

Use of Case Study Methods in Human Resource Management, Development, and Training Courses: Strategies and Techniques

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This paper will study some of the problems associated with case studies and make recommendations using standard and innovative methodologies effectively. Human resource management (HRM) and resource development cases provide context for analysis and decision-making designs in different industries. In most HRM development and training courses students use cases about actual companies to practice strategic HRM analysis and to gain some experience in the tasks of crafting strategies and implementing HRM training and development programs.

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The case method is an effective avenue for sensitizing students and faculty to the complexities and structures of entrepreneurial business organizations and leadership situations. Business cases are one of the most effective and convenient ways to introduce practice into the classroom, to tap a wide variety of experiences, and involve students actively in analysis and decision-making. Cases are not intended as examples of either weak or exceptionally good management practices. Nor do they provide examples of particular concepts. Faculty that utilize case analysis methods are up-dated as to current techniques, successes and failures of business allowing them to stay current.

The case approach to strategic analysis is, first and foremost, an exercise in learning by doing. Cases help substitute for on-the-job experience by (1) giving you broader exposure to a variety of industries, organizations, and strategic problems; (2) forcing you to assume a managerial role (as opposed to that of just an onlooker); (3) providing a test of how to apply the tools and techniques of human resource management, development, and training; and (4) asking you to come up with pragmatic managerial action plans to deal with the issues at hand.

Cases attempt to reflect the various pressures and considerations that professionals of all varieties confront in the workplace (Stanford University, 1994). Using complex, realistic open-ended problems as a focus, cases are designed to challenge you and help you develop and practice skills that you may need in your future careers. Cases are also an excellent way to see how abstract principles learned in class are applied to real world situations.

Additional reasons to use case studies:

1. Learn Different Perspectives - Group discussion can help you understand how others might view an issue and what the valid points are.
2. Real-life Scenarios - Cases allow students to apply classroom principles to real situations.
3. Solve Ambiguous Problems - Few problems in the real world are as clean cut as those in a textbook. Cases can help you develop skills to analyze the more complex problems you may encounter later.
4. Sort and Analyze Ambiguous Data - Case studies can help you learn strategies for sorting out seemingly unconnected bits of data and organizing them to understand the problem.
5. Communication Skills - Both group discussion and writing an analysis of the issues can improve your writing and speaking skills.
6. Identify Your Own Assumptions - Learning what your core assumptions in life are can help you understand what emotional reactions you may have to certain issues and help consider whether they are valid or not

Cases Replicate Reality

The case method is based on the principle that learning occurs most when people teach themselves through working on their own problems. You will gain a greater understanding and improve judgment skills when you work through an issue instead of just listening passively to a lecture.

Many cases center-around an ill-structured collection of ambiguous (occasionally contradictory) facts, opinions, incidents and documents which you must organize into a coherent whole in order to analyze the problem and provide a viable solution. Like any expert, you will approach cases under the pressure of time, on the basis of

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limited facts and when facing the unknown. You may also be working on a case with other people whose opinions may differ from your own. You never have all the facts you would like and will have to exercise your best judgment which can be improved by discussion and consultation with others. Experiencing this process can be frustrating and confusing, but it is also practical and realistic.

Common Elements

Cases come in many shapes and sizes from a simple *"What would you do in this situation and so what?"* question to an elaborate role-playing scenario in which students must resolve a complex questions based on real-world data and documents. How simple or elaborate a case is depends on what you want your students to be able to do in the course.

Benefits of Case Studies

Many courses use case studies in their curriculum to teach content, involve students with real life data or provide opportunities for students to put themselves in the decision maker's shoes. Some of the primary benefits include:

1. Real World Context - Not only do students see how the course material applies to the world outside the classroom, but they get to see how data is often ambiguous or not clearly defined in many situations.
2. Explore Multiple Perspectives - Cases in which a decision is required can be used to expose students to viewpoints from multiple sources and see why people may want different outcomes. Students can also see how a decision will impact different participants, both positively and negatively.
3. Requires Critical Thinking and Analysis - Cases usually require students to analyze data in order to reach a conclusion. Since many assignments are open-ended, students can practice choosing appropriate analytic techniques as well.
4. Students Synthesize Content - Many cases require students to pull in different analytic techniques and information from different areas of the course in order to provide an effective solution to the problem. In addition, a case assignment can require an initial statement of the facts and techniques used to reach the conclusion.

Recommendations for Using Cases

There are many ways to use cases. Some instructors prefer to generate open class discussion. Others prefer to assign cases to student teams for oral presentations (Stanford University, 1994). Most like to have students write an analysis of the case, often as a final examination. Some other techniques and methods follow. Case studies include a scenario, statement of the issues or problem(s), and a required assignment. There is no one best case study method for all situations. The following are some of the various case study types available for use.

Types of Case Analyses

Class Case Discussion

One approach is for the instructor to lead the discussion with penetrating questions and answers. Many strategic management, entrepreneurship and marketing professors like to begin the analysis with a few key questions and hope to get the students to take over the discussion (Penn State, 2006). Some suggested steps for class case discussion:

1. Read the case over carefully before class. Review financial data, adjusting for inflation.
2. Define your objectives before entering the class. Identify key points. Organize the class into teams and have them role-play or analyze certain parts of the case and present them to the class.
3. Begin with basic information. Have a student identify the facts of the case. Request students to describe the firm.
4. Outline on the chalkboard or whiteboard key material or points. Under each key point, identify alternatives with pros and cons for each. Force the class to make a decision. At the end of each class, sum up the discussion and to point out the key learning objectives of the case discussion.
5. Do not to carry a case over to the next class meeting. Students will forget and it will eliminate valuable time for your next class gathering.
6. Explain what the outcome was to the students at the end of the case.

Student Oral Presentations

Another approach commonly used with case studies is student oral presentations. Place the students into teams, each composed of three to five people. Each team is assigned a case to present during the semester. This approach may be used during the second half of the semester if the instructor chooses to lead open discussion during the first half. It may also be used during the first half instead of open class case discussion if a simulation or project is planned for the second half of the course.

Written Case Analysis

There are at least three approaches to use with written case analyses. One is the comprehensive student report that covers all the issues in the case. A second approach is the short report prepared in response to a specific question. A third approach is the strategic audit that is only a three- to five- page outline for expediency.

Grading of Written Comprehensive Case Reports

The grading of a written and oral comprehensive report is often aided by the use of a case evaluation forms. Items to be addressed in the form or legibility, length of report, organization of report, spelling and use of grammar, effectiveness of writing style, use of references and exhibits, environmental scan assessment, achievement of goals and objectives, strategy formulation, implementation and audit assessment and recommendations. Written assignments can easily be developed using discussion questions and teaching notes for each case.

Role Play

A common type of case assignment in which students are assigned roles to play in a scenario. Some scenarios can include developing a business plan or staging a mock trial; other role play scenarios can involve controversial issues. Role-playing is one way students can express different views in a relatively safe classroom climate.

Real-Word Scenario

Cases are generally based on real world situations, although some facts may be changed to simplify the scenario.

Supporting Data and Documents

Effective cases assignments typically provide real world artifacts for students to analyze. These can be simple data tables, links to real URLs, quoted statements or testimony, supporting documents, images, video, audio, or any appropriate material.

Open-Ended Problem

Most case assignments require students to answer an open-ended question or develop a solution to an open-ended problem with multiple potential solutions. Requirements can range from a one-paragraph answer to a fully developed group action plan, proposal or decision. Case assignments can be done in teams or independently. Typically, cases are done in teams so that the students can brainstorm solutions and share the work load. Finally, it is possible to incorporate real world data into other assignments which are not necessarily open-ended and still realize the benefits of exposing students to realistic situations.

Web Search

Another type of assignment in which students read and analyze authentic Web sites relating a particular issue or piece of course content and develop a synthesized answer at the end.

In-Tray Diagnosis and Diagnosis Problem

This is also known as a complex case, the objective of this case type is for students to diagnose the underlying problem based on case data. These issues are not easy to distinguish because they are submerged in a mass of data that includes irrelevant material and external issues used as distractions (external and underlying issues are normally interdependent). This can also be an initial step for cases types in which a final decision is required. A variant of this type of diagnosis case is the in-tray diagnosis in which students are presented a number of documents that might be found in their in-trays. Some background information is provided, but learners are given a limited amount of time to determine and record their actions on each of the documents provided. This type of case study closely approximates real life job functions, and can be adapted to a number of professions. The in-tray case study is very useful for improving analytical skills, promoting creative thinking, and practicing decision-making.

Jigsaw

Students are assigned a subsection of a larger topic or case, either in teams or individually, and then are responsible for researching it and teaching or giving their research results to the rest of the team or class.

Live

The material for a live case study comes from events that are occurring at the current time. Usually only a newspaper article is used to provide students with the case study information. The instructor provides questions for thought in order to help begin the discussion. The answers are truly unknown when this case is presented. Only after a few days can the trainee's conclusions be compared with the actual decisions made. This is usually found in a follow-up newspaper article, or industry publication. Because the information for a live case study is based on

current events, it's difficult to plan and write the case study ahead of time, although lesser-known stories can be archived for future use in other types of case studies. When using a live case study, give the students up-to-date factual information from the beginning. A good summary exercise is to compare and evaluate a variety of solutions for the problem analyzed (i.e., comparing hypothetical solutions from the study group that contradict with the actual solutions that have been applied).

Pause the Action

This is similar to the live case study in that an ongoing scenario (e.g., a role-playing scenario) is paused in mid-action and the class is given an opportunity to predict the outcome or suggest solutions. This is also known as a "sequential" case.

Create a Case

Here, learners develop and present a case study to the group. The students can readily identify with this type of case since it is being conveyed, normally, by one of their peers. The advantages of this approach include greater learner involvement and interest, complex and challenging cases (Nickols, 2000). In addition, there is an increased responsibility for students to research and contribute materials for the learning experience and depend less on the instructor who ordinarily presents it all. This type of case study can be used as a final class exercise by using the information presented during the entire course.

Developing a Case Study

The following section highlights some of the methods for developing each element to providing a successful case study analysis based on the above types of cases (Penn State, 2006). The discussion includes tips for effectively structuring and writing out a case assignment. It is important to make sure the background and assignments are clearly spelled out.

Scenario

In many cases, a scenario can be relatively easy to find from news items. Even more helpful, there may be Listservs or Web sites that specialize in monitoring news events in specific disciplines. What is important is that the scenario present a real-world, complex, open-ended problem with multiple solutions. Many experts also recommend "high emotional impact," but that can range from the highly controversial story to the interesting field assignment.

Defining the Problem

There are several possible approaches to writing a case (Herreid, 1999; Davis & Wilcock, 2004). Develop a case based on a news item, research data, or a real-time data set. What can be tricky is making sure the issue is fully developed and that it matches your course objectives (Herreid, 1998).

Other Role-Play Elements

For role-playing cases, it may be necessary to define fictional characters, organizations, locales and other elements. If students are asked to all play one specific character (e.g., a judge, scientist, doctor), it is usually recommended that students be able to feel empathy for that character (Ortmeyer, 1994; Herreid, 1999).

Timeline

If your case is taken from a scenario where events take place, or could take place, over a long period of time, a timeline is recommended, to help students gain a realistic view of the time frames involved. If events occur simultaneously, this should be noted as well (Kardos & Smith, 1979).

Define the Assignment Criteria

In order for a case assignment to be effective, it is important that the assignment be integral to your course objectives.

Match Objectives

A case assignment can be structured in any number of ways depending on what concepts or techniques you want the student to extract from the case.

Restricting the Scope

Make sure your assignment is defined to be doable given the amount of time allotted to the case. A paragraph may be enough for a simple case presented in class; more complex results would be expected from a case assignment lasting several weeks.

Style Notes

Narrative

Many experts recommend writing the case as a narrative, almost like a short story (Herreid, 1999; Kardos & Smith, 1979) in order to engage student interest. However, there may be instances when a more objective

presentation is desired such as presenting clinical reports or official documents. In any case, it is important to find an appropriate format which engages student interest, yet presents the content appropriately. Excessive jargon should be avoided unless it is needed for the case structure.

Length

Experts vary on how much detail is necessary, but it is important that enough material be written so that all the important background and data are included, but short enough so that students are not overwhelmed. A good index or detailed outline can help in assignments where large amounts of case background need to be presented.

Sequence of Data & Documents

In most cases, supporting data and documents are sequenced according to the narrative of the case. If possible, short passages or tabular data can be embedded within the narrative in the appropriate location. For some case types, however, documents can be organized out of sequence if the goal is for students to learn, organize, and, analyze a random collection of documents.

Format

Categorize Cases by Level of Difficulty

It is often beneficial to categorize cases by their level of difficulty. Cases to use early are generally easier to analyze and tend to generate a good level of student interest and enthusiasm. Quantitative analysis is minimal. Cases to use at mid-point are a little more complicated and involve more quantitative analysis. Cases to use late are generally complicated and difficult to analyze. They generally require a lot of quantitative analysis.

There is no “correct” answer to any case. There may be several “good” answers and many poor ones. The purpose of strategic management, marketing and entrepreneurship course discussions should be to help the student to understand the nature of “better” answers, what to look for, how to analyze alternatives, and how to see through the complexities of arriving at and implementing solutions in real organizations. The total number of variables in a real strategy situation is typically beyond the capacities of any one person or group to control them all. Hence, the students should be warned that they should not rely on what a company actually did to be a thorough guide to action. The company may be succeeded or failed – not because of its specific decisions – but because they are in the right place at the right time currently or vis-à-vis. We all know that in a dynamic environment that their continued success will probably be challenged.

Additional Guidelines for Preparing Case Analyses

We never have all the information to make decisions because of unavailability, cost, or time constraints. So, be practical and make assumptions based on the information available. There is no one best solution to a case study. The justification for the students’ recommended strategies are what are important, not the actual solution or decision that they came up with. No organization can possibly pursue all the strategies that could potentially benefit the firm. One must be realistic. Estimate how much capital will be required to implement what you recommend.

Never make generalizations about cases. Be specific by telling what, why, when, how, where, and who. Encourage students to be open-minded and be creative and original. Do not necessarily recommend the course of action that the firm plans to take or actually undertook, even if those actions resulted in improved revenues and earnings. Some additional recommendations in structuring your course:

- Categorize your cases by strategic decision-making process.
- Establish strategy formulation in the beginning of the course, implementation, evaluation, and control toward the end of the course.

There are other types of case studies, but the majority of different case study methods are variations to the above methods.

Difficulties for Students Using Case Analysis

Students may be uncomfortable with open-ended assignments. Many students view education as a collection of well-defined facts that reach a common understanding and assignments as always having a single solution. Students often lack experience with an open-ended problem-solving format in the classroom.

If the case assignment is too complex, the material may frustrate students and shut down the very critical thinking skills the assignment may be trying to foster. If the case assignment is a team assignment, students may

need to understand team dynamics in order successfully complete the tasks. A very controversial case could lead to extreme emotional reactions. A firm statement of the facts and rules of etiquette can help reduce tensions.

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