Doing research in business & management: An essential guide to planning your project

Abstract

About this book It is now fourteen years since we collaborated in the writing of our first research methods book. In 2009 the fifth edition was published (Saunders et al., 2009). The success of that book suggests that research methods is a popular subject with business and management students. This may be so. But we think that it has more to do with the fact research methods is a complex area- one where it is easy to do things, but much less easy to do things right. When we planned the first book we had one overall mission in mind. That was to write a book in a way that came as near as possible to the way in which we taught our students. By this we mean that we wanted to be clear and straightforward, and explain things in a way that lost none of the complexity, or academic rigour of the subject. Over the years this mission has not altered. We feel just as passionate about clear communication as we did back in 1997. However, things in the world of business and management education have changed since 1997, and this book reflects those changes. In 1997 the normal requirement was for undergraduate students in their final year, to undertake a large piece of research which involved them in collecting their own data and was assessed by means of a written project report. This is now often not the case. Although some degree programmes still require students to complete an assessed research project, they may be told that, rather than collect their own data, they should use only data that have already been collected for some other purpose (secondary data), or alternatively, write an extended review of the literature. For a second category of students on undergraduate programmes the extent of their research work is a research methods module which is assessed by a research proposal. There is a third category, those business and management students who opt not to do a research project...
at all. We have written this book to cater for all three categories of student. For those undertaking research to be assessed by a written project report we aim to help in all aspects of the research process; from thinking of a topic through to writing the final submission. We therefore include material, in chapter three, on managing the research process; as well as chapters on using secondary data (chapter 4) and reviewing the literature (chapter 2). There are also two chapters (6 and 7) on collecting and analysing data as an understanding of these is important for all types of research projects as well as preparing a research proposal. If you’re taking a research methods module which is assessed by a research proposal you will find that there is considerable emphasis upon the preparation of a research proposal. Indeed, chapter 8 deals specifically with writing the research proposal. It may sound strange, but we think that business and management students in the third category, those who opt not to do a research project at all, can gain just as much from this book as those in the other two categories. As a student you will spend much of your time studying material which is the result of careful research which has been scrutinised by the research community prior to publication. This scrutiny is a guarantee of good quality: that you should put your faith in what you have read. However, some of what you read may not have been through quite such a rigorous process. Knowing something about the research process enables you to ask the right questions of the material you are studying. It gives you the sense of healthy scepticism that is the hallmark of a university education. How might you use this book We don’t anticipate that you will read this book progressively from chapter 1 through to chapter 8. In fact, you may not read all the chapters, although we certainly hope that you will! The reason we suspect is that you will choose those chapters that meet your own needs. This may be because you are in one of the categories we mentioned earlier, have specific questions about the research process you need to answer, or it may be that your research methods lecturers specify certain chapters. We’ve written the chapters in such a way that they stand alone. To some extent they draw inevitably on material from other chapters directly. Where this is so, we have cross-referenced to the relevant chapter. But the point remains that you can pick up any chapter in isolation and make sense of it. This book is not a self-study text in the truest sense; there are no questions with model answers! However, we have included questions in each chapter which facilitates an element of independent learning. Each chapter begins with a summary of content which we call ‘Why read this chapter?’ This gives you some idea of the chapter content and the approach we have taken to the topic being discussed. Each chapter contains a small number of examples of research called ‘Research in Practice’. These serve to illustrate in a practical manner some of the points being made in the chapter, in much the same way as a lecturer would give practical examples in a research methods lecture. Every chapter ends with a summary of the main points in the chapter and a section called ‘Thinking about…’ Here we make suggestions as to how you may test and reinforce the learning you have achieved during the reading of the chapter. Throughout the book key research terms we use are isolated and placed in ‘Key terms definition’ boxes to make it easy for you to refresh your understanding of these terms as you read through chapter. What’s in the book? Chapter 1 deals with the first issue you will encounter in the research process: choosing the right research topic. We suggest some novel ways in which you may decide upon your topic, offer guidance in deciding what constitutes an effective research topic, and consider some topics which may be problematic. In the latter part of the chapter we deal with the issue of defining suitable research questions and objectives. The chapter ends with a discussion on what is meant by the all important term ‘theory’. In chapter 2 we approach the subject of the literature review. We offer some practical suggestions on the ways you may go about approaching your literature review and actually conducting it, particularly through the use of information technology. The chapter also explains what constitutes an effective critical literature review and offers guidance in how it may be structured. Chapter 3 is concerned with practical issues concerning gaining access to work organizations from which you may collect your own research data. In this chapter we also consider the issues of self-management you may face in conducting your research, particularly the effective use of resources such as time. The management of other aspects of the research process is also discussed, such as your supervisor, university and those from whom you collect your data. We also help you to think about the ways in which you adhere to the code of research ethics that you will be required to observe. In chapter 4 we consider the use of secondary data. We discuss the valuable role which secondary data may play in your research and the reasons you may use secondary data. The ready availability of a wealth of secondary data, particularly as a result of the growth of the Internet is considered. We also warn you about some of the pitfalls inherent in the use of secondary data and how to assess its value to your own research project. The subject of chapter 5 is research strategy. This involves a consideration of the main philosophies you may adopt and the ways in which they affect choice of strategy. We discuss the different types of research strategy, with an emphasis upon the possibility of mixing strategies in one research project. We end the chapter with a discussion about the importance of validity and reliability: ensuring that your research results and conclusions are believable. Chapter 6 gets to the heart of the research process: the collection of data. We explain how to: choose a sample; draft an effective questionnaire and conduct effective interviews in various forms, including electronic means. In chapter 7 we deal with the process of data analysis. We discuss the two types of data: quantitative and qualitative and the ways in which these data may be prepared for analysis and actually analysed. The use of statistics in both the presentation and analysis of data is explained with particular emphasis upon the use of different software packages. We also discuss ways in which qualitative data may be prepared for analysis and analysed. As with the analysis of quantitative data we emphasise the way in which you may develop theory from the analysed data. Chapter 8 is devoted to the writing of the research proposal. We explain how the process of writing clarifies your ideas and we emphasise the importance of treating the research proposal as an item of ‘work in progress’ by constantly revising it. The chapter also includes a discussion on what content the proposal should contain; how it may be structured and the appropriate writing style to be adopted. Finally, we suggest some of the criteria against which the quality of your research proposal may be assessed. We hope you will learn a lot from this book, that’s why it exists! But we also hope that you will enjoy reading it. Doing your research project should be fun! Mark and Phil Reference Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2009). Research Methods for Business Students. (5th edition). Harlow: FT Prentice Hall.