Designing Case Studies

Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- Describe the purpose of case studies.
- Plan a systematic approach to case study design.
- Recognize the strengths and limitations of case studies as a research method.
- Compose a case study report that is appropriately structured and presented.

We saw in Chapter 5 that surveys are used where large amounts of data have to be collected, often from a large, diverse and widely distributed population. In contrast, case studies tend to be much more specific in focus. While surveys tend to collect data on a limited range of topics but from many people, case studies can explore many themes and subjects, but from a much more focused range of people, organizations or contexts. The case study method can be used for a wide variety of issues, including the evaluation of training programmes (a common subject), organizational performance, project design and implementation, policy analysis and relationships between different sectors of an organization or between organizations. According to Stake (2000), case studies can prove invaluable in adding to understanding, extending experience and increasing conviction about a subject. Yin (1993) is insistent that the case study approach can be used as both a qualitative and quantitative method. However, just a brief look at case studies shows why they are more often used qualitatively. Yin (1994) defines the case study as

... an empirical inquiry that

- Investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when
- The boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. (Yin, 1994: 13)

Case studies, then, explore subjects and issues where relationships may be ambiguous or uncertain. But, in contrast to methods such as descriptive surveys, case
studies are also trying to attribute causal relationships and are not just describing a situation. The approach is particularly useful when the researcher is trying to uncover a relationship between a phenomenon and the context in which it is occurring. For example, a business might want to evaluate the factors that have made a recent merger a success (to prepare the ground for future mergers). The problem here, as with all case studies, is that the contextual variables (timing, global economic circumstances, cultures of the merging organizations, etc.) are so numerous that a purely experimental approach revealing causal associations would simply be unfeasible.

The case study approach requires the collection of multiple sources of data but, if the researcher is not to be overwhelmed, these need to become focused in some way. Therefore case studies benefit from the prior development of a theoretical position to help direct the data collection and analysis process. Note, then, that the case study method tends to be deductive rather than inductive in character (although, as we shall see, this is not always the case). It is also, contrary to popular opinion, often a demanding and difficult approach, because there are no particular standardized techniques as one would find, say, with experimental design. Yin (1994), one of the authorities on case study research, who we will refer to extensively in this chapter, also stresses the wide range of skills and flexibility required by case study investigators.

### WHEN SHOULD WE USE CASE STUDIES?

The case study method is ideal when a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the researcher has no control. As Table 6.1 shows, 'what', 'who' and 'where' questions are likely to favour a survey approach, or the use of archival records (unobtrusive measures – see Chapter 10), where it is important to show the incidence of a factor. So, a business that needs to identify how many of its workforce are aged 55 or more, will either turn to its human resource records or, if these are so fragmented as not to contain this kind of information, conduct a survey amongst its employees. This would reveal who and where these older workers were located. If, however, the organization wanted to know how an ageing workforce affected its business, a case study would be able to deal with this more explanatory issue and to illuminate key features.

### Activity 6.1

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 6.1</th>
<th>SELECTION CRITERIA FOR DIFFERENT RESEARCH STRATEGIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Form of research question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment</td>
<td>How, why</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Who, what, where, how many, how much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unobtrusive measures</td>
<td>Who, what, where, how many, how much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case study</td>
<td>How, why</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from COSMOS Corporation, in Yin, 1994

You probably decided that the safe houses approach could be used as a case study to explore how the drug intake methods affected addiction. The case study approach is not dissimilar to the use of unobtrusive measures such as documents, archives and the use of historical evidence – in each case no attempt is made to manipulate behaviours. But while unobtrusive measures can only rely on the use of existing documentation (historical or contemporary), case studies tend to focus on collecting up-to-date information. For this reason, data collection may involve the use of not only contemporary documentation, but also direct observation and systematic interviewing.

Nevertheless, as Yin (1994) makes clear, the case study approach has not been universally accepted by researchers as reliable, objective and legitimate. One problem is that it is often difficult (indeed, dangerous) to generalize from a specific case. But, in defence of case studies, Yin points out that most scientific inquiries have to be replicated by multiple examples of the experiment, and case studies too can be based upon multiple cases of the same issue or phenomenon. Gummesson (2000) supports this view, asserting that, even in medicine, doctors' skills are often built up from a knowledge of many individual cases.

Another criticism of case studies is the amount of time they take and the volume of documentation they generate. But Yin argues that this is to confuse case studies with one particular type, the use of ethnographic or participant-observation studies where the amount of data collected can be vast. The one argument that Yin (1994) does concede is that conducting case studies successfully is an uncommon skill.