and Mumford on the learning cycle (Marchington and Wilkinson 2008). This views the learning process as going through a four-stage cycle of:

- 1 concrete experience;
- 2 observation and reflection in relation to the experience;
- 3 forming abstract concepts and generalisations from these observations and reflections;
- 4 testing these concepts and generalisations in new situations.

The learning cycle emphasises that for learning to happen you need to pass through the complete cycle, as without reflection there will be no learning from experience. Such reflection is the process of stopping and thinking about a concrete experience that has happened or is happening, and the subsequent forming of concepts and generalisations; so you can apply what you have learnt from your experiences to new situations.

Given the benefits to learning, it is not surprising that many universities require students to write a reflective essay or a reflective practice statement as part of the assessment for their research project. In order to do this well, and more importantly to enhance your learning during the research process, we recommend that you keep a reflective diary or notebook (sometimes called a learning log or learning journal) in which you make entries at regular intervals regarding what has gone well, what has gone less well, what you have learnt from each experience and how you will apply this learning in the future. Indeed, as you read on you will find that we ask you to do this at the end of each chapter in the section 'Progressing your research project'! Questions our students have found helpful to guide them when making their diary entries are listed as a checklist in

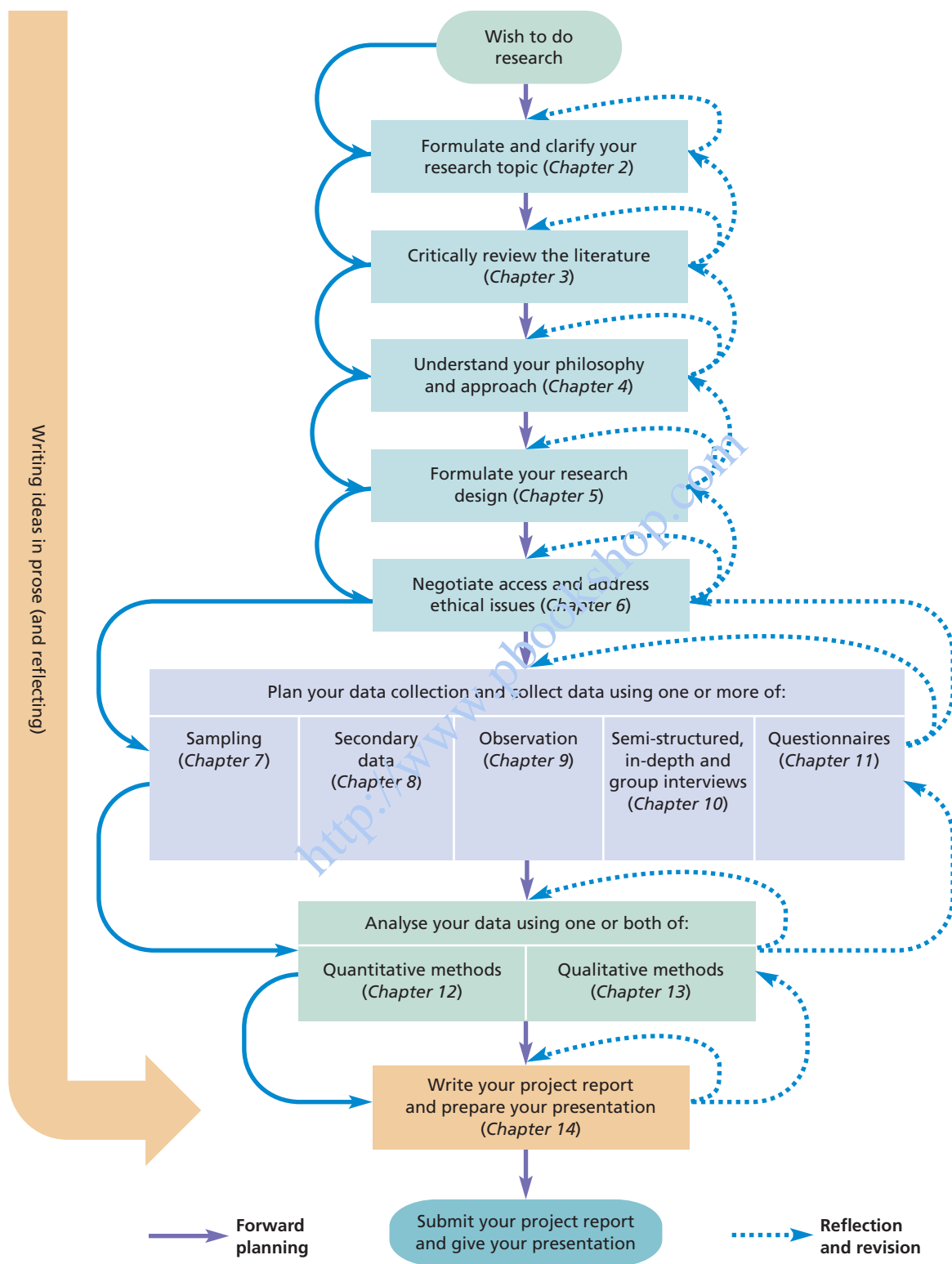


Figure 1.2 The research process

Source: © Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill 2011



Box 1.4 Checklist of questions to ask yourself when making reflective diary entries

- ✓ What has gone well in relation to each experience?
 - Why has it gone well?
- ✓ What has not gone so well in relation to each experience?
 - Why has it not gone so well?
- ✓ What adjustments will/did I make to my ongoing research following my reflection?
 - Why will/did I make these adjustments?
- ✓ (Looking back) how could I have improved on these adjustments?
 - Why?
- ✓ What have I learnt in relation to each experience?
- ✓ How will I apply what I have learnt from each experience to new situations?

Box 1.4. Be warned, many students forget to make entries in their reflective diaries regularly; this makes writing a good reflective essay difficult as much of the learning will have been forgotten!

1.6 The purpose and structure of this book

The purpose

As we stated earlier (Section 1.1), the overriding purpose of this book is to help you to undertake research. This means that early on in your research project you will need to be clear about what you are doing, why you are doing it, and the associated implications of what you are seeking to do. You will also need to ensure that you can show how your ideas relate to research that has already been undertaken in your topic area and that you have a clear research design and have thought about how you will collect and analyse your data. As part of this you will need to consider the validity and reliability of the data you intend to use, along with associated ethical and access issues. The appropriateness and suitability of the analytical techniques you choose to use will be of equal importance. Finally, you will need to write and present your research project report as clearly and precisely as possible, making sure you meet your university's assessment criteria.

The structure of each chapter

Each of the subsequent chapters deals with part of the research process outlined in Figure 1.2. The ideas, methods and techniques are discussed using as little jargon as possible. Where appropriate you will find summaries of these, using tables, checklists or diagrams. When new terms are introduced for the first time they are shown in **bold**, and a definition or explanation follows shortly afterwards. They are also listed with a brief definition in the glossary. The use of the Internet and application of appropriate information technology is considered in most instances as an integral part of the text. Discussion of information technology is not software specific but is concerned with general principles. However, we recognise that you may wish to find out more about how to use data

analysis software packages and so have included tutorials for the quantitative data analysis software IBM SPSS Statistics, the spreadsheet Excel™ and the qualitative data analysis software NVivo™ (with practice data sets) on this book's companion website. These will enable you to utilise whatever software you have available most effectively. We have also included the Smarter Online Searching Guide to help you with your Internet searches. Chapters have been cross-referenced as appropriate, and an index is provided to help you to find your way around the book.

Included within the text of each subsequent chapter is a series of boxes which are called *Focus on student research*. These reflect actual research projects, undertaken by students, in which points made in the text are illustrated. In many instances these examples illustrate possible pitfalls you may come across while undertaking your research. Further illustrations are provided by *Focus on management research* and *Focus on research in the news* boxes. *Focus on management research* boxes (such as Box 1.3) discuss recent research in business and management. These are normally derived from refereed academic journal articles and you are likely to be able to download the actual articles from online databases at your university. *Focus on research in the news* boxes, two of which you will have already read (Boxes 1.1 and Box 1.2), provide topical newspaper articles that illustrate pertinent research-related issues. All these will help you to understand the technique or idea and to assess its suitability or appropriateness for your research. Where a pitfall has been illustrated, it will, it is hoped, help you to avoid making the same mistake. There is also a series of boxed *Checklists* (such as Box 1.4) to provide you with further focused guidance for your own research. At the end of each chapter there is a *Summary* of key points, which you may look at before and after reading the chapter to ensure that you have digested the main points.

To enable you to check that you have understood the chapter a series of *Self-check questions* is included at the end. These can be answered without recourse to other (external) resources. *Answers* are provided to all these self-check questions at the end of each chapter. Self-check questions are followed by *Review and discussion questions*. These suggest a variety of activities you can undertake to help you further develop your knowledge and understanding of the material in the chapter, often involving discussion with a friend. Self-test multiple choice questions are available on this book's companion website. Each chapter also includes a section towards the end headed *Progressing your research project*. This contains a series of questions that will help you to consider the implications of the material covered by the chapter for your research project. Answering the questions in the section *Progressing your research project* for each chapter will enable you to generate all the material that you will need to include in your project report and, where required, your reflective statement. Each chapter's questions involve you in undertaking activities that are more complex than self-check questions, such as a library-based literature search or designing and piloting a questionnaire. They are designed to help you to focus on the techniques that are most appropriate to your research. However, as emphasised by Figure 1.2, you will almost certainly need to revisit and revise your answers as your research progresses.

Each chapter is also accompanied by References, Further reading and a Case study. Further reading is included for two distinct reasons:

- to direct you to other work on the ideas contained within the chapter;
- to direct you to further examples of research where the ideas contained in the chapter have been used.

The main reasons for our choice of further reading are therefore indicated.

The new case studies towards the end of every chapter are drawn from a variety of business and management research scenarios and have been based on the case study's authors'

and students' experiences when undertaking a research project. In addition there is an ongoing case study which starts at the end of Chapter 5, continues at the end of Chapter 8, and finishes at the end of Chapter 13. All case studies have been written to highlight real issues that occur when undertaking business and management research. To help to focus your thoughts or discussion on some of the pertinent issues, each case is followed by evaluative questions. Further case studies relating to each chapter are available from the book's companion website. This provides hyperlinks to over 50 additional case studies.

An outline of the chapters

The book is organised in the following way.

Chapter 2 is written to assist you in the generation of ideas, which will help you to choose a suitable research topic, and offers advice on what makes a good research topic. If you have already been given a research topic, perhaps by an organisation or tutor, you will need to refine it into one that is feasible, and should still therefore read this chapter. After your idea has been generated and refined, the chapter discusses how to turn this idea into a clear research question(s) and objectives. (Research questions and objectives are referred to throughout the book.) Finally, the chapter provides advice on how to write your research proposal.

The importance of the critical literature review to your research is discussed in Chapter 3. This chapter outlines what a critical review needs to include and the range of primary, secondary and tertiary literature sources available. The chapter explains the purpose of reviewing the literature, discusses a range of search strategies, and contains advice on how to plan and undertake your search and to write your review. The processes of identifying key words and searching using online databases and the Internet are outlined. It also offers advice on how to record items and to evaluate their relevance.

Chapter 4 addresses the issue of understanding different research philosophies, including positivism, realism, interpretivism and pragmatism. Within this the functionalist, interpretive, radical humanist and radical structuralist paradigms are discussed. Deductive, inductive and abductive approaches to research are also considered. In this chapter we challenge you to think about your own values and how you view the world and the impact this will have on the way you undertake your research.

These ideas are developed further in Chapter 5, which explores formulating your research design. As part of this, the methodological choice of quantitative, qualitative or multiple methods is considered. A variety of research strategies are explored and longitudinal and cross-sectional time horizons discussed. Consideration is given to the implications of design choice for the credibility of your research findings and conclusions.

Chapter 6 explores issues related to gaining access and to research ethics. It offers advice on how to gain access both to organisations and to individuals using both traditional and Internet-mediated strategies. Potential ethical issues are discussed in relation to each stage of the research process and different data collection methods. Issues of data protection are also introduced.

A range of the probability and non-probability sampling techniques available for use in your research is explained in Chapter 7. The chapter considers why sampling is necessary, and looks at issues of sample size and likely response rates for both probability and non-probability samples. Advice on how to relate your choice of sampling techniques to your research topic is given, and techniques for assessing the representativeness of those who respond are discussed.

Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11 are concerned with different methods of obtaining data. The use of secondary data is discussed in Chapter 8. This chapter introduces the variety of data that are likely to be available, and suggests ways in which they can be used.

Advantages and disadvantages of secondary data are discussed, and a range of techniques for locating these data is suggested. Chapter 8 provides an indication of the myriad of sources available via the Internet and also offers advice on how to evaluate the suitability of secondary data for your research.

In contrast, Chapter 9 is concerned with collecting primary data through observation. The chapter examines two types of observation: participant observation and structured observation. Practical advice on using each is offered, and particular attention is given to ensuring that the data you obtain are both valid and reliable.

Chapter 10 is also concerned with collecting primary data, this time using semi-structured, in-depth and group interviews. The appropriateness of using these interviews in relation to your research strategy is discussed. Advice on how to undertake such interviews is offered, including the conduct of focus groups, Internet-mediated (including online) and telephone interviews. Particular attention is given to ensuring that the data collected are both reliable and valid.

Chapter 11 is the final chapter concerned with collecting data. It introduces you to the use of both self-administered and interviewer-administered questionnaires, and explores their advantages and disadvantages. Practical advice is offered on the process of designing, piloting and administering Internet-mediated, postal, delivery and collection, and telephone questionnaires to enhance their response rates. Particular attention is again given to ensuring that the data collected are both reliable and valid.

Analysis of data is covered in Chapters 12 and 13. Chapter 12 outlines and illustrates the main issues that you need to consider when preparing data for quantitative analysis and when analysing these data by computer. Different types of data are defined and advice is given on how to create a data matrix and to code data. Practical advice is also offered on the analysis of these data using computer-based analysis software. The most appropriate diagrams to explore and illustrate data are discussed and suggestions are made about the most appropriate statistics to use to describe data, to explore relationships and to examine trends.

Chapter 13 outlines and discusses the main approaches available to you to analyse data qualitatively both manually and using computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). The nature of qualitative data and issues associated with transcription are discussed. The use of deductively based and inductively based analytical approaches is discussed and different types of procedures are outlined to analyse your qualitative data. A number of aids that will help you to analyse these data and record your ideas about progressing your research are also discussed.

Chapter 14 helps you with the structure, content and style of your final project report and any associated oral and poster presentations. Above all, and as illustrated by Figure 1.2, it encourages you to see writing as an intrinsic part of the research process that should not be left until everything else is completed.

Appendices and glossary

This book contains four appendices designed to support you at different stages of your research project. In the early stages, as you begin to read, you will need to keep a reference of what you have read using a recognised system, the most frequently used of which are detailed in Appendix 1. When selecting your sample you may need to calculate the minimum sample size required and use random sampling numbers (Appendices 2 and 3). Finally, when designing your data collection tools and writing your project report you will need to ensure that the language you use is non-discriminatory. Guidelines for these are given in Appendix 4. A separate glossary of nearly 600 research-methods-related terms is also included for quick reference.

1.7 Summary

- This book is designed to help you to undertake a research project whether you are an undergraduate or postgraduate student of business and management or a manager. It is designed as an introductory text and will guide you through the entire research process.
- Business and management research involves undertaking systematic research to find out things. It is transdisciplinary, and engages with both theory and practice.
- All business and management research projects can be placed on a basic–applied continuum according to their purpose and context.
- Wherever your research project lies on this continuum, you should undertake your research with rigour. To do this you will need to pay careful attention to the entire research process.
- In order to enhance your learning during your research we recommend you keep a reflective diary or notebook.
- In this book, research is represented as a multi-stage process; however, this process is rarely straightforward and will involve both reflecting on and revising stages already undertaken and forward planning.
- The text of each chapter is supported through a series of boxed examples. These include, focus on student research and focus on research in the news. In addition, there are checklists, self-check questions and review and discussion questions, an assignment and a case study with questions. Answers to all self-check questions are at the end of the appropriate chapter.
- Answering the questions in the section ‘Progressing your research project’ for Chapters 2–13 will enable you to generate all the material that you will need to include in your project report and reflect on what you have learnt. When you have also answered the questions in this section for Chapter 14, you will have written your research report.

Self-check questions

Help with these questions is available at the end of the chapter.

- 1.1** Outline the features that can make business and management research distinctive from research in other disciplines.
- 1.2** What are the key differences between basic and applied research (and consultancy)?
- 1.3** Examine Figure 1.2 What does this suggest about the need to plan and to reflect on and revise your ideas?

Review and discussion questions

- 1.4** Agree with a friend to each read a different quality newspaper. Make a note of at least 10 articles in your newspaper that mention the word ‘research’. Now examine the articles one at a time. As you examine each article, does the reference to research:
 - refer to the collection of facts or information with no clear purpose?
 - refer to the reassembling and reordering of facts or information without interpretation?
 - provide a means of getting the reader to respect what is being written?
 - refer to the systematic collection and interpretation of data with a clear purpose?

Discuss your answers with your friend.

- 1.5 Revisit Table 1.2 and look at the differences in management researcher and practitioner orientations for foci of interest, methodological imperatives, key outcomes and how each views the other. For each of the continua implied by this table, where would you place yourself? To what extent do you believe that business and management research should meet the practitioner requirements? Give reasons for your answer.



Progressing your research project

Starting your reflective diary or notebook

- Find out if your university requires you to write a reflective practice statement, learning journal or keep a reflective diary or research notebook as part of your research project or research methods module.
- If the answer is 'yes', look carefully at what is required by the assessment criteria and ensure

that your reflective diary or research notebook entries will enable you to meet fully the assessment criteria. When doing this, amend the questions in Box 1.4 to guide your reflective entries as necessary.

- If the answer is 'no', we still believe it will be beneficial to your learning for your research project or research methods module if you keep a reflective diary or research notebook on a regular basis. Please use the questions in Box 1.4 to guide your reflective entries at the end of each chapter.

References

- Becker, H.S. (1998) *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While You're Are Doing It*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Cassell, C. and Lee, B. (eds) (2011) *Challenges and Controversies in Management Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Cassell, C. and Lee, B. (2011) 'Introduction: Key debates, challenges and controversies in management research', in C. Cassell and B. Lee (eds) *Challenges and Controversies in Management Research*. New York: Routledge, pp. 1–16.
- Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R., Jackson, P. and Lowe, A. (2008) *Management Research* (3rd edn). London: Sage.
- Fukami, C. (2007) 'The third road', *Journal of Management Education*, Vol. 31, pp. 358–64.
- Ghuri, P. and Grønhaug, K. (2010) *Research Methods in Business Studies: A Practical Guide* (4th edn). Harlow: FT Prentice Hall.
- Gibbons, M.L., Limoges, H., Nowotny, S., Schwartzman, P., Scott, P. and Trow, M. (1994) *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage.
- Hedrick, T.E., Bickmann, L. and Rog, D.J. (1993) *Applied Research Design*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Hodgkinson, G.P., Herriot, P. and Anderson, N. (2001) 'Re-aligning the stakeholders in management research: Lessons from industrial, work and organizational psychology', *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 12, Special Issue, pp. 41–8.
- Hodgkinson, G.P. and Rousseau, D. (2009) 'Bridging the rigour–relevance gap in management research. It's already happening!', *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 534–46.

- Huff, A.S. and Huff, J.O. (2001) 'Re-focusing the business school agenda', *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 12, Special Issue, pp. 49–54.
- Marchington, M. and Wilkinson, A. (2008) *Human Resource Management at Work* (4th edn). London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.
- Pandza, K. and Thorpe, R. (2010) 'Management as design, but what kind of design? An appraisal of the design science analogy for management', *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 171–86.
- Post-it (2011) *Post-it history and facts*. Available at http://solutions.3m.co.uk/wps/portal/3M/en_GB/Post-Its/Post-It/Solutions/History/ [Accessed 15 July 2011].
- Rousseau, D. (2006). 'Is there such a thing as "Evidence-Based Management"?', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 256–69.
- Saunders, M.N.K. (2011) 'The management researcher as practitioner', in B. Lee and C. Cassell (eds) *Challenges and Controversies in Management Research*. New York: Routledge, pp. 243–57.
- Starkey, K. and Madan, P. (2001) 'Bridging the relevance gap: Aligning stakeholders in the future of management research', *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 12, Special Issue, pp. 3–26.
- Syed, J., Mingers, J. and Murray, P.A. (2010) 'Beyond rigour and relevance: A critical realist approach to business education', *Management Learning*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 71–85.
- Tranfield, D. and Denyer, D. (2004) 'Linking theory to practice: A grand challenge for management research in the 21st century?', *Organization Management Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 10–14.
- Tranfield, D. and Starkey, K. (1998) 'The nature, social organization and promotion of management research: Towards policy', *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 9, pp. 341–53.
- Van Aken, J.E. (2005) 'Management research as a design science: Articulating the research products of Mode 2 knowledge production in management', *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 19–36.
- Walliman, N. (2011) *Your Research Project: A Step by Step Guide for the First-Time Researcher* (3rd edn). London: Sage.
- Wensley, R. (2011) 'Seeking relevance in management research', in C. Cassell and B. Lee (eds) *Challenges and Controversies in Management Research*. New York: Routledge, pp. 258–74.

Further reading

- Cassell, C. and Lee, B. (eds) (2011) *Challenges and Controversies in Management Research*. New York: Routledge. This edited volume consists of a series of chapters looking at the key challenges and controversies facing business and management research at the start of the twenty-first century. The opening chapter includes a useful overview of the rest of the book and will enable you to easily follow up those aspects that you feel are most pertinent.
- Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R., Jackson, P. and Lowe, A. (2008) *Management Research* (3rd edn). London: Sage. Chapter 1 provides a very clear and readable introduction to management research and how it is distinct from other forms of research.
- Salmon, P. (2003) 'How do we recognise good research?', *The Psychologist*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 24–7. This short article looks at how we can evaluate research in general looking at rigour of method and 'fit' with what is being studied, clarity and coherence of what has been undertaken and its utility.
- Starkey, K. and Madan, P. (2001) 'Bridging the relevance gap: Aligning stakeholders in the future of management research', *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 12, Special Issue, pp. 3–26. This article argues the need for relevant management research within a Mode 2 framework, emphasising a need for research partnership.

Case 1 Reporting evidence from business and management research

Katie is working in her local NHS hospital on a six-month internship. During her time there, the hospital plans the introduction of what they call a 'Leadership at all Levels' programme. All staff are to be encouraged to act as leaders, and Katie is asked to write a report for her manager setting out the best way to ensure that the aims of the programme actually happen. Her manager

makes a special point of telling Katie that the hospital wants to make its introduction 'evidence-based'. This means, he explains, that he would like her report to set out the scientific evidence about what works in these kinds of initiatives. Katie agrees to do the report, and she thinks it may also be suitable as the research project for her degree.



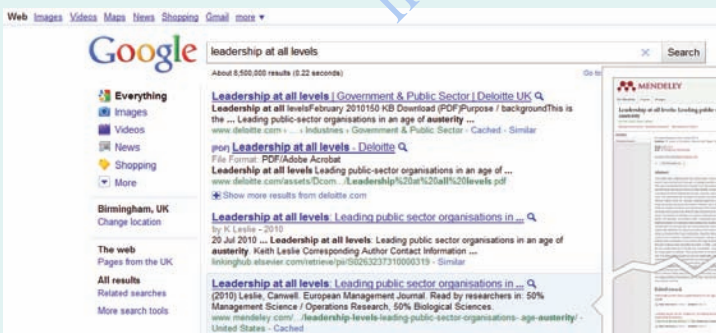
Source: Alamy Images/Justin Kase

'Where do you start with a project like this?' Katie wonders. 'Well', she thinks, 'I may as well type "leadership at all levels" into Google!' On the day she does this, the entry at the very top of the list takes her straight to 'Leadership at all levels: Leading public sector organisations in an age of austerity'. The title page says it is a 'research paper' and it is published by the prestigious firm of management consultants, Deloitte (Deloitte 2010). She reads it all carefully. While the report is very enthusiastic about leadership as a general idea for improving public services, she is surprised to see

that it contains very few concrete details. Although it is 16 pages long, there is nothing specifically about what leadership is, nothing about how 'leadership at all levels' is actually going to happen; no academic research at all, as far as she can see. In fact, the more she thinks about it, the more she feels its recommendations are vague with little justification. For instance, among a list of bullet-points on page 12, it recommends that top public sector leaders ask themselves questions like:

- Do you have a senior team that is ready for change and is working collectively to enable it?
- Can you articulate a brief, compelling message of change, framed appropriately to connect with your staff?

'But how could chief executives really know whether their answers to such questions were correct?' Katie ponders. She feels chief executives are likely to have a vested interest in making their answers fit with what they already believe to be the case. Even if they can put their managerial interests aside, she thinks that the questions arising from the bullet point list such as 'how "ready for



change” is my team?’ or ‘how “compelling [a] message” might I be delivering to staff?’ are never going to be things that can be measured with any degree of objectivity. They are quite different from the kind of medical questions a hospital generally deals with; such as: ‘what is this patient’s body-mass index and blood pressure?’ ‘So’, Katie thinks, ‘Deloitte’s is probably not the kind of scientific evidence my manager had in mind when he asked me for an evidence-based report!’

She decides to look instead at academic journals, thinking that they might be a better place to look for scientific evidence than the World Wide Web. But she soon finds it a rather daunting task. Not only is there an almost overwhelming number of potentially relevant research papers, when she starts reading them she gets very confused. Not primarily because she doesn’t understand them (though because of the language that can sometimes be a problem!) Still, her confusion is more down to the fact that many of the articles apparently contradict one another – even within the same journal. What is worse, their disagreements are often over fundamentals, rather than over details. For example, in the journal *Human Relations*, while Schippers et al. (2008: 1593) think that transformational leadership is key to the ‘adoption of a shared vision by the team’, Harding et al. (2011:1) claim ‘that leaders evoke a homoerotic desire in followers such that followers are seduced into achieving organizational goals’.

After a few weeks of reading this evidence, Katie starts to think that she has been asked to do something that misunderstands the nature of scientific evidence – at least that of business and management studies. Her manager appears to have assumed that ‘the evidence’ will all point in the same direction. But Katie has discovered that in the case of leadership, ‘the evidence’ cannot even agree what leadership is, or whether it is a good or a bad thing for managers to adopt – never mind the best way to get all staff to become leaders. Authors disagree so much – and so fundamentally – that she finds it impossible to extract ‘best practice’.

Unfortunately, Katie did say she would write the report. It occurs to her that she could just mention those articles that imply leadership is a good thing, and that detail ways of involving staff in it. She thinks that’s really what her manager would like. After all, it’s already been announced across the hospital that a Leadership at all Levels programme is going to happen, and her report would still enable him to tell people that what he was doing was ‘evidence-based’. After some soul-searching she decides to write this partial and somewhat misleading report (recognising she will need a good reference from him if she wants to get a job). But all her other reading won’t go to waste – at least she can include it in her research project for university!

References

- Deloitte (2010) Leadership at all levels: Leading public sector organisations in an age of austerity. Available at www.deloitte.com/assets/Dcom-UnitedKingdom/Local%20Assets/Documents/Industries/GPS/UK_GPS_Leadership_at_all_levels.pdf [Accessed 24 March 2011].
- Harding, N., Lee, H., Ford, J. and Learmonth, M. (2011) ‘Leadership and charisma: A desire that cannot speak its name?’, *Human Relations*, Vol. 64, No. 7, pp. 927–49
- Schippers, M.C., Den Hartog, D.N., Koopman, P.L. and van Knippenberg, P. (2008) ‘The role of transformational leadership in enhancing team reflexivity’, *Human Relations*, Vol. 61, No. 11, pp. 1593–1616.

Questions

- 1 If Katie is correct, and evidence doesn’t necessarily tell managers the best way to take action, do we still need evidence?
- 2 Can Katie’s decision to submit a report she thinks is misleading be justified on ethical grounds?
- 3 In what ways are the kinds of research projects that most managers want to read likely to be different from the kinds of research projects that get high marks at university?

An additional case study relating to material covered in this chapter is available via the book's companion website: www.pearsoned.co.uk/saunders.

It is:
Isabelle's research dilemma.



Self-check answers

- 1.1** The features you outline are likely to include:
- the transdisciplinary nature of business and management research;
 - the development of ideas that are related to practice and in particular the requirement for the research to have some practical consequence;
 - the need for research to complete the virtuous circle of theory and practice;
 - addressing problems that grow out of the interaction between the worlds of theory and practice.
- 1.2** The key differences between basic and applied research relate to both the purpose and the context in which it is undertaken. They are summarised in Figure 1.1.
- 1.3** Figure 1.2 emphasises the importance of planning during your research project. Forward planning needs to occur at all stages up to submission. In addition, you will need to reflect on and to revise your work throughout the life of the research project. This reflection needs to have a wide focus. You should both consider the stage you have reached and revisit earlier stages and work through them again. Reflection may also lead you to amend your research plan. This should be expected, although large amendments in the later stages of your research project are unlikely.

Get ahead using resources on the companion website at:

www.pearsoned.co.uk/saunders

- Improve your IBM SPSS Statistics and NVivo research analysis with practice tutorials.
- Save time researching on the Internet with the Smarter Online Searching Guide.
- Test your progress using self-assessment questions.
- Follow live links to useful websites.



Chapter 2

Formulating and clarifying the research topic

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- identify the attributes of a good research topic;
- generate ideas and explore sources that will help you to choose a suitable research topic;
- refine your ideas to clarify your research topic;
- turn research ideas into a research project that has a clear research question(s) and objectives;
- draft a written research proposal.

2.1 Introduction

Many students think that choosing their research topic is the most exciting part of their course. After all, this is something that they get to decide for themselves rather than having to complete a task decided by their tutors. We will stress in this chapter that it is important to choose something that will sustain your interest throughout the months that you will need to complete it. You may even decide to do some research on something that forms part of your leisure activities!

Before you start your research you need to have at least some idea of what you want to do. This is probably the most difficult, and yet the most important, part of your research project. Up until now most of your studies have been concerned with answering questions that other people have set. This chapter is concerned with how to formulate and clarify your research topic, research question and related objectives. Without being clear about what you are going to research it is difficult to plan how you are going to research it. This reminds us of a favourite quote in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. This is part of Alice's conversation with the Cheshire Cat. In this Alice asks the Cat (Carroll 1989: 63–4):

'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?'

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to', said the Cat.

'I don't much care where', said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which way you walk', said the Cat.

Formulating and clarifying the research topic is the starting point of your research project (Ghuri and Grønhaug 2010; Smith and Dainty 1991). Once you are clear about this, you will

be able to choose the most appropriate research strategy and data collection and analysis techniques. The formulating and clarifying process is time-consuming and will probably take you up blind alleys (Saunders and Lewis 1997). However, without spending time on this stage you are far less likely to achieve a successful project (Raimond 1993).

In the initial stages of the formulating and clarifying process you will be generating and refining research ideas (Section 2.3). It may be that you have already been given a research idea, perhaps by an organisation or tutor. Even if this has happened you will still need to refine the idea into one that is feasible. Once you have done this you will need to turn the idea into research questions and objectives (Section 2.4) and to write the research proposal for your project (Section 2.5).

Research has found that shopping may prolong your life. This is the physical type, not the one where you switch on your computer and surf the Internet. For those who raise a sceptical eyebrow at such a thought, perhaps you should remember this the next time you go shopping in an unbearably crowded retail centre and the experience begins to drain your energy! Men were found to benefit more than women from shopping every day.

Ageing and shopping was the research topic chosen by a group of researchers in Taiwan. The variables in which they were interested were shopping frequency and health. To conduct this study, they designed a longitudinal research project based on a representative sample of 1841 Taiwanese people aged over 65 who lived independently. Data were collected on a range of factors including age, socioeconomic status, health, physical and cognitive wellbeing as well as shopping behaviours. Data were linked to mortality records between 1999 and 2008. After other variables were controlled for, the researchers found a statistically significant relationship between shopping frequency and life expectancy. Older people who went shopping every day were found to have a 27 per cent lower risk of death compared with those who went shopping least frequently. Men had a 28 per



Source: Alamy Images/Ellen Issacs

cent lower risk and women a 23 per cent lower risk (BBC 2011; Chang et al. 2011).

They explained this relationship by the potential for wellbeing that shopping may promote. Shopping involves sustainable physical activity and social interaction. It can be pleasurable and may promote psychological wellbeing and satisfaction. The relationship between shopping frequency and life expectancy lead Chang et al. to claim that, 'Shopping behaviour favourably predicts survival.'

This research may give a whole new meaning to the expression, 'shop till you drop'. Time to go and find where you left your 'lifetime' shopping bags. . . .

However, before you start the formulating and clarifying process we believe that you need to understand what makes a good research topic. For this reason we begin this chapter with a discussion of the attributes required for a good research topic.

2.2 Attributes of a good research topic

The attributes of a business and management research topic do not vary a great deal between universities (Raimond 1993), although there will be differences in the emphasis placed on these attributes. If you are undertaking your research project as part of a course of study then the most important attribute will be that it meets the examining body's requirements and, in particular, that it is at the correct level. This means that you must choose your topic with care. For example, some universities require students to collect their own data as part of their research project, whereas others allow them to base their project on data that have already been collected. Alternatively, some ask you to undertake an organisation-based piece of applied research, whilst others simply say that it must be within the subject matter of your course or programme. You therefore need to check the assessment criteria for your project and ensure that your choice of topic will enable you to meet these criteria. If you are unsure, you should discuss any uncertainties with your project tutor.

In addition, your research topic must be something you are capable of undertaking and one that excites your imagination. Capability can be considered in a variety of ways. At the personal level you need to feel comfortable that you have, or can develop, the skills that will be required to research the topic. We hope that you will develop your research skills as part of undertaking your project. However, some skills, for example learning a new foreign language, may be impossible to acquire in the time you have available. As well as having the necessary skills we believe that you also need to have a genuine interest in the topic. Most research projects are undertaken over at least a four-month period. A topic in which you are only vaguely interested at the start is likely to become a topic in which you have no interest and with which you will fail to produce your best work.

Your ability to find the financial and time resources to undertake research on the topic will also affect your capability. This relates to the concept of feasibility, which we also discuss in Chapter 6 (see Section 6.2). Some topics are unlikely to be possible to complete in the time allowed by your course of study. This may be because they require you to measure the impact of an intervention over a long time period (Box 2.1). Similarly, topics that are likely to require you to travel widely or need expensive equipment should also be disregarded unless financial resources permit.

Capability also means you must be reasonably certain of gaining access to any data you might need to collect. Many people start with ideas where access to data will prove difficult. Certain, more sensitive topics, such as financial performance or decision making by senior managers, are potentially fascinating. However, they may present considerable access problems. You should therefore, discuss this with your project tutor after reading Chapter 6.

It is important that the issues within your research are capable of being linked to academic theory. Initially, theory may be based just on the reading you have undertaken as part of your study to date. However, as part of your assessment criteria you are almost certain to be asked to set your topic in context (Sections 2.4 and 3.2). As a consequence you will need to have knowledge of the literature and to undertake further reading as part of defining your research questions and objectives (Section 2.4).



Box 2.1 Focus on student research

Turning ideas into a viable project

Zaynab was not short of ideas for her research. But she was much less sure about how to turn her topic of interest into a question that could be answered for her research project. Her tutors emphasised that thinking of topics was relatively easy compared to turning them into viable research projects.

Having explored various websites and looked at relevant publications in the library, she drew up a plan of action which she was sure would give her the material necessary to write her research proposal.

Charting ideas

At the start her project, Zaynab got a huge sheet of paper to make a mind map of all of her ideas, questions, associations, sources and leads. She marked her most compelling thoughts in red. Then she marked the main links to those ideas in red too. She was careful not to throw out her weaker or isolated thoughts. She felt this mind map would help her know the place of all her thoughts. She thought that she could make another mind map later in the project if she felt there was too much information.

Recording questions

Next Zaynab recorded who had originally asked a potential research question and left a space by each to record possible answers or places to look for answers. Then she highlighted the questions that she found most exciting; the ones that really grabbed her attention. She thought that recording all of these questions would encourage her to develop her own ideas. She also recorded her own thoughts as a further set of questions that were designed as prompts to help her to be clear about what she needed to do to progress her research ideas.

Blogging it

Zaynab was a keen blogger so she posted summaries of her ideas and questions on a weblog. She asked site visitors to suggest further reading, new research methods or for possible answers to her questions. She received 20 posts which she used to help turn her favourite idea into a question that could be answered for her research project.

Thinking about applying findings

Zaynab knew that she would be expected to comment on the practical implications of her findings when writing up her research. Therefore, an important part of her action plan was to ask herself what would be the implications for practice for the various outcomes that might be expected.

Most project tutors will argue that one of the attributes of a good topic is clearly defined research questions and objectives (Section 2.4). These will, along with a good knowledge of the literature, enable you to assess the extent to which your research is likely to provide new insights into the topic. Many students believe this is going to be difficult. Fortunately there are numerous ways in which such insight can be defined as new (see Sections 2.3 and 2.4).

If you have already been given a research idea (perhaps by an organisation) you will need to ensure that your questions and objectives relate clearly to the idea. It is also important that your topic will have **symmetry of potential outcomes**: that is, your results will be of similar value whatever you find out (Gill and Johnson 2010). Without this symmetry you may spend a considerable amount of time researching your topic only to find an answer of little importance. Whatever the outcome, you need to ensure you have the scope to write an interesting project report.

Finally, it may be important to consider your future aspirations. If you wish to obtain employment or pursue a career in a particular subject area, it is sensible to use this opportunity to start to develop some expertise in it.



Box 2.2 Checklist

Attributes of a good research topic

Capability: is it feasible?

- ✓ Is the topic something with which you are really fascinated?
- ✓ Do you have, or can you develop within the project time frame, the necessary research skills to undertake the topic?
- ✓ Is the research topic achievable within the available time?
- ✓ Will the topic still be current when you finish your project?
- ✓ Is the topic achievable within the financial resources that are likely to be available?

- ✓ Are you reasonably certain of being able to gain access to data you are likely to require for this topic?

Appropriateness: is it worthwhile?

- ✓ Does the topic fit the specifications and meet the standards set by the examining institution?
- ✓ Does your topic contain issues that have a clear link to theory?
- ✓ Are you able to state your research question(s) and objectives clearly?
- ✓ Will your proposed research be able to provide fresh insights into this topic?
- ✓ Does your topic relate clearly to the idea you have been given (perhaps by an organisation)?
- ✓ Are the findings for this topic likely to be symmetrical: that is, of similar value whatever the outcome?
- ✓ Does the topic match your career goals?

It is almost inevitable that the extent to which the attributes we have discussed apply to your research topic will depend on your topic and the reasons why you are undertaking the research. However, most will apply. For this reason it is important that you check and continue to check any potential research topic against the summary checklist contained in Box 2.2.

2.3 Generating and refining research ideas

Some business and management students are expected both to generate and to refine their own research ideas. Others, particularly those on professional and post-experience courses, are provided with a research idea by an organisation or their university. In the initial stages of their research they are expected to refine this to a clear and feasible idea that meets the requirements of the examining organisation. If you have already been given a research idea we believe you will still find it useful to read the next subsection, which deals with generating research ideas. Many of the techniques which can be used for generating research ideas can also be used for the refining process.

Generating research ideas

If you have not been given an initial **research idea** there is a range of techniques that can be used to find and select a topic that you would like to research. They can be thought of as those that are predominantly **rational thinking** and those that involve more **creative thinking** (Table 2.1). The precise techniques that you choose to use and the order in which you use them are entirely up to you. However, like Raimond (1993), we believe you should use both rational and creative techniques, choosing those that you believe are going to be of most use to you and which you will enjoy using. By using one or more

Table 2.1 More frequently used techniques for generating and refining research ideas

Rational thinking	Creative thinking
Examining your own strengths and interests	Keeping a notebook of your ideas
Examining staff research interests	Exploring personal preferences using past projects
Looking at past project titles	Exploring relevance to business using the literature
Discussion	Relevance trees
Searching the literature	Brainstorming
Scanning the media	

creative techniques you are more likely to ensure that your heart as well as your head is in your research project. In our experience, it is usually better to use a variety of techniques. In order to do this you will need to have some understanding of the techniques and the ways in which they work. We therefore outline the techniques in Table 2.1 and subsequently discuss possible ways they might be used to generate research ideas. These techniques will generate one of two outcomes:

- one or more possible project ideas that you might undertake;
- few ideas that relate to your interests. In this case you may want to revise the area in which you are interested, either by choosing another area or by refining and perhaps narrowing or widening your original area of interest.

In either instance we suggest that you make some notes and arrange to talk to your project tutor.

Examining your own strengths and interests

It is important that you choose a topic in which you are likely to do well and, if possible, already have some academic knowledge. One way of doing this is to look at those assignments for which you have received good grades. For most of these assignments they are also likely to be the topics in which you were interested (Box 2.1). They will provide you with an area in which to search and find a research idea. In addition, you may, as part of your reading, be able to focus more precisely on the sort of ideas about which you wish to conduct your research.

As noted in Section 2.1, there is the need to think about your future. If you plan to work in financial management it would be sensible to choose a research project in the financial management field. One part of your course that will inevitably be discussed at any job interview is your research project. A project in the same field will provide you with the opportunity to display clearly your depth of knowledge and your enthusiasm.

Examining staff research interests

You may follow the links within your institution’s website to the profile pages of academic staff. These pages are likely to display information about their teaching and research interests. You may be able to use this as a funnel to help you to explore and generate research ideas in which you would be interested for your own project. In very many cases, these pages will provide you with the overall subject area taught by each member of staff (e.g. accounting, international management, marketing, strategic management). These pages are also likely to list the particular research interests of each member of staff within her or his subject area (e.g. regulation of accounting standards, transnational management, pricing and price promotions, organisational learning). In many cases, a

member of staff will offer a short commentary on her or his research interests which will provide more specific details. Lists of publications and conference papers with direct links to online copies may be included. These will provide even more detail about the exact nature of the research interests of a member of staff. Working through this information may allow you to generate ideas for your own research and guide you to some initial reading to test this interest.

Looking at past project titles

Many of our students have found looking at past projects a useful way of generating research ideas. For undergraduate and taught master's degrees these are often called **disertations**. For research degrees they are termed **theses**. A common way of doing this is to scan your university's list of past project titles for anything that captures your imagination. Titles that look interesting or which grab your attention should be noted down, as should any thoughts you have about the title in relation to your own research idea. In this process the fact that the title is poorly worded or the project report received a low mark is immaterial. What matters is the fact that you have found a topic that interests you. Based on this you can think of new ideas in the same general area that will enable you to provide fresh insights.

Scanning actual research projects may also produce research ideas. However, you need to beware. The fact that a project is in your library is no guarantee of the quality of the arguments and observations it contains. In many universities all projects are placed in the library whether they are bare passes or distinctions.

Discussion

Colleagues, friends and university tutors are all good sources of possible project ideas. Often project tutors will have ideas for possible student projects, which they will be pleased to discuss with you. In addition, ideas can be obtained by talking to practitioners and professional groups. It is important that as well as discussing possible ideas you also make a note of them. What seemed like a good idea in the coffee shop may not be remembered quite so clearly after the following lecture!

Searching the literature

As part of your discussions, relevant literature may also be suggested. Sharp et al. (2002) discuss types of literature that are of particular use for generating research ideas. These include:

- articles in academic and professional journals;
- reports;
- books.

Of particular use are academic **review articles**. These articles contain a considered review of the state of knowledge in a particular topic area and are therefore likely to contain a wealth of ideas about that area (see Box 2.3). These ideas will act as pointers towards aspects where further research needs to be undertaken. In addition, you can browse recent publications, in particular journals, for possible research ideas (Section 3.5). For many subject areas your project tutor will be able to suggest possible recent review articles, or articles that contain recommendations for further research. Reports may also be of use. The most recently published are usually up to date and, again, often contain recommendations that may form the basis of your research idea. Books by contrast may be less up to date than other written sources. They do, however, often contain a good overview of research that has been undertaken, which may suggest ideas to you.



Box 2.3 Focus on management research

Research ideas in organisational behaviour

Morrison (2010) undertook a review of recent research topics in organisational behaviour (OB). Her study identified topics in OB-focused manuscripts submitted for consideration for publication in the *Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ) during the first two years of her term as an associate editor and also topics in OB papers actually published in the first decade of this century.

In the first category, she identified the 10 most frequent topics in OB submissions to the AMJ in 2007 to 2009. These were: 'groups/teams', 'leadership', 'diversity', 'turnover', 'work-related attitudes and behaviours', 'incentives/motivation', 'attitudes/beliefs', 'emotions/mood', 'organisational citizenship behaviour' and 'cognition/perception' (Morrison 2010: 934).

In the second category, she identified the five most frequent topics in published OB articles: 'team processes/performance'; 'job performance'; 'organisational citizenship behaviour'; 'leadership'; 'job attitudes' (Morrison 2010: 933). Morrison also identified

two further categories of topics that occurred in published OB articles less often and more rarely. Topics occurring less often were: 'goals', 'turnover', 'stress', 'careers' and 'career transitions' (Morrison 2010: 933). Topics occurring more rarely were: 'conflict', 'power or influence', 'organisational climate', 'personality', 'cultural differences or values', 'counterproductive behaviour', 'communication and motivation' (Morrison 2010: 933).

Morrison (2010: 933) also usefully suggested a further list of research topics that she recognised as being 'underrepresented, at least relative to my perception of the prevalence of those topics in the OB literature more generally'. These were: 'creativity, diversity, social exchange/psychological contracts and justice/fairness' (Morrison 2010: 933).

If you are interested in conducting your research in the area of OB you should read Morrison's article. You may be able to examine the topics she highlights to generate your own research ideas. You may be interested to explore the relationship between two, or perhaps three, of these concepts within the context of a particular organisation. For example, you may be interested in the relationship between leadership and team working, or team working and motivation, or communication, attitudes and justice, or other possible relationships between these variables. You could then develop this through identifying terms to search online databases to locate relevant literature and refine your research idea.

Searching for publications is only possible when you have at least some idea of the area in which you wish to undertake your research. One way of obtaining this is to re-examine your lecture notes and course textbooks and to note those subjects that appear most interesting (discussed earlier in this section) and the names of relevant authors. This will give you a basis on which to undertake a **preliminary search** (using techniques outlined in Section 3.4 and 3.5). When the articles, reports and other items have been obtained it is often helpful to look for unfounded assertions and statements on the absence of research (Raimond 1993), as these are likely to contain ideas that will enable you to provide fresh insights.

Scanning the media

Keeping up to date with items in the news can be a very rich source of ideas. The stories which occur every day in the 'broadsheet' or 'compact' newspapers, in both online and traditional print versions, may provide ideas which relate directly to the item (e.g. the extent to which items sold by supermarkets contravene the principles of 'green consumerism' by involving excessive 'food miles' in order import them). Please note however

that some of these online media are only available by subscription. The stories in these media may also suggest other ideas which flow from the central story (e.g. the degree to which a company uses its claimed environmental credentials as part of its marketing campaign).

Keeping a notebook of ideas

One of the more creative techniques that we all use is to keep a **notebook of ideas**. All this involves is simply noting down any interesting research ideas as you think of them and, of equal importance, what sparked off your thought. You can then pursue the idea using more rational thinking techniques later. Mark keeps a notebook by his bed so he can jot down any flashes of inspiration that occur to him in the middle of the night!

Exploring personal preferences using past projects

Another way of generating possible project ideas is to explore your personal preferences using past project reports from your university. To do this Raimond (1993) suggests that you:

- 1 Select six projects that you like.
- 2 For each of these six projects, note down your first thoughts in response to three questions (if responses for different projects are the same this does not matter):
 - a What appeals to you about the project?
 - b What is good about the project?
 - c Why is the project good?
- 3 Select three projects that you do not like.
- 4 For each of these three projects, note down your first thoughts in response to three questions (if responses for different projects are the same, or cannot be clearly expressed, this does not matter; note them down anyway):
 - a What do you dislike about the project?
 - b What is bad about the project?
 - c Why is the project bad?

You now have a list of what you consider to be excellent and what you consider to be poor in projects. This will not be the same as a list generated by anyone else. It is also very unlikely to match the attributes of a good research project (Box 2.2). However, by examining this list you will begin to understand those project characteristics that are important to you and with which you feel comfortable. Of equal importance is that you will have identified those that you are uncomfortable with and should avoid. These can be used as the parameters against which to evaluate possible research ideas.

Exploring relevance to business using the literature

There has been a debate running in the pages of the *Financial Times* over recent years about the relevance of business research for managers (see Box 2.4). This debate raises a number of issues for business research in general as well as opportunities for you, as you seek to generate research ideas.

In reality, business and management journals range from those with a more applied focus through to those that are more esoteric. Even more esoteric journal articles will still contain a wealth of ideas. Part of the issue of relevance may be the style of writing. The language codes of academics and managers are likely to vary: 'academic speak' may not be the same as 'management speak'! However Yip (see Box 2.4) believes that the issue of relevance is also related to different methodological preferences.



Box 2.4 Focus on research in the news

How relevant is business research to managers?

In 2008, Michael Skapinker, an assistant editor and columnist at the *Financial Times* (FT), wrote an article pointing out that whilst professions such as lawyers, medical practitioners and engineers read the journals published by law schools, medical schools and engineering schools, the same relationship does not exist between managers and journals produced by business schools (Skapinker 2008).

In October 2010, Jordi Canals, dean of Lese Business School, wrote in the FT: 'Business Schools became relevant because they developed knowledge about the main areas of management. But as some schools became more interested in promoting research similar to other disciplines (economics etc.) some research output became increasingly irrelevant to management practice' (Canals 2010).

This debate seems to have developed some momentum in early 2011. Freek Vermeulen, associate professor of Strategic and International Management at the London Business School (LBS), commented that, 'There is a great divide in business schools . . . between research and teaching. There is little relation between them . . . The consequences of this divide are grave. First of all for research: because none of this research is really intended to be used in the classroom, or to be communicated to managers in some other form . . . The goal is publication in a prestigious academic journal' (Vermeulen 2011). He then went on to develop the consequences, as he saw them, for teaching.

About the same time Michael Skapinker returned to the debate with another article, entitled 'Why business still ignores business schools' (Skapinker 2011). These contributions raised comment from academics in the

Letters pages of the FT. Timothy Devinney, professor of Strategy at the University of Technology, Sidney in Australia, wrote, 'While I am slightly amenable to Freek Vermeulen's argument, it is simplistic. The reality is that our research does inform our teaching, but does so subtly . . . Where research gets into teaching is through the teacher who translates ideas rather than regurgitates them' (Devinney 2011).

As a final contribution to this on-going debate we cite George Yip, who has taught at a number of universities: LBS, Cambridge, UCLA, Harvard, Erasmus and Ceibs, Shanghai (Bradshaw 2011). Yip wrote: 'Even when business academics can gather data and conduct research on business topics, they face the additional challenge that the great majority of their findings – predictions about what will happen on average – is generally not what managers can use.

'Managers are far more interested in pattern recognition. Does this configuration of external circumstances mesh with my particular configuration of strategies and actions to produce a successful outcome for my company? That is why managers much prefer to read managerial articles in managerial journals that are based on in-depth case studies where there are more variables than observations, rather than large samples statistical studies with many more observations than variables.

'This preference of the managerial audience for case-based evidence raises the challenging requirement for top business schools to conduct research with two types of methodology . . . to gather and test large sample quantitative data and to gather in-depth case studies . . . I am not saying that all, or even most, business researchers must conduct immediately relevant research. The same researchers can make the conversion to relevance at a later date; other academic researchers can make the conversion; or practitioners . . . can make the conversion. In the meantime, with rework and added case examples some academic research can be made readable for managers.' (Yip 2011).

Articles may be based on abstract ideas or on empirical studies. By abstract ideas in this context, we mean work based on conceptual thinking rather than on data. In contrast, empirical studies will be based on collected and analysed data. Both of these may be potentially useful for you as you seek to generate research ideas. Even esoteric, conceptual pieces may contain ideas that you may be able to translate, make operational and test in practice in a given setting, such as a particular organisation, albeit using a simpler methodology to any used in the published study (see Box 2.4).

Articles based on empirical studies may also provide you with research ideas. A published empirical study may have been undertaken as a case study. It may have been based in a particular sector or industry, and it may have been based in a particular organisation or type of organisation. Reading it may lead you to think that you could undertake a similar study, albeit possibly scaled down, in a different type of organisation, in a different industry or sector.

Picking up on Yip's point in Box 2.4, there may be scope for you to undertake a case study that seeks to apply the findings from a large sample statistical study to a particular organisational context or type of organisation. This will allow you to test the applicability of these previous findings and to convert them into a relevant and accessible form for a particular context.

Creatively approaching the literature to convert existing work into a relevant and specifically applied study, in the ways described above, may provide you with a rich and valuable research idea.

Relevance trees

Relevance trees may also prove useful in generating research topics. In this instance, their use is similar to that of mind mapping (Buzan 2011), in which you start with a broad concept from which you generate further (usually more specific) topics. Each of these topics forms a separate branch from which you can generate further, more detailed sub-branches. As you proceed down the sub-branches more ideas are generated and recorded. These can then be examined and a number selected and combined to provide a research idea (Sharp et al. 2002). This technique is discussed in more detail in Section 3.4 (see in particular, Box 3.11).

Brainstorming

The technique of **brainstorming** (Box 2.5), taught as a problem-solving technique on many business and management courses, can also be used to generate and refine research ideas. It is best undertaken with a group of people, although you can brainstorm on your own. Brainstorming involves a number of stages:

- 1 *Defining the problem.* This will focus on the sorts of ideas you are interested in – as precisely as possible. In the early stages of formulating a topic this may be as vague as, 'I am interested in marketing but don't know what to do for my research topic'.
- 2 *Asking for suggestions.* These will relate to the problem.
- 3 *Recording suggestions.* As you record these you will need to observe the following rules:
 - No suggestion should be criticised or evaluated in any way before all ideas have been considered.
 - All suggestions, however wild, should be recorded and considered.
 - As many suggestions as possible should be recorded.
- 4 *Reviewing suggestions.* You will seek to explore what is meant by each as you review these.
- 5 *Analysing suggestions.* Work through the list of ideas and decide which appeal to you most as research ideas and why.



Box 2.5 Focus on student research

Brainstorming

George's main interest was football. When he finished university he wanted to work in marketing, preferably for a sports goods manufacturer. He had examined his own strengths and discovered that his best marks were in marketing. He wanted to do his research project on some aspect of marketing, preferably linked to football, but had no real research idea. He asked three friends, all taking business studies degrees, to help him brainstorm the problem.

George began by explaining the problem in some detail. At first the suggestions emerged slowly. He

noted them down on the whiteboard. Soon the board was covered with suggestions. George counted these and discovered there were over 100.

Reviewing individual suggestions produced nothing that any of the group felt to be of sufficient merit for a research project. However, one of George's friends pointed out that combining the suggestions of Premier League football, television rights and sponsorship might provide an idea which satisfied the assessment requirements of the project.

They discussed the suggestion further, and George noted the research idea as 'something about how confining the rights to show live Premiership football to paid-for satellite TV channels would impact upon the sale of Premiership club-specific merchandise'.

George arranged to see his project tutor to discuss how to refine the idea they had just generated.

Refining research ideas

The Delphi technique

An additional approach that our students have found particularly useful in refining their research ideas is the **Delphi technique** (Box 2.6). This involves using a group of people who are either involved or interested in the research idea to generate and choose a more specific research idea (Robson 2011). To use this technique you need:

- 1 to brief the members of the group about the research idea (they can make notes if they wish);
- 2 at the end of the briefing to encourage group members to seek clarification and more information as appropriate;
- 3 to ask each member of the group, including the originator of the research idea, to generate independently up to three specific research ideas based on the idea that has been described (they can also be asked to provide a justification for their specific ideas);
- 4 to collect the research ideas in an unedited and non-attributable form and to distribute them to all members of the group;
- 5 a second cycle of the process (steps 2 to 4) in which individuals comment on the research ideas and revise their own contributions in the light of what others have said;
- 6 subsequent cycles of the process until a consensus is reached. These either follow a similar pattern (steps 2 to 4) or use discussion, voting or some other method.

This process works well, not least because people enjoy trying to help one another. In addition, it is very useful in moulding groups into a cohesive whole.

The preliminary inquiry

It is often necessary to refine your research idea in order to turn it into a research question and then into your research project. This process is called the **preliminary inquiry**



Box 2.6 Focus on student research

Using a Delphi Group

Tim explained to the group that his research idea was concerned with understanding the decision-making processes associated with mortgage applications and loan advances. His briefing to the three other group members, and the questions that they asked him, considered aspects such as:

- the influences on a potential first-time buyer to approach a specific financial institution;
- the influence on decision making of face-to-face contact between potential borrowers and potential lenders.

The group then moved on to generate a number of more specific research ideas, among which were the following:

- the factors that influenced potential first-time house purchasers to deal with particular financial institutions;
- the effect of interpersonal contact on mortgage decisions;
- the qualities that potential applicants look for in mortgage advisers.

These were considered and commented on by all the group members. At the end of the second cycle Tim had, with the other students' agreement, refined his research idea to:

- the way in which a range of factors influenced potential first-time buyers' choice of lending institution.

He now needed to pursue these ideas by undertaking a preliminary search of the literature.

or initial inquiry. This is likely to involve searching for and evaluating relevant literature and other related sources (see Box 2.7 for a rare reported example of this in the literature). This may lead to the first iteration of your critical literature review, or help to inform it (see Figure 3.1 later).

For some researchers this process may also include informal discussions with people who have personal experience of and knowledge about your research ideas. It may also involve **shadowing** employees that are likely to be important in your research and who may therefore be able to provide some initial insights. If you are planning on undertaking your research within an organisation it is also important to gain a good understanding of your host organisation (McDonald 2005). However, whatever techniques you use, the underlying purpose is to gain a greater understanding so that your research question can be refined, perhaps by also revisiting some of the techniques we discussed earlier in this section.

At this stage you will need to test your research ideas against the checklist in Box 2.2 and where necessary change them. It may be that after a preliminary inquiry, or discussing your ideas with colleagues, you decide that the research idea is no longer feasible in the form in which you first envisaged it. If this is the case, do not be too downhearted. It is far better to revise your research ideas at this stage than to have to do it later, when you have undertaken far more work.

Integrating ideas

The integration of ideas from these techniques is essential if your research is to have a clear direction and not contain a mismatch between objectives and your final project report. Jankowicz (2005: 34–6) suggests an integrative process that our students have found most useful. This he terms 'working up and narrowing down'. It involves classifying each research idea first into its area, then its field, and finally the precise aspect



Box 2.7 Focus on management research

The rare case of a reported preliminary inquiry

There are few reports in journal articles of the preliminary inquiries that researchers undertake. Generally the 'methods' section of a journal article only describes the research methodology and techniques used in the actual study. This is probably due to word limits and the presentation of research as an unproblematic process. However, in many studies there may not be a well-defined theoretical base from which to commence the research. There may instead be several possible theoretical strands that might be useful for the proposed study, which need to be explored first. Researchers may need to search for and familiarise themselves with theoretical strands that were previously unknown to them. These possibilities are likely to be the case where the proposed research seeks to explore a new area.

An excellent example describing the way a group of researchers undertook a preliminary inquiry is found in Elsbach et al. (2010). Their study, published in *Human Relations*, examines 'how passive "face time" (i.e. the amount of time one is passively observed without interaction) affects how one is perceived at work' (Elsbach et al. 2010: 735). For example, it is likely to be important for new employees to create an impression of being a diligent worker, without the observer knowing exactly what the person being observed is actually doing. Being seen is what Elsbach and colleagues call 'expected face time'. Positive impressions may be created by being seen in the right places (e.g. at one's desk, in meetings, taking part in events) rather than being based on actual performance. There is also 'extracurricular face time', where the impression an employee creates is also shaped by his or her involvement outside work.

Elsbach et al. identified this as a research idea that had not been investigated previously. They thought

that this was surprising because of the increasing numbers of employees who spend much time working away from their work base, as well as the existence of anecdotal evidence indicating that remote workers may feel anxious about their lack of face time.

They conducted a preliminary inquiry that commenced with the collection of anecdotal evidence which suggested that passive face time was linked to the creation of positive impressions of employees in professional jobs. This anecdotal evidence was gleaned from newspaper articles, business magazines and books. In order to understand this relationship further they located two strands of theoretical literature which offered them 'clues' about 'how and why passive face time affects perceptions of employees who display it' (Elsbach et al. 2010: 739). These two strands of literature related to research on organisational citizenship behaviour and research on trait inferences. While these strands of literature had not been designed to focus on passive face time, they lent some support to the idea that being seen in the workplace was likely to lead observers to infer positive attributes about those being observed.

This preliminary inquiry led Elsbach and colleagues to identify that this was an area worth researching to close the gap in our understanding of this phenomenon. They devised a research question – 'How do observers perceive displayers of passive face time in professional work contexts?' – as a result of their preliminary inquiry, which led to a substantive research project composed of two stages. The first of these, called 'Study 1', involved an exploratory stage that used semi-structured interviews which were analysed inductively using the principles of Grounded Theory (see Chapters 4 and 5). The second of these, called 'Study 2', involved an experimental design (see Chapter 5) to test the 'proposed effects of passive face time' (Elsbach et al. 2010: 748).

This published study by Elsbach et al. is rare in terms of describing how their preliminary inquiry helped to establish the need for a substantive research study and the definition of that study. As such, this article may be seen as a model example of the process of a research project from conception to execution.

in which you are interested. These represent an increasingly detailed description of the research idea. Thus your initial area, based on examining your coursework, might be accountancy. After browsing some recent journals and discussion with colleagues this becomes more focused on the field of financial accounting methods. With further reading, the use of the Delphi technique and discussion with your project tutor you decide to focus on the aspect of activity-based costing.

You will know when the process of generating and refining ideas is complete as you will be able to say, 'I'd like to do some research on . . .'. Obviously there will still be a big gap between this and the point when you are ready to start serious work on your research. Sections 2.4 and 2.5 will ensure that you are ready to bridge that gap.

Refining topics given by your employing organisation

If, as a part-time student, your manager gives you a topic, this may present particular problems. It may be something in which you are not particularly interested. In this case you will have to weigh the advantage of doing something useful to the organisation against the disadvantage of a potential lack of personal motivation. You therefore need to achieve a balance. Often the research project your manager wishes you to undertake is larger than is appropriate for your course. In such cases, it may be possible to complete both by isolating an element of the larger organisational project that you find interesting and treating this as the project for your course.

One of our students was asked to do a preliminary investigation of the strengths and weaknesses of her organisation's pay system and then to recommend consultants to design and implement a new system. She was not particularly interested in this project. However, she was considering becoming a freelance personnel consultant. Therefore, for her research project she decided to study the decision-making process in relation to the appointment of personnel consultants. Her organisation's decision on which consultant to appoint, and why this decision was taken, proved to be a useful case study against which to compare management decision-making theory.

In this event you would write a larger report for your organisation and a part of it for your project report. Section 14.4 offers some guidance on writing two separate reports for different audiences.

Other problems may involve your political relationships in the organisation. For example, there will be those keen to commission a project which justifies their particular policy position and see you as a useful pawn in advancing their political interests. It is important to have a clear stance with regard to what you want to do, and your personal objectives, and to stick to this.

Finally, perhaps the biggest potential problem may be one of your own making: to promise to deliver research outcomes to your employer and not do so.

2.4 Turning research ideas into research projects

Writing research questions

Much is made in this book of the importance of defining clear research questions at the beginning of the research process. The importance of this cannot be overemphasised. One of the key criteria of your research success will be whether you have developed a set of clear conclusions from the data you have collected. The extent to which you can do that will be determined largely by the clarity with which you have posed your research questions (Box 2.8).



Box 2.8 Focus on student research

Defining the research question

Imran was studying for a BA in Business Studies and undertaking his placement year in an advanced consumer electronics company. When he first joined the company he was surprised to note that the company's business strategy, which was announced in the company newsletter, seemed to be inconsistent with what Imran knew of the product market.

Imran had become particularly interested in corporate strategy in his degree. He was familiar with some of the literature which suggested that corporate strategy should be linked to the general external environment in which the organisation operated. He wanted to do some research on corporate strategy in his organisation for his degree dissertation.

After talking this over with his project tutor, Imran decided on the following research question: 'Why does [organisation's name]'s corporate strategy not seem to reflect the major factors in the external operating environment?'

Defining research questions, rather like generating research ideas (Section 2.3), is not a straightforward matter. It is important that the question is sufficiently involved to generate the sort of project that is consistent with the standards expected of you (Box 2.2). A question that only prompts a descriptive answer – for example, 'What is the proportion of graduates entering the civil service who attended the pre-1992 UK universities?' – is far easier to answer than: 'Why are graduates from pre-1992 UK universities more likely to enter the civil service than graduates from other universities?'

Questions may be divided into ones that are descriptive, evaluative and/or explanatory. A question that commences with 'What', 'When', 'Where', 'Who' or 'How' will lead to an answer that will be at least partly descriptive. Questions that seek explanations will either commence with 'Why' or contain this word within the question. For example, a question may ask customers what they think about a new product and why they like or dislike it.

Many research questions commence with 'What' or 'How' but go beyond seeking a descriptive answer. There is a clear distinction between asking, 'How much did the marketing campaign for the new range of products cost?' and 'How effective was the marketing campaign for the new range of products?' The first question, 'How much . . .?', will only reveal a descriptive answer. The second question, 'How effective . . .?', is designed to be evaluative as well as descriptive. In order to make sure that this question is evaluative it will be necessary to identify a set of evaluation criteria within the research objectives that are devised to operationalise this question (Box 2.9). There is a role for research that evaluates as well develops explanations in business and management. Another way of wording this type of question might be, 'To what extent was the marketing campaign effective and why?' There is further consideration of the relationship between 'what', 'how' and 'why' questions later in this section.

While some questions may be too simple, it is perhaps more likely that you might fall into the trap of asking research questions that are too difficult. The question cited above, 'Why are graduates from pre-1992 UK universities more likely to enter the civil service than graduates from other universities?', is a case in point. It would probably be very difficult to gain sufficient access to the inner portals of the civil service to get a good grasp of the subtle 'unofficial' processes that go on at staff selection which may favour one type of candidate over another. Over-reaching yourself in the definition of research questions is a danger.



Box 2.9 Focus on student research

Writing a set of research objectives

Tom was a part-time student who worked for a large power and gas company employing several thousand employees across many different sites. Tom had been undertaking an employment-related project on employee engagement and had decided to focus his university research project on employee communication. His employing organisation had been refocusing its employee communication away from traditional methods towards Internet- and intranet-based channels. Tom had noted the following comment in the CIPD Research Insight (2010: 14): 'The measurement of communication does not appear in HR research or literature very often and yet measurement is essential to evaluate, guide and direct communication initiatives and investments.'

Following a process of generating and refining ideas for research Tom decided that he would like to explore the effectiveness of employee communication developments in his employing organisation. This idea had been approved by the internal communication management team and he was informed that his request for access to managers would be supported.

Tom refined his research question until he was satisfied with it: 'How effective are internet and intranet channels as a means to communicate with employees in [company name]?' He and his project tutor felt that the scope of this research question was 'just about

right'. They felt it was 'doable' and that it focused on an issue that was important and relevant for the business.

Tom's project tutor asked Tom to draw up a set of interconnected research objectives that would operationalise his research and provide a set of evaluation criteria to enable him to address his 'how effective . . .' type of question. Tom came up with the following set of research objectives. Objective 2 allowed Tom to identify the company's objectives for each channel and objectives 3–6 allowed Tom to measure and then compare channels in order to draw conclusions about 'how effective' they were.

- 1 To identify each Internet and intranet channel of employee communication used in the company;
- 2 To describe the company's objectives for each channel (e.g. conveying news about the business, facilitating communication across the company, announcing results and targets, bringing about behavioural change);
- 3 To identify and explore specific examples of how each channel has been beneficial or influential;
- 4 To identify and explore specific examples where each channel has not been beneficial or influential;
- 5 To determine a measure of effectiveness for each channel that shows whether and how the channel had met, exceeded or failed to meet the objectives set for it;
- 6 To compare measures of effectiveness across channels related to different organisational objectives;
- 7 To make recommendations about each channel's future use and fitness for purpose.

Clough and Nutbrown (2002) use what they call the '**Goldilocks test**' to decide if research questions are either 'too big', 'too small', 'too hot' or 'just right'. Those that are too big probably need significant research funding because they demand too many resources. Questions that are too small are likely to be of insufficient substance, while those that are too 'hot' may be so because of sensitivities that might be aroused as a result of doing the research. This may be because of the timing of the research or the many other reasons that could upset key people who have a role to play, either directly or indirectly, in the research context. Research questions that are 'just right', note Clough and Nutbrown (2002: 34), are those that are 'just right for investigation at *this* time, by *this* researcher in *this* setting'.

The pitfall you must avoid at all costs is asking research questions that will not generate new insights (Box 2.2). This raises the question of the extent to which you have consulted the relevant literature. It is perfectly legitimate to replicate research because

Table 2.2 Examples of research ideas and resulting general focus research questions

Research idea	Research questions
Advertising and share prices	How does the running of a TV advertising campaign designed to boost the image of a company affect its share price?
Job recruitment via the Internet	How effective is recruiting for new staff via the Internet in comparison with traditional methods?
The use of aromas as a marketing device	In what ways does the use of specific aromas in supermarkets affect buyer behaviour?
The use of Internet banking	What effect has the growth of Internet banking had upon the uses customers make of branch facilities and why?

you have a genuine concern about its applicability to your research setting (for example, your organisation). However, it certainly is not legitimate to display your ignorance of the literature.

McNiff and Whitehead (2000) make the point that the research question may not emerge until the research process has started and is therefore part of the process of 'progressive illumination'. They note that this is particularly likely to be the case in practitioner-led action research (see Sections 4.3 and 5.5).

It is often a useful starting point in the writing of research questions to begin with one **research question** that flows from your research idea. This may lead to several more detailed questions or the definition of research objectives. Table 2.2 has some examples of general focus research questions.

In order to clarify the research question, Clough and Nutbrown (2002) talk of the Russian doll principle. This means taking the research idea and 'breaking down the research questions from the original statement to something which strips away the complication of layers and obscurities until the very essence – the heart – of the question can be expressed ... just as the Russian doll is taken apart to reveal a tiny doll at the centre' (Clough and Nutbrown 2002: 34).

Writing your research questions will be, in most cases, your individual concern but it is useful to get other people to help. An obvious source of guidance is your project tutor. Consulting your project tutor will avoid the pitfalls of the questions that are too easy or too difficult or have been answered before. Discussing your area of interest with your project tutor will lead to your research questions becoming much clearer.

Prior to discussion with your project tutor you may wish to conduct a brainstorming session with your peers or use the Delphi technique (Section 2.3). Your research questions may flow from your initial examination of the relevant literature. As outlined in Section 2.3, journal articles reporting primary research will often end with a conclusion that includes the consideration by the author of the implications for future research of the work in the article. This may be phrased in the form of research questions. However, even if it is not, it may suggest possible research questions to you.

Writing research objectives

Your research question may be used to generate more detailed investigative questions, or you may use it as a base from which to write a set of **research objectives**. Objectives are more generally acceptable to the research community as evidence of the researcher's clear sense of purpose and direction. Once you have devised your research question, we believe that research objectives are likely to lead to greater specificity than using

Table 2.3 Criteria to devise useful research objectives

Criterion	Purpose
Transparency (What does it mean?)	The meaning of the research objective is clear and unambiguous
Specificity (What I am going to do?)	The purpose of the research objective is clear and easily understood, as are the actions required to fulfil it
Relevancy (Why I am going to do this)	The research objective’s link to the research question and wider research project is clear
Interconnectivity (How will it help to complete the research project?)	Taken together as a set, the research objectives illustrate the steps in the research process from its start to its conclusion, without leaving any gaps. In this way, the research objectives form a coherent whole
Answerability (Will this be possible?) (Where shall I obtain data?)	The intended outcome of the research objective is achievable. Where this relates to data, the nature of the data required will be clear or at least implied
Measurability (When will it be done?)	The intended product of the research objective will be evident when it has been achieved

investigative questions. It may be that either is satisfactory. Do check whether your examining body has a preference.

Your research question allows you to say what the issue or problem is that you wish to study. Research objectives allow you to **operationalise** your question – that is, to state the steps you intend to take to answer it. A similar way of thinking about the difference between questions and objectives is related to ‘what’ and ‘how’. Research questions express ‘what’ your research is about. Research objectives express ‘how’ you intend to structure the research process to answer your question. In this way, research objectives can be seen to complement a research question, through providing the means to operationalise it. They provide a key step to transform your research question into your research project.

Writing useful research objectives requires you to fulfil a number of fit-for-purpose criteria. Table 2.3 sets out criteria to help you devise research objectives to operationalise your research question. Each of these criteria is also rephrased as a question, which you can use as a checklist to evaluate your own draft research objectives. Box 2.9 provides an example set of objectives at the stage when a student’s research question was being developed into a sequence of research objectives.

The importance of theory in writing research questions and objectives

Section 4.3 outlines the role of theory in helping you to decide your approach to research design. However, your consideration of theory should begin earlier than this. It should inform your research questions and research objectives.

To help you to think about this, we may ask four questions that relate to the role of theory. What is theory? Why is theory important? How is theory developed? What types of theoretical contribution might be made? These questions lead into the discussion in Section 4.3

What is theory?

To address the question ‘what is theory?’ we use the influential work of Whetten (1989). Whetten identified that theory is composed of four elements, related to ‘what’, ‘how’, ‘why’ and a fourth group of ‘who’, ‘where’ and ‘when’. The first of these may be summarised as: what are the variables or concepts that the theory examines? For example, in Box 2.9, the variables in Tom’s research question are communication channels and employees (their awareness and behaviours).

The second element may be summarised as: how are these variables or concepts related? Tom’s research question was designed to examine the relationship between communication channels and employees. A key aspect here is **causality**. Theory is concerned with cause and effect. In Tom’s research, Tom was interested to explore how each communication channel influenced employees’ levels of awareness and behaviour. In other words, does the use of a particular channel cause an effect on employees’ levels of awareness and behaviour.

The third element may be summarised as: why are these variables or concepts related? This is the critical element in a theory because it explains the nature of the relationship between the variables or concepts. According to Whetten, ‘what’ and ‘how’ are descriptive; it is ‘why’ that explains the relationship. This point is worth developing, as you may be asking, ‘what is the difference between “how” and “why” in this context?’ In the case of Tom’s research, Tom found that his data suggested some channels were better at communicating ‘top-down’ news, whereas other channels were better at facilitating communication across the company. His data helped him to recognise relationships that he could describe. However, Tom needed to analyse his data further (and where necessary to extend its collection) to answer the question, ‘why do these relationships exist in my data?’

To summarise so far, good theory must not only include ‘what’ and ‘how’ elements to identify underpinning variables and describe the nature of their relationship (cause and effect); it must also use **logical reasoning** to explain why the relationship exists. ‘Logical’ because you will be looking for good reasons to explain ‘why’ and ‘reasoning’ because your use of logic will be based on what you already know, related to the ‘what’ and ‘how’. Once a valid explanation has been developed, the theory may be used not only to explain why the relationship exists but also to make predictions about new outcomes if the variables on which the theory is based are manipulated (or changed). In the case of Tom’s research, his theory may be used to predict that increasing investment in an effective communication channel will lead to improvements in employee awareness. Conversely, it may be used to predict that withdrawing investment in this channel will be a false cost saving.

While good theory has the power to explain and predict, it may also be subject to limitations. The scope of many theories will be limited by one or more constraints. The fourth group of elements that Whetten identified may therefore be summarised as: who does this theory apply to; where does this theory apply; when does this theory apply? In the case of Tom’s research, Tom recognised that some of his theoretical conclusions applied to engineering staff but not to administrative staff. Other conclusions applied to head office employees but not to regional employees. He also recognised that as some communication channels continued to develop, his conclusions about those would need to be re-evaluated in the future.

In this way, the explanations of the cause-and-effect relationships between variables in a theory may be contextual and time limited, indicating constraints to their generalisability. Another important contribution that addresses the question ‘what is theory?’ starts from the opposite perspective by discussing ‘What theory is not?’ (Sutton and Staw 1995). This is a helpful contribution to our understanding and provides a complementary approach to that of Whetten (1989) (see Box 2.10).



Box 2.10 Focus on management research

Clarifying what theory is not

Sutton and Staw (1995) make a helpful contribution to the question 'What is theory?' by defining what it is not. In their view theory is not:

- 1 *References*. Listing references to existing theories and mentioning the names of such theories may look impressive. However, alluding to the theory developed by other researchers may only provide a smokescreen. Instead researchers need to identify the concepts, casual relationships and logical explanations that they are using from previous theoretical work in relation to their own work.
- 2 *Data*. Data are important to be able to confirm, revise or overturn existing theory and to be able to develop new theory. However, data are used to describe the relationships or patterns that are revealed from their collection and analysis. Description by itself does not equal theory. Theory also requires logical explanations to discuss why such relationships or patterns were revealed, or

why they might be expected to be revealed when testing existing theory (see Section 4.3).

- 3 *Lists of variables*. Variables are important in the process of theory development but simply presenting or listing these by themselves does not represent a theory.
- 4 *Diagrams*. Diagrams are often helpful to show observed or expected casual relationships and how different relationships are related or how they are expected to be related. However, by themselves diagrams or figures are not theory. Sutton and Staw (1995: 376) state: 'Good theory is often representational and verbal.' They say that clear explanations can be represented graphically but that, to be able to develop a rich theoretical understanding, these will also require written discussion to explain why these relationships exist.
- 5 *Hypotheses or predictions*. In a similar manner to point 3 above, hypotheses are an important part of the process of developing and testing theory in particular theoretical approaches (see Experiment in Section 5.5), but they do not constitute a theory by themselves.

You are likely to use research questions rather than hypotheses in your research design and we would add to point 5 that the propositions or concepts that inform your research questions are also not theory by themselves.

Why is theory important?

There is probably no word that is more misused and misunderstood in education than the word 'theory'. It is thought that material included in textbooks is 'theory', whereas what is happening in the 'real world' is practice. Students who saw earlier editions of this book remarked that they were pleased that the book was not too 'theoretical'. What they meant was that the book concentrated on giving lots of practical advice. Yet the book is full of theory. Advising you to carry out research in a particular way (variable A) is based on the theory that this will yield effective results (variable B). This is the cause-and-effect relationship referred to in the definition of theory developed above and is very much the view of Kelly (1955). Kelly argues that the individual who attempts to solve the daily problems which we all face goes about this activity in much the same way as the scientist. Both continuously make and test hypotheses and revise their concepts accordingly. Both organise their results into what are called schemata and then into a system of broader schemata which are called theories. Kelly asserts that we need such schemata and theories in order to make sense of the complexity of the world in which we live. Without these organising frameworks we would be overwhelmed by the unconnected detail we would have to recall.

Implicitly each of us uses theory in our lives and in the jobs that we undertake. For example, the marketing manager believes that the use of loyalty cards in the supermarket chain for which he or she works makes customers less likely to shop regularly at a competitor supermarket. This is a theory even though the marketing manager would probably not recognise it as such. He or she is still less likely to refer to it as a theory, particularly in the company of fellow managers. Many managers are very dismissive of any talk that smacks of 'theory'. It is thought of as something that is all very well to learn about at business school but which bears little relation to what goes on in everyday organisational life. Yet the loyalty card example shows that it has everything to do with what goes on in everyday organisational life. By introducing loyalty cards (variable A), the retailing company is attempting to influence the behaviour of customers (variable B). As every supermarket chain introduces their own loyalty card, the marketing manager's personal theory that this encourages loyalty may begin to seem inadequate when confronted by a range of other complementary and innovative strategies to encourage customers to switch where they shop.

The use of a loyalty card may become just one variable among many as supermarkets compete by offering extra loyalty card bonus points on particular goods, double or treble points if customers spend over a certain amount, the opportunity to redeem the value from accumulated bonus points against a range of discounted offers and so on. In this case, research will provide the marketing manager with a much greater understanding of the effectiveness of the strategies used within her or his supermarket chain. The data collected will allow theoretical explanations to be developed based on causal relationships that may then be used to predict which of these strategies is more effective. It may also indicate that different strategies will be effective in different locations and perhaps that specific strategies are more effective at particular times of the year, or that specific strategies should be targeted at particular socioeconomic groups. The ability to make these predictions potentially allows the supermarket chain to compete more effectively against its rivals. Valid theoretical explanations may lead to predictions that offer the supermarket chain increased opportunities for influence and control and the possibility of increasing market share.

If theory is so rooted in our everyday lives it is something that we need not be apprehensive about. If it is implicit in all of our decisions and actions then recognising its importance means making it explicit. In research, the importance of theory must be recognised: therefore it must be made explicit.

How is theory developed and how does this inform your research question and research objectives?

So far we have defined the elements of theory and discussed the need to recognise it in your research, even as you start to plan this. You may ask, 'why is it important for me to recognise theory at this early stage, when writing my research question and research objectives?' Apart from its capacity to inform your research ideas (discussed earlier), the answer to this relates to the way theory may also inform your research question and how theory is developed.

Just as literature and the theory contained within it may provide you with research ideas, theory may also inform your research question. Theory may provide you with an idea for a research question and a set of variables or concepts that you then test to determine whether, how and why they are related in the context of your own research (see Box 2.11). In 1945, Kurt Lewin used the expression 'nothing is as practical as a good theory' (1945: 129). Van de Ven (1989) utilised Lewin's expression to illustrate that good theory always indicates important questions for further research.



Box 2.11 Focus on student research

Writing a research question based on theory

Justine was a final-year marketing undergraduate who was interested in the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). She wanted to apply this to consumer purchasing decision making in the snack foods industry (e.g. buying potato crisps) in the light of the adverse publicity that the consumption of such foods has as a result of 'healthy eating' campaigns.

Justine applied Festinger's theory by arguing in her research project proposal that a consumer who learns that eating too many snacks is bad for her health will experience dissonance, because the knowledge that eating too much snack food is bad for her health will

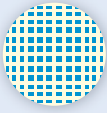
be dissonant with the cognition that she continues to eat too many snacks. She can reduce the dissonance by changing her behaviour, i.e., she could stop eating so many snacks. (This would be consonant with the cognition that eating too many snacks is bad for her health.) Alternatively, she could reduce dissonance by changing her cognition about the effect of snack over-eating on health and persuade herself that does not have a harmful effect on health. She would look for positive effects of eating snacks, for example by believing that it is an important source of enjoyment which outweighs any harmful effects. Alternatively, she might persuade herself that the risk to health from snack over-eating is negligible compared with the danger of car accidents (reducing the importance of the dissonant cognition).

Justine's research question was, 'To what extent does adverse "healthy eating" campaign publicity affect the consumer's decision to purchase snack foods and why?'

Research questions may also be inspired by sources other than existing theory. Kilduff (2006) suggests that an important inspiration for research flows from your involvement with issues in which you are personally interested. Even in this case, however, theory will allow you to familiarise yourself with your area of interest and may help you to draft your research question.

How theory is developed also provides a crucial reason for recognising relevant theory when writing your research question and objectives. Your research project will be designed to test a theory or to develop a theory. Where you wish to adopt a clear theoretical position that you will test through the collection of data, your research project will be theory driven and you will be using a **deductive approach**. Where you wish to explore a topic and develop a theoretical explanation as the data are collected and analysed, your research project will be data driven and you will be adopting an **inductive approach**.

We discuss theory development in much greater detail in Section 4.3, but it is useful to introduce this fundamental difference in the way theory is developed to be able to show why you need to think about this when drafting your research question and research objectives. A deductive approach will require you identify a clear theoretical position when you draft the research question that you will then test. This is the approach we outlined above (see Box 2.11). An inductive approach does not rely on identifying an existing theoretical position but it is likely that if you adopt this approach you will still need to familiarise yourself with theory in your chosen subject area before you draft your research question. Using an inductive approach does not mean disregarding theory as you formulate your research question and objectives. An inductive approach is intended to allow meanings to emerge from data as you collect them in order to identify patterns and relationships to build a theory, but it does not prevent you from using existing theory to formulate your research question and even to identify concepts that you wish to explore in the research process (see Section 4.3). In this way, all researchers are likely to commence their research with knowledge of relevant literature and the theory it contains.



Box 2.12 Focus on management research

Thanks for the description; I'd like some more explanation please!

Mackenzie (2000a, 2000b) argues that research using opinion surveys leads to ambiguous conclusions if these only ask questions about what respondents believe rather than asking other questions that reveal why they hold those beliefs. For example, an opinion survey in a workplace may include the statement, 'I am satisfied with my overall compensation'. Respondents will typically be asked to respond by ticking a box which indicates whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree. The data produced will be very useful in analytical terms, since they will provide an organisation-wide measure of satisfaction and

allow comparisons to be made across and between departments, occupations, grades, genders and locations, etc. However, when it comes to developing conclusions and recommendations, other data will be required that explain why these beliefs are held. For example, why might 65 per cent agree with the statement, 'I am provided with the necessary training to do my job well'. Perhaps more importantly, why might 35 per cent be disagreeing? Other data related to the context of the workplace and to the implementation of organisational processes (e.g. related to pay and to training in our examples) will be required to understand why respondents hold the views that they do.

Without such data, meaningful explanations can only be guessed. For you to be able to develop a theoretical explanation you will need not only 'what'-type data but also 'why'-type data. 'What'-type data are referred to as descriptive research. Whilst these are essential for analytical purposes, you will also need to develop explanatory research to be able to build and test theory.

There is a third relationship between theory and your research question that is important to recognise when drafting your research question. In our discussion of theory we recognised that it is crucial to be able to explain how variables or concepts are related and why they are related. Research questions may therefore play a crucial role in encouraging research that is designed to produce theoretical explanations, no matter how limited these explanations might be (see the following subsection). A question that only encourages a descriptive outcome will not lead to a theoretical explanation. For example, compare the following questions. 'How satisfied are employees with recent changes in the department's business strategy?' 'What are the implications of recent changes in the department's business strategy for employee satisfaction and why?' The first question is written to produce a descriptive outcome. The second question has the potential to explore and test relationships and to arrive at theoretical explanations to explain why these might exist (see Box 2.12).

What types of theoretical contribution might be made?

This discussion of theory has probably left you asking, 'what does this mean for me?' While you will be expected to produce a theoretical explanation, you will not be expected to develop a momentous theory that leads to a new way of thinking about management! Not all theoretical contributions are the same and it is reassuring to look at the threefold typology of theories shown in Figure 2.1

'Grand theories' are usually thought to be the province of the natural scientists (e.g. Newton's theory of gravity, Darwin's theory of evolution or Einstein's theory of relativity). These may be contrasted with 'middle-range theories', which lack the capacity to change the way in which we think about the world but are nonetheless of significance. Some of the theories of human motivation well known to managers would be in

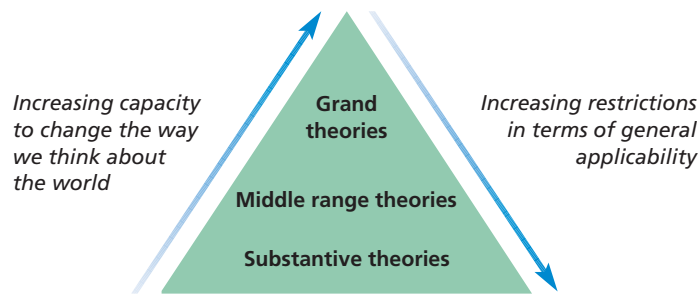


Figure 2.1 Grand, middle-range and substantive theories

this category. However, most of us are concerned with ‘substantive theories’ that are restricted to a particular time, research setting, group or population or problem.

For example, studying the implications of a cost-saving strategy in a particular organisation would be an example of a substantive theory. Restricted they may be, but a host of ‘substantive theories’ that present similar propositions may lead to ‘middle-range theories’. By developing ‘substantive theories’, however modest, we are doing our bit as researchers to enhance our understanding of the world about us. A grand claim, but a valid one!

2.5 Writing your research proposal

The **research proposal**, occasionally referred to as a protocol or outline, is a structured plan of your proposed research project. In this section we discuss why it is necessary and how it may be structured, but it is important to recognise that a competent research proposal needs to draw on material discussed in subsequent chapters. Before you can write your research proposal you will need to be aware of available literature and appropriate theory (Section 2.4 and Chapter 3), the research philosophy and approach that you wish to use (Chapter 4), your research design including methodological choice, research strategy and time frame (Chapter 5), access and ethical issues (Chapter 6), sample selection (Chapter 7), data collection methods and data analysis techniques (Chapters 8–13).

Why is a research proposal necessary?

Creating a clear specification to guide your research project

Your research project is likely to be a large element in your course. It is also student driven. You will be responsible for conceiving, conducting and concluding this project and creating a dissertation, thesis or report. Apart from applying your research methods training and the advice you receive from your project tutor, it will be your piece of work. From this perspective, developing a research proposal offers you the opportunity to think carefully about your research project (see Table 2.4).

We do not suggest that you use these questions to provide headings under which you write responses, but we feel that they should be helpful as a guide and as a checklist against which to evaluate your research proposal before submitting it to your tutor. A well-thought-out and well-written research proposal has the potential to provide you with a clear specification of the what, why, how, when and where of your research project.

Table 2.4 Key questions to guide and evaluate a research proposal

- What am I going to do?
- Why am I doing this?
- Why is it worth doing?
- How does it relate to what has been done before in my subject area?
- Which theory or theories will inform what I am doing and how will I use it or them?
- What is my research question and what are my research objectives?
- How shall I conduct my research?
- What is my research design?
- What type of data do I need?
- Who and where are my intended participants?
- How will I gain access?
- How shall I select them?
- How will I collect my data?
- How will I analyse my data and use this to develop theoretical explanations?
- What data quality issues might I encounter?
- How will I seek to overcome these?
- What ethical issues might I encounter at each stage of my research?
- How will I overcome these?

Producing a research proposal is demanding: thinking through what you wish to do and why, identifying and synthesising literature and then envisaging all of the stages of your research will be time-consuming, as will the necessary revisions to create a coherent and clearly written proposal. However, the effort is likely to prove to be very worthwhile. As you juggle several activities during the period of your research project, there may be occasions when you pick up your research proposal and feel glad that you spent so much time producing a clear specification to guide your project through its various stages.

Meeting the requirements of those who approve and assess your project

It is likely that your research proposal will be assessed before you are allowed to carry on with your proposed research project. A proportion of the overall marks available for your project report may be set aside to assess the research proposal. Alternatively, a research proposal may be subject to approval before you are permitted to proceed with your research project. In either case, it will be necessary to pass a certain standard before being allowed to progress. There are potentially a number of different criteria that may be used to assess a research proposal. These may include criteria that are specific to each of the components of the proposal, which we describe below. Part of the assessment and approval process may also centre on criteria that focus on more general concerns. We discuss three such criteria that are likely to be used to assess your research proposal: coherence, ethical clearance and feasibility.

Coherence

A research project is a complex and time-consuming activity. As we indicated above, you are likely to benefit from creating a clear specification to guide your research project. Your project tutor and any other assessor will be looking for evidence of coherence and lucidity in the way you have written your research proposal, to demonstrate that it will be fit for purpose and able to direct your research activity.

Ethical clearance

Part of the approval process for your research proposal may involve it being considered and approved by a research ethics committee. Your university's code of ethical practice is likely to require all research involving human participants to be considered and approved, especially where research involves young or vulnerable participants. It may also be necessary to state how data will be stored, whether they will be kept subsequently and under what conditions, in order to ensure the continuing anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of their data. Section 6.5 discusses ethical issues related to the design stage of a research project. You will need to be aware of and abide by the ethical requirements of your institution. These requirements will add to the time that you will need to allow for the planning stage of your research project. As a professional student you may also need to be aware of and abide by the ethical requirements of your professional institute.

Feasibility

You may have devised a coherent and well-structured research proposal that would create much interest but it may not be possible to achieve, or sensible to contemplate. Feasibility is a multifaceted criterion that your assessors will be concerned about. Your proposal may not be possible to achieve in the time available to undertake the research project and produce your dissertation or management report. It may be that data collection would not be possible because you would not be able to gain access to participants, or it might not be practical and your tutor will tell you so! The proposal may require resources that are not available, finance commitments that are unaffordable or skills that you have not developed and would not be able to do so in the timescale of the project.

It is always helpful to discuss your research proposal with a tutor. Where there are concerns about any of the issues just considered, it will be possible to discuss these to work out how the proposed research may be amended. For example, in relation to feasibility something more modest in scope may be discussed. Your task will then be to amend initial ideas and convince your tutor that the proposed research is achievable within the time and other resources available.

Ensuring that your research project isn't based on preconceived ideas

Your research project offers a valuable way to learn the skills involved in this activity. These skills are transferable to many other situations including the world of work. It is about process as well as outcome. Concerns about feasibility (related to overenthusiasm) lie at one end of a continuum, at other end of which lies a very occasional concern about sincerity. Do not be like the student who came to Phil to talk over a research proposal and said, 'Of course, I know what the answer will be'. When asked to explain the purpose of doing the research if he already knew the answer, he became rather defensive and eventually looked for another supervisor and, probably, another topic.

Approval of your research proposal implies that it is satisfactory. While this is no guarantee of subsequent success, it will reassure you to know that you have started your research journey with an appropriate destination and journey plan. It will be for you to ensure that you do not get lost!

How may your research project be structured?

Perhaps the first comment to make is that there are potentially different ways to structure your research proposal. Different research traditions (see Chapter 5) may lead to different



Box 2.13 Focus on student research

Devising research proposal titles

Imran (see Box 2.8) reworded his research question into the following title for his research proposal:

'Reasons for mismatch between corporate strategy and the external environment.'

Tom (see Box 2.9) devised this title for his research proposal:

'The effectiveness of Internet and intranet channels for employee communication.'

Justine (see Box 2.11) used her research question to develop this title for her proposal:

'The effect of healthy eating publicity on snack foods purchasing decisions.'

ways of structuring your proposal and, later on, your project report (see Chapter 14). We describe what may be thought of as the standard approach to structuring your research proposal. You will need to make yourself aware if there is any variation to this in your institution's or faculty's requirements. Whichever structure you are required to adopt, this will be driven by and focused on your research question and research objectives, and you will need to ensure that you produce a coherent proposal.

Title

The title should simply and concisely summarise the research question. It should avoid unnecessary phrases such as 'A study to explore . . .' Instead it should reflect the concepts or variables in your research (see Box 2.13). If your research question changes, this will naturally lead to a change to your title.

Background

This section has a number of related functions. It needs to introduce the reader to the research issue or problem. This addresses the question, 'what am I going to do?' You also need to provide a rationale for your proposed research and to justify this. This may be composed of two elements, one relating to you and the other relating to the value of the work. Your reader will be looking for some evidence that this is a topic in which you have sufficient interest to sustain the effort that will be required from you over the period of the research project. This may relate to the need to tackle a problem, to your intellectual curiosity, or to your intended career direction. It relates to the question, 'why am I going to do this?' The rationale will also need to address the question, 'why is it worth doing?' This will relate to one of the following types of justification: the application of a theory to a particular context (such as within an organisation); the development of a theory within a research setting; testing a theory within a given context. Your research may propose other such justifications depending on its nature.

This leads to another function of this section: to demonstrate 'how my research relates to what has been done before in this subject area'. In achieving this you will show your knowledge of relevant literature and clarify where your proposal fits into the debate in this literature (see Section 3.2). You will also be able to begin to show 'which theory or theories will inform what I am doing and how I will use it or them'. The intention will be not to write a detailed review of the literature but rather to provide an overview of key literature sources from which you will draw and the theory or theories within them. This

will not be the same as the critical literature review (Section 3.2) that you will present in your final project report but the start of the process that leads to it.

Research questions and objectives

The Background section should lead logically into a statement of your research question(s) and research objectives. These should leave the reader in no doubt about what your research seeks to achieve. Be careful here to ensure that your objectives are precisely written and will lead to observable outcomes (see Box 2.9).

Method

The Background and Method will be the longest sections of your proposal. The Method is designed to address the general question, 'how shall I conduct my research?' The Method may be divided into subsections that deal with research design, participants, techniques and procedures, and ethical considerations. This final element may need to be dealt with in a discrete section of your research proposal.

Research design is discussed in Chapter 5. It involves you making a number of decisions about, 'what is my research design?' You will need to make a methodological choice between a quantitative, qualitative or multiple methods design. You will also need to select one or more research strategies (e.g. an experiment, a case study, a survey or a Grounded Theory strategy etc.) and determine an appropriate time frame for your project depending on the nature of your research. You will need to describe each of these and justify your choice by the way these elements fit together to form a coherent whole.

How you design your research will affect the type of data you require, where you intend to locate them and from whom you will collect them. Your data may be collected from human participants, or they may be secondary data (see Chapter 8) such as from archival research (see Section 5.5) or a combination of these. You will therefore need to address the question, 'what type of data do I need?' If you are using secondary data you will need to explain what these are, where they are located, any issues related to access and justify this choice. If you intend to collect data from human participants, you will need to answer, 'who and where are my intended participants?' You may be intending to conduct research in a single organisation or across a number of organisations. You will need to explain and justify the nature of the organisation or organisations and possibly the sector or sectors within which it operates (or they operate). Your intended participants may be located within a specific part of an organisation or be drawn from across it. You will need to explain and justify this.

You will also need to explain the nature of your research population and why you chose it. For example, they may either be entrepreneurs, managerial employees, non-managerial employees, a particular occupational group, trade union officials, or some combination of these. Where you need to select a sample from within a research population you will need to address the question, 'how shall I select them?' Chapter 7 discusses types of probability and non-probability sampling and you will need to describe and justify your sampling technique and sample size.

You will also need to describe the data collection and analysis techniques you intend to use by answering the questions, 'how will I collect my data?' and 'how will I analyse it and use this to develop theoretical explanations?' Data collection techniques include examination of secondary data, questionnaires, interviews and observation (see Chapters 8–11). You will not need to explain the precise details of the technique you intend to use, such as including a copy of your questionnaire, interview questions or the content of an

observation schedule but you will need to describe how you will use them. For example, if you are using interviews what type will you use, how many will you conduct, with what type of participant, their intended duration, how you will record the data (e.g. note taking and/or audio-recording). You will also need to describe, albeit briefly, how you intend to analyse each type of data that you collect.

It will also be important to discuss ethical considerations so that you anticipate these and demonstrate to your tutor and ethics committee that your research design and proposal has been formulated to minimise ethical concerns and avoid unethical practice. This will be essential where you are dealing with human participants, and sometimes even with secondary data collected from human participants. There may be a reduced need for some of you undertaking certain types of research (e.g. where this is based on macro-level, completely anonymised data) but in nearly all cases this requirement is very likely to mean that business and management researchers need to be sensitive to ethical concerns.

Timescale

This will help you and your reader to decide on the viability of your research proposal. It will be helpful if you divide your research plan into stages. This will give you a clear idea as to what is possible in the given timescale. Experience has shown that however well the researcher's time is organised the whole process seems to take longer than anticipated (Box 2.14).

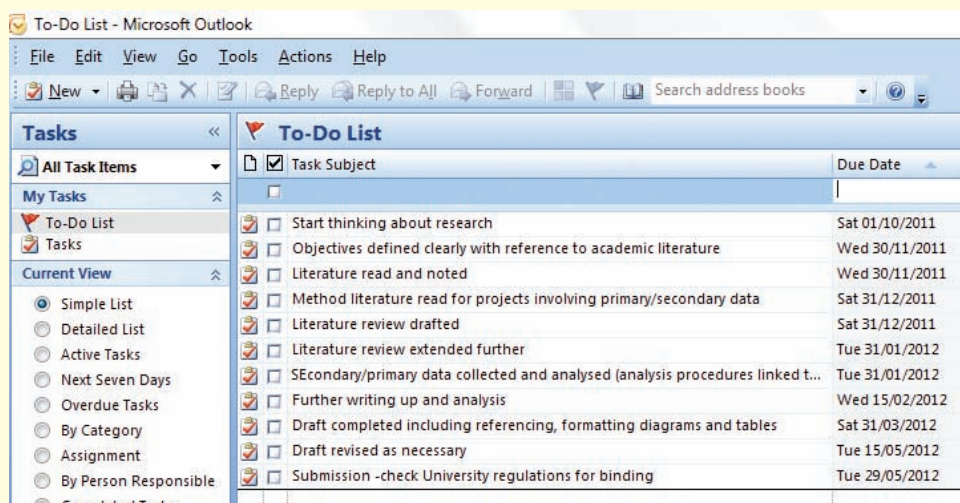


Box 2.14 Focus on student research

Louisa's research timescale

As part of the final year of her undergraduate business studies degree, Louisa had to undertake an

8000–10,000 word research project. In order to assist her with her time management, she discussed the following 'To-Do List', developed using Microsoft Outlook's project planning tool 'Tasks', with her tutor.



As part of this section of their proposal, many researchers find it useful to produce a schedule for their research using a Gantt chart. Developed by Henry Gantt in 1917, this provides a simple visual representation of the tasks or activities that make up your research project, each being plotted against a timeline. The time we estimate each task will take is represented by the length of an associated horizontal bar, whilst the task's start and finish times are represented by its position on the timeline. Box 2.15 includes a Gantt chart for a student's research project. As we can see from the



Box 2.15 Focus on student research

A student research proposal

Jian was a student from China. Jian was interested in the applicability of theory relating to organisational citizenship behaviours to Chinese workers. An abbreviated version of Jian's research proposal follows. Whilst this is not perfect, it provides an idea of what may be expected.

Title

The applicability of organisational citizenship behaviour theory to a Chinese organisation.

Background

The early definition of organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) viewed this as discretionary behaviour on the part of employees that was not recognised through the reward system (Organ 1988; Organ et al. 2006). This was contested and led to OCB being defined as 'performance that supports the social and psychological environment' within which work occurs (Organ 1997: 95). It has been adopted by researchers such as Bolino et al. (2002) to indicate situations where employees work beyond contractual requirements to support one another, to subordinate individual interests to organisational ones and to demonstrate organisational commitment. In this way organisational citizenship behaviours may contribute to organisational performance and potentially offer a source of competitive advantage.

Previous studies have demonstrated that theories relating to organisational justice and the psychological contract are positively correlated to OCB and may be amongst the antecedents of OCB (Farh et al. 1997; Hui et al. 2004). OCB is both complex and contested and studies may reflect the cultural context within

which they are conducted (Choi 2009). I have therefore become interested to find out whether theories that I have learnt about that are based on research conducted within a particular cultural context may be applied to other national contexts, or whether a different theoretical approach may be required to explain work relationships and potential causes of competitive advantage.

The applicability of these concepts to other cultural settings therefore requires further research. There are cultural and institutional differences that question the cross-cultural and cross-national applicability of these concepts. These include psychological, social and national differences that affect the nature of employment relationships between countries (Hui et al. 2004). This study therefore uses initial research by Farh et al. (1997) to examine how applicable these concepts may be in the context of a Chinese organisation.

Research question and research objectives

The research question is:

To what extent are organisational citizenship behaviour theory, organisational justice theory and psychological contract theory applicable to Chinese organisations and why?

The research objectives are:

- 1 To identify suitable measurement scales for each theory, to use in the case study Chinese organisation.
- 2 To examine the relationship in the case study organisation between findings from the organisational justice scale and findings from the organisational citizenship behaviour scale.
- 3 To examine the relationship in the case study organisation between findings from the psychological contract scale and findings from the organisational citizenship behaviour scale.
- 4 To examine the relationship between findings in the case study organisation from the organisational



citizenship behaviour scale and findings in other national contexts from organisational citizenship behaviour research.

- 5 To draw conclusions from the relationships observed in objectives 2, 3 and 4, to evaluate the applicability of these concepts in a Chinese organisation.

Method

Research design

This research is designed to test the applicability of these theories in a case study, Chinese organisation. The research will use a survey strategy incorporating existing scales from published, peer-reviewed, high-quality academic journals. The research will be cross-sectional in nature.

Participants

The intended participants in this study work for [company name] in China. Its management have formally agreed to grant me access to a representative sample of employees drawn from the different grades and occupations and between males and females employed within the organisation [email attached]. I am currently in correspondence with the manager of the human resource department to finalise a stratified random sample to represent the characteristics of the organisation's workforce. It is envisaged that the sample size will be 200 employees.

Techniques

The scales for organisational citizenship behaviour, organisational justice and the psychological contract will be incorporated into a questionnaire that will also collect data about respondents' demographic characteristics. This questionnaire will be administered in Chinese. It will be checked for accuracy of translation and pilot tested by some of my fellow students. Amendments will be made where necessary. It will then be administered in paper form. My data will be analysed quantitatively using IBM SPSS statistics. A range of statistical techniques will be used to analyse these data and the results from these will be used to identify relationships between the concepts identified in the research objectives and to allow comparison with previously published research.

Ethical considerations and procedures

I will compose a letter to be sent to members of the sample that informs them about who I am and the

purpose of my research project, and to assure them that their responses to each of the questionnaire items will only be seen and used by me. Respondents will not be asked for their name on the questionnaire. The questionnaire will only ask for limited personal data about each participant [for example, whether they are male or female as previous research has found this to be a significant factor in the applicability of organisational justice and organisational citizenship behaviours in a Chinese context (Farh et al. 1997)].

Completed questionnaires will be posted into a sealed container that will be returned to me to ensure respondent confidentiality and the anonymity of the data that they provide. These questionnaires will be given an anonymous code and the data they contain entered into a spreadsheet by me. Once data input has been checked carefully to ensure accuracy they will be shredded by me.

Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity should mean that no harm should result from participating in this survey. Part of my covering letter will state that participation is entirely voluntary and if an intended participant does not wish to take part, they are not under any obligation to do so. Another matching employee will be sent a copy of my letter and asked if they would like to receive a copy of my questionnaire. If he or she is willing to complete the questionnaire, he or she will be informed to post it personally into the sealed container.

Timescale (please see Gantt chart)

KEY DATES:

- 1 Nov Submit proposal to tutor
- 20 Jan Begin data collection
- 1 March Complete data collection
- 20 April Complete draft and hand to tutor
- 30 May Submission

Resources

As outlined above, data access has been negotiated in a case study organisation.

I will be responsible for producing and copying the questionnaire. I will pay for the cost of posting these to China. I also have access to IBM SPSS statistics and am competent in the analytical techniques required to analyse the data and interpret this analysis. The company has kindly agreed to pay the costs of returning the completed questionnaires to me. Once I have received



first bar on this chart, the student has decided to schedule in two weeks of holiday. The first of these occurs over the Christmas and New Year period, and the second occurs while her tutor is reading a draft copy of the completed project in April. We can also see from the second and fourth bar that, like many of our students, she intends to begin to draft her literature review while she is still reading new articles and books. However, she has also recognised that some activities must be undertaken sequentially. For example, bars 9 and 10 highlight that before she can administer her questionnaire (bar 10) she must complete all the revisions highlighted as necessary by the pilot testing (bar 9). Finally this student has noted that her project assessment criteria include a reflective essay and has decided to keep a reflective diary throughout the research project (bar 20).

Resources

This is another facet of feasibility (Box 2.2 and also our earlier discussion in this section). Including this discussion in your research proposal will allow you and your tutor to assess whether what you are proposing can be resourced. Resource considerations may be categorised as finance, data access and equipment.

Conducting research costs money. This may be for travel, subsistence, help with data analysis, or postage for questionnaires. Think through the expenses involved and ensure that you can meet them.

Assessors of your proposal will need to be convinced that you have access to the data you need to conduct your research (Sections 6.2 and 6.3). This may be unproblematic if you are carrying out research in your own organisation. Many academic committees wish to see written approval from host organisations in which researchers are planning to conduct research. You will also need to convince your reader of the likely response rate to any questionnaire that you send.

It is surprising how many research proposals have ambitious plans for large-scale data collection with no thought given to how the data will be analysed. It is important that you convince the reader of your proposal that you have access to the necessary computer software to analyse your data. Moreover, it will be necessary for you to demonstrate that you have either the necessary skills to perform the analysis or can learn the skills in an appropriate time, or you have access to help.

References

It is not necessary to try to impress your proposal reader with an enormous list of references. A few key literature sources to which you have referred in the background section and which relate to the previous work and theory that directly informs your own proposal should be all that is necessary.

An example of a student research proposal is shown in Box 2.15.

2.6 Summary

- The process of formulating and clarifying your research topic is a key part of your research project.
- Attributes of a good research topic do not vary a great deal between universities. The most important of these is that your research topic will meet the requirements of the examining body.
- Generating and refining research ideas makes use of a variety of techniques. It is important that you use a variety of techniques, including those involving rational thinking and those involving creative thinking.

- Further refinement of research ideas may be achieved through using the Delphi technique, conducting a preliminary inquiry and integrating ideas by working these up and narrowing them down.
- A clearly defined research question expresses what your research is about and will become the focal point of your research project.
- Well-formulated research objectives operationalise how you intend to conduct your research by providing a set of coherent and connected steps to answer your research question.
- It will be important to use academic theory to inform your research topic irrespective of the approach you will use to conduct your research project.
- A research proposal is a structured plan of your proposed research project.
- A well-thought-out and well-written research proposal has the potential to provide you with a clear specification of the what, why, how, when and where of your research project.

Self-check questions

Help with these questions is available at the end of the chapter.

- 2.1** For the workplace project for her professional course, Karen had decided to undertake a study of the effectiveness of the joint consultative committee in her NHS Trust. Her title was 'An evaluation of the effectiveness of the Joint Consultative Committee in Anyshire's Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust'. Draft some objectives which Karen may adopt to complement her title.
- 2.2** You have decided to search the literature to 'try to come up with some research ideas in the area of Operations Management'. How will you go about this?
- 2.3** A colleague of yours wishes to generate a research idea in the area of accounting. He has examined his own strengths and interests on the basis of his assignments and has read some review articles, but has failed to find an idea about which he is excited. He comes and asks you for advice. Suggest two techniques that your colleague could use, and justify your choice.
- 2.4** You are interested in doing some research on the interface between business organisations and schools. Write three research questions that may be appropriate.
- 2.5** How may the formulation of an initial substantive theory help in the development of a research proposal?
- 2.6** How would you demonstrate the influence of relevant theory in your research proposal?

Review and discussion questions

- 2.7** Together with your colleagues, decide on the extent to which a set of research ideas constitute a 'good research topic' according to the checklist in Box 2.2. The set of topics you choose may be past ones obtained from your tutor that relate to your course. Alternatively, they may be those which have been written by you and your colleagues as preparation for your project(s).
- 2.8** Look through several of the academic journals which relate to your subject area. Choose an article which is based upon primary research. Assuming that the research question and objectives are not made explicit, infer from the content of the article what the research question and objectives may have been.
- 2.9** Watch the news on television. Most bulletins will contain stories on research which has been carried out to report the current state of affairs in a particular field. Spend some time investigating news sites on the Internet (e.g. <http://www.news.google.com>) in order

to learn more about the research which relates to the news story. Study the story carefully and decide what further questions the report raises. Use this as the basis to draft an outline proposal to seek answers to one (or more) of these questions.



Progressing your research project

From research ideas to a research proposal

- If you have not been given a research idea, consider the techniques available for generating and refining research ideas. Choose a selection of those with which you feel most comfortable, making sure to include both rational and creative thinking techniques. Use these to try to generate a research idea or ideas. Once you have got some research ideas, or if you have been unable to find an idea, talk to your project tutor.
- Evaluate your research ideas against the checklist of attributes of a good research project (Box 2.2).
- Refine your research ideas using a selection of the techniques available for generating and refining research ideas. Re-evaluate your research ideas against the checklist of attributes of a good research project (Box 2.2). Remember that it is better to revise (and in some situations to discard) ideas that do not appear to be feasible at this stage. Integrate your ideas using the process of working up and narrowing down to form one research idea.
- Use your research idea to write a research question. Where possible this should be a 'how?' or a 'why?' rather than a 'what?' question.
- Use this research question to write a set of connected research objectives.
- Write your research proposal making sure it includes a clear title and sections on:
 - the background to your research;
 - your research questions and research objectives;
 - the method you intend to use including research design, participants (data), techniques, and ethical considerations and procedures;
 - the timescale for your research;
 - the resources you require;
 - references to any literature to which you have referred.
- Use the questions in Box 1.4 to guide your reflective diary entry.

References

- BBC (2011) *Shopping 'may improve health'*. Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-12990071 [Accessed 7 April 2011].
- Bradshaw, D. (2011) 'Rotterdam dean eyes China', *Financial Times*, 11 March. Available at www.ft.com/ [Accessed 17 March 2011].
- Buzan, T. (2011) *Buzan's Study Skills: Mind Maps, Memory Techniques, Speed Reading and More*. London: BBC.
- Canals, J. (2010) 'Crisis offers a chance to reflect on strategy', *Financial Times*, 17 October. Available at www.ft.com/ [Accessed 17 March 2011].
- Carroll, L. (1989) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Hutchinson.
- Chang, Y.H., Chen, R.C.Y., Wahlqvist, M.L. and Lee, M.S. (2011) 'Frequent shopping by men and women increases survival in the older Taiwanese population', *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health Online*, 6 April. Available at <http://jech.bmj.com/> [Accessed 7 April 2011].
- CIPD (2010) *Research Insight: Harnessing the Power of Employee Communication*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

- Clough, P. and Nutbrown, C. (2002) *A Student's Guide to Methodology*. London: Sage.
- Devinney, T. (2011) 'Research generates better business scholarship', *Financial Times*, 31 January. Available at www.ft.com/ [Accessed 17 March 2011].
- Elsbach, K.D., Cable, D.M. and Sherman, J.W. (2010) 'How passive "face time" affects perceptions of employees: Evidence of spontaneous trait inference', *Human Relations*, Vol. 63, No. 6, pp. 735–60.
- Festinger, L. (1957) *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ghauri, P. and Grønhaug, K. (2010) *Research Methods in Business Studies* (4th edn). Harlow: Financial Times Prentice Hall.
- Gill, J. and Johnson, P. (2010) *Research Methods for Managers* (4th edn). London: Sage.
- Jankowicz, A.D. (2005) *Business Research Projects* (4th edn). London: Thomson Learning.
- Kelly, G.A. (1955) *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. New York: Norton.
- Kilduff, M. (2006) 'Editors comments: Publishing theory', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 252–5.
- Lewin, K. (1945) 'The Research Center for Group Dynamics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology', *Sociometry*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 126–36.
- Mackenzie, K.D. (2000a) 'Knobby analyses of knobless survey items, part I: The approach', *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 131–54.
- Mackenzie, K.D. (2000b) 'Knobby analyses of knobless survey items, part II: An application', *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 238–61.
- McDonald, S. (2005) 'Studying actions in context: A qualitative shadowing method for organisational research', *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 455–73.
- McNiff, J. with Whitehead, J. (2000) *Action Research in Organizations*. London: Routledge.
- Morrison, E. (2010) 'OB in AMJ: What is hot and what is not?', *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 5, pp. 932–36.
- Raimond, P. (1993) *Management Projects*. London: Chapman & Hall.
- Robson, C. (2011) *Real World Research: A Resource for Users of Social Research Methods in Applied Settings* (3rd edn). Chichester: John Wiley.
- Saunders, M.N.K. and Lewis, P. (1997) 'Great ideas and blind alleys? A review of the literature on starting research', *Management Learning*, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 283–99.
- Sharp, J., Peters, J. and Howard, K. (2002) *The Management of a Student Research Project* (3rd edn). Aldershot: Gower.
- Skapinker, M. (2008) 'Why business ignores business schools', *Financial Times*, 7 January. Available at www.ft.com/ [Accessed 17 March 2011].
- Skapinker, M. (2011) 'Why business still ignores business schools', *Financial Times*, 24 January. Available at www.ft.com/ [Accessed 17 March 2011].
- Smith, N.C. and Dainty, P. (1991) *The Management Research Handbook*. London: Routledge.
- Sutton, R. and Staw, B. (1995) 'What theory is not', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 371–84.
- Van de Ven, A.H. (1989) 'Nothing is quite so practical as a good theory', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 486–9.
- Vermeulen, F. (2011) 'Popular fads replace relevant teaching', *Financial Times*, 24 January. Available at www.ft.com/ [Accessed 17 March 2011].
- Whetten, D. (1989) 'What constitutes a theoretical contribution?', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 490–95.
- Yip, G. (2011) 'Business research needs to be more relevant for managers', *Financial Times*, 14 February. Available at www.ft.com/ [Accessed 17 March 2011].

Further reading

- Robson, C. (2011) *Real World Research: A Resource for Users of Social Research Methods in Applied Settings* (3rd edn). Chichester: John Wiley. Chapter 3 covers similar ground to this chapter, providing helpful advice on generating research ideas, developing research questions and the role of theory in your research.
- Gill, J. and Johnson, P. (2010) *Research Methods for Managers* (4th edn). London: Sage. The initial part of Chapter 2 contains a helpful discussion on the characteristics of a research topic and ways of generating research topics, while the initial part of Chapter 3 contains a useful discussion of the role of theory in research.
- Sutton, R. and Staw, B. (1995) 'What theory is not', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 371–84. This is a helpful article to read to gain some insights into the role of theory if you find this aspect daunting. In telling us what theory is not, they provide a very helpful discussion about what it is by referring to their own experiences. They also go further than this and evaluate the role of theory.
- Van Maanen, J. Sorensen, J.B. and Mitchell, T.R. (2007) 'The interplay between theory and method', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 1145–54. We haven't referenced this article in this particular chapter but it provides an extension to some of the material in Section 2.4 and a link to some of our discussion later on, notably to Chapters 4 and 5, and to some material in later, methods, chapters. Van Maanen et al. provide a thoughtful discussion of the relationship between theory and methods and the primacy of theory versus the primacy of data.

Case 2 Self-service technology: does co-production harm value co-creation?

George was in his final year of an MSc Marketing degree. He had booked a meeting with his project tutor in the expectation that having a deadline would concentrate his efforts on identifying a suitable research project. He now had 10 days to prepare for the meeting and was still searching for inspiration.

George wanted to research something that was relevant to him so he listed out the activities he engaged in as a customer or consumer. He was struck by the fact that most of his activities involved services rather than product marketing: shopping, banking, dining, broadband and travelling. George remembered that one of the differences between product and services marketing that had been stressed by his lecturers was the important role of people, especially the service employees, and the face-to-face experiences they provided. Thinking more deeply about the way in which he experienced most of the services he had listed, George realised that there was a lack of people, particularly service employees, involved in his experiences. This mismatch between what he had learned so far and his own experiences took him by surprise, so he decided to see what his friends thought.



'Arrive me' touch screen at a Doctor's surgery
Source: © Mark Saunders 2011

Over the next few days George spent a lot of time asking other people about their experiences of services, writing them down in his notebook. George also added notes about his own experiences now that he was looking at them afresh. He concluded that there was indeed a gap between what he had been taught in his lectures, his reading on the subject and the way in which he and his friends experienced services today. George decided that this was probably interesting enough to him to form the basis of his research project.

George remembered that he needed to read around the topic to find out what had already been written, and to ensure that much of this reading was in academic journals because that is where current thinking is more likely to be found. George enlisted the help of a librarian as he did not feel confident to use the search engines within the business and management databases. She encouraged him to think of words that might bring up relevant articles. After several false starts George stumbled on 'self-service', 'self-service technologies', the abbreviation 'SST' and 'Technology-based self-service' often abbreviated to 'TBSS'. These key words resulted in a number of interesting articles that seemed relevant.

Many of the articles seemed to deal with the technology systems and how easy or difficult they were to follow. Others dealt with the security aspects or customer satisfaction (Meuter et al. 2000) while another article talked about the need to incorporate a sense of 'fun' to encourage customers to use the SST (Curran and Meuter 2007). George realised that he needed to do some serious thinking to come up with a practical project.

Reviewing the notes he had made when talking to his friends and considering his own SST experiences, George realised that SSTs were everywhere. Some are 'in situ': self-scanning in shops or ticket machines at the train station and self-check-ins at airports. Then there were all the services that could be accessed via the Internet including banking and travelling. A friend had even mentioned an 'arrive me' touchscreen at the doctor's surgery. His father had done his tax return online and his grandfather, who had just had his 70th birthday, had renewed his driving licence online – so SST experiences are not confined to the young!

The day before the meeting with his project tutor, George attended a seminar for the Contemporary Issues in Marketing module entitled: 'Service-dominant logic'. He read the two articles prescribed for the seminar, both by Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008), and felt that much of what he had heard and read was relevant to self-service technologies. Service-dominant logic talks about 'co-creating value' and it seemed to George that customers using SST were co-creating the services they received. He also noted that Vargo and Lusch suggest that the knowledge, skills and effort (operant resources) are the basis for competitive advantage and what that might mean for consumer experiences if SSTs substitute customer resources for employee resources (Hilton 2008).

George made a list for the meeting with his project tutor:

- Self-service technologies: everywhere and for everyone.
- Service-dominant logic framework.
- Co-creating value.
- Operant resources being the basis for competitive advantage.
- Does SST facilitate co-creation?
- Are companies relying too much on the operant resources of their customers to gain a competitive advantage when using SST?

Although the project tutor was very supportive of George's initial ideas, saying that it was very topical and had lots of potential, it was clear that he still had a lot of work to do before he could put his proposal together. George still needed to determine a research question, a clear aim for his research and research objectives. George's project tutor also drew his attention to the descriptive nature of the two questions he had identified and reaffirmed the need for research questions to have an explanatory dimension in order to generate new insights. During the

meeting they discussed service-dominant logic and the emphasis on co-creation of value. George was asked to consider whether customers were co-creating value or co-producing the service and what the difference might be. That had not occurred to George. He had assumed the two words meant the same thing and realised he had to read more thoroughly to become familiar with the terminology being used. George was also not able to answer any of the project tutor's questions about the research design at the meeting. He did not know what data he needed to collect, from whom, or how he would go about it. George began to realise that defining terms and words is critical when framing the research question and planning the research project.

His project tutor reminded him that, realistically, he would only have two months to collect his data because he had to also allow time for data analysis, writing his draft project report, submitting the draft for project tutor feedback and preparing the final submission. His research design had to be achievable within the time constraints. He needed to think about how easy it would be to get access to the people from whom he needed to collect data for his research. They had discussed the fact that SST changed the role of the service employee as well as the customer and that might be an interesting angle to pursue. However, George did not think he could get access to an organisation in the time allowed. He felt that might be more of an HRM (Human Resource Management) or Organisational Studies project and not draw as heavily upon marketing literature as he needed to do for his degree. George also had to consider the costs involved in collecting any data.

Then George came across a weblink to an article by Hilton (2011) about self-service technology, co-production and co-creation that helped him to narrow down his ideas: www.mycustomer.com/topic/customer-experience/does-self-service-technology-mean-co-production-harming-co-creation/119301. Reading this article, George became aware of the different ways in which he evaluated his own SST experiences. He found great value in online banking because it was 'open' 24/7 and he had more control over his banking arrangements than he would have if he had to deal with branch employees. However, he did not get a lot of value from the self-scanning in the supermarket because he invariably needed an employee to help him with some aspect of it, which was very frustrating. George wanted to know how other consumers evaluated their experiences, to see whether the value they received was commensurate with the effort they were contributing to the production of the services and, to explore what characteristics of people or the SST led different people to different valuations. He also found an article by Stephen Brown (2007) calling for empirical testing to build knowledge of how consumers participate in, or make sense of any role they play in 'co-creating value'. These articles led George to begin to narrow his research aim to understanding more about the influence that increasing the customer co-production role might have on the evaluation of the value that is co-created. Bearing in mind the need to adopt an explanatory perspective, George's title became: 'Self-service technology: To what extent does co-production harm value co-creation and why?' He summarised his initial ideas as a simple relevance tree (Figure 2.2).

Next George thought about the people he could access most easily and decided that they would be his peer group of university students. George realised that he did not know enough about what might constitute co-production, co-creation or value to develop a survey or measurement instrument: what behaviours, outcomes or attitudes would he measure? This exploratory study would have to focus on understanding the phenomena that constitute co-production and value. He felt qualitative methods would be more appropriate than quantitative methods. George then found an article by Baron et al. (2010) which calls for the use of more interpretive research approaches that encourage consumers to reflect upon their experiences when researching the application of service-dominant logic to marketing practice. This confirmed George's decision to adopt qualitative methods. George realised that he had now narrowed down the area for his literature review to something manageable: co-production, co-creation and value. He had also managed to align his project to an emerging area of theory

Mind map to explore research question

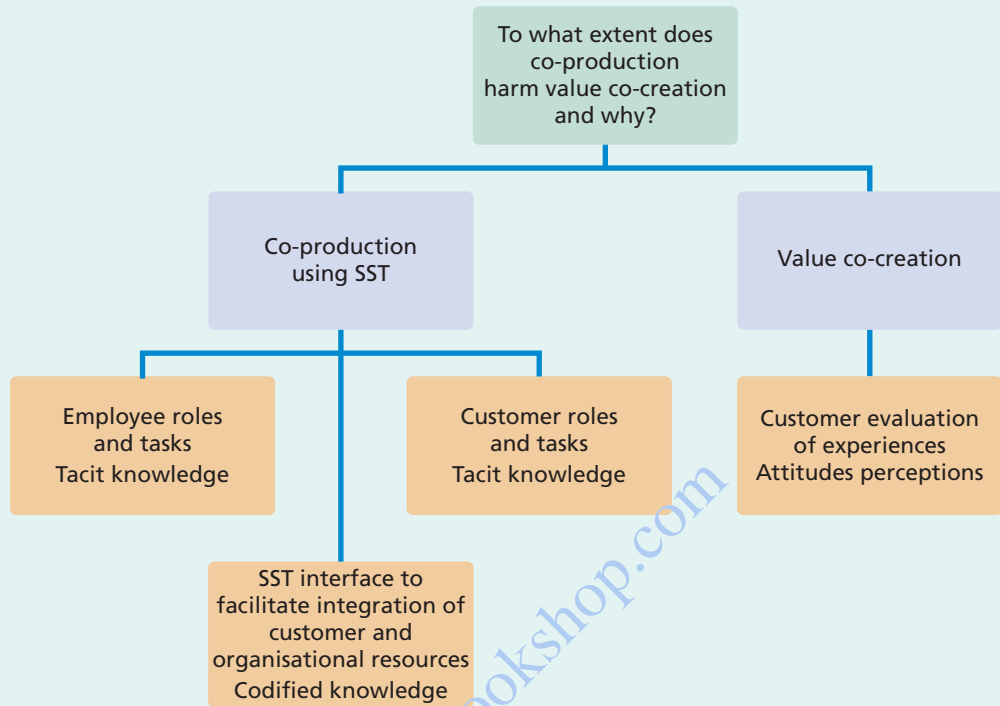


Figure 2.2 Relevance tree of self-service technology and value co-creation

development (service-dominant logic) and a growing area of marketing practice. This he felt was a topical project that had the potential to be useful to both academics and practitioners.

References

Baron, S., Patterson, A., Warnaby, G. and Harris, K. (2010) 'Service-dominant logic: Marketing research implications and opportunities', *Journal of Customer Behaviour*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 253–64.

Brown, S. (2007) 'Are we nearly there yet? On the retro-dominant logic of marketing', *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 291–300.

Curran, J.M. and Meuter, M.L. (2007) 'Encouraging existing customers to switch to self-service technologies: Put a little fun in their lives', *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 283–98.

Hilton, T. (2008) 'Leveraging operant resources of consumers: Improving consumer experiences or productivity?', *The Marketing Review*, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 359–66.

Hilton, T. (2011) 'Self-service technology: How co-production could be harming co-creation'. Available at www.mycustomer.com/topic/customer-experience/does-self-service-technology-mean-co-production-harming-co-creation/119301 [Accessed 31 January 2011].

Meuter, M.L., Ostrom, A.L., Roundtree, R.I. and Bitner, M.J. (2000) 'Self-service technologies: Understanding customer satisfaction with technology-based service encounters', *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 64 (July), pp. 50–64.

Vargo, S.L. and Lusch, R.F. (2004) 'Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing', *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 68, No. 1, pp. 1–17.

Vargo, S.L. and Lusch, R.F. (2008) 'Service-dominant logic: Continuing the evolution', *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 36, pp. 1–10.

Questions

- 1 **a** Why is it important that George's research draws upon existing theory?
b At what point in the process should he identify a relevant model, theory or framework to guide his work?
- 2 George has identified the need for qualitative rather than quantitative methods in order to understand the phenomena that constitute co-production, co-creation and value. What ways of collecting data might he consider using and why?
- 3 George plans to collect his data from his fellow university students.
a Is this a good idea?
b What issues should George consider before commencing and why?

Additional case studies relating to material covered in this chapter are available via the book's companion website: www.pearsoned.co.uk/saunders.

They are:

- The use of internal and word of mouth recruitment methods.
- Strategic issues in the brewing industry.
- Catherine Chang and women in management.
- Media climate change reporting and environmental disclosure patterns in the low-cost airline industry in the twenty-first century.



Self-check answers

- 2.1 These may include:
 - To identify the management and trade union objectives for the Joint Consultative Committee and use this to establish suitable effectiveness criteria.
 - To review key literature on the use of joint consultative committees.
 - To carry out primary research in the organisation to measure the effectiveness of the Joint Consultative Committee.
 - To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Joint Consultative Committee.
 - To make recommendations for action to ensure the effective function of the Joint Consultative Committee.
- 2.2 One starting point would be to ask your project tutor for suggestions of possible recent review articles or articles containing recommendations for further work that he or she has read. Another would be to browse recent editions of operations management journals such as the *International Journal of Operations and Production Management* for possible research ideas. These would include both statements of the absence of research and unfounded assertions. Recent reports held in your library or on the Internet may also be of use here. You could also scan one or two recently published operations management textbooks for overviews of research that has been undertaken.
- 2.3 From the description given, it would appear that your colleague has considered only rational thinking techniques. It would therefore seem sensible to suggest two creative

thinking techniques, as these would hopefully generate an idea that would appeal to him. One technique that you could suggest is brainstorming, perhaps emphasising the need to do it with other colleagues. Exploring past projects in the accountancy area would be another possibility. You might also suggest that he keeps a notebook of ideas.

- 2.4** Your answer will probably differ from that below. However, the sorts of things you could be considering include:
- How do business organisations benefit from their liaison with schools?
 - Why do business organisations undertake school liaison activities?
 - To what extent do business organisations receive value for money in their school liaison activities?
- 2.5** Let us go back to the example used in the chapter of the supermarket marketing manager who theorises that the introduction of a loyalty card will mean that regular customers are less likely to shop at competitor supermarkets. This could be the research proposal's starting point, i.e., a hypothesis that the introduction of a loyalty card will mean that regular customers are less likely to shop at competitor supermarkets. This prompts thoughts about the possible use of literature in the proposal and the research project itself. This literature could have at least two strands. First, a practical strand which looks at the research evidence which lends credence to the hypothesis. Second, a more abstract strand that studies human consumer behaviour and looks at the cognitive processes which affect consumer purchasing decisions.
- This ensures that the proposal and resultant research project are both theory driven and also ensures that relevant theory is covered in the literature.
- 2.6** Try including a subsection in the background section that is headed 'How the previous published research has informed my research questions and objectives'. Then show how, say, a gap in the previous research that is there because nobody has pursued a particular approach before has led to you filling that gap.

Get ahead using resources on the companion website at:

www.pearsoned.co.uk/saunders

- Improve your IBM SPSS Statistics and NVivo research analysis with practice tutorials.
- Save time researching on the Internet with the Smarter Online Searching Guide.
- Test your progress using self-assessment questions.
- Follow live links to useful websites.



