

# RESEARCH METHODS FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS

**EIGHTH EDITION**

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Version 1 CU. He changes the title of his project to “Risk and Return in Loan Decisions at a Small Version 1 credit union”.

During his Christmas holiday, Josef returns to Wales. While volunteering, he collects a range of documents including manuals on loan decisions, he observes how people advise members who enquire about loans and he interviews both the paid manager and other volunteers. He starts every interview by asking the interviewee to confirm what Josef thinks he already knows about the CU's policies. He finds the interview with the paid manager both interesting and frustrating. The manager confirms that the CU does not vary its interest rate according to notions of risk and that the dividends paid to members depends on the surplus at the year end, but members are not worried about dividends because the more affluent save with the CU to help others. When Josef asks about the risk of fraud of £10,000, the manager says that will not happen again because the CU now recognises suspicious characters. When Josef prompts the manager about how, he receives only vague answers such as “you just know”, or information not in the CU's manuals such as whether someone's relatives lived locally and were CU members, or whether it was the first time of applying for the maximum loan, or whether the reason for the loan could be verified.

Josef shares a house with Briony, a Sociology undergraduate student. Josef tells Briony about the problem of no clear relationship between risk and returns at the small CU and that the manager only seemed to say “you just know whether someone is suspicious” when discussing risk-management. Briony introduces Josef to Polanyi's (1966) concept of tacit knowledge. Josef reads Polanyi's work and understands that while some knowledge may be formalised into codes and explained to others, people possess types of knowledge that entail knowing more than they can tell, so although knowledge is not codified, people may go through a rational, implicit question and answer process to surface concerns based on past experiences.

Josef decides to use template analysis (see Chapter 13 for more details) to interpret the interviews. Josef uses two primary headings in the template; criteria for loan decisions in formal manuals; and informal criteria affecting loan decisions. He finds the latter most interesting. When writing up, he changes his project's title to “The Tacit Knowledge of Credit Union Workers when making loan decisions”. He submits his project to his supervisor for initial review. The supervisor thinks that the methodology chapter needs strengthening. He recommends that Josef reads Lee and Saunders' (2017) discussion of emergent case studies. Josef re-writes his methodology chapter to state how he conducted an emergent case study in an iterative way, by continually moving between the research and literature to develop and refine his argument.

### References

- Ferguson, C. and McKillop, D. (1997) *The Strategic Development of Credit Unions*, Chichester: Wiley.
- Lee, B. and Brierley, J.A. (2017) ‘UK government policy, credit unions and payday loans’, *International Journal of Public Administration*, Volume 40, Issue 4, pp. 348–360.
- Lee, B. & Saunders, M.N.K. (2017) *Conducting Case Study Research*, London: Sage.
- Polanyi, M. (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

### Questions

- 1 What methods of data collection did Josef employ?
- 2 How was Josef's approach to a case study different from a conventional or orthodox approach?
- 3 Will Josef be able to ‘generalise’ his findings to other credit unions? Does it matter whether he can or cannot do so?
- 4 Did Josef apply for ethical approval for his study at the correct point and what should he have done when changing his research question?

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

They are:

- The effectiveness of computer-based training at Falcon Insurance Company.
- Embedded quality at Zarlink Semi-conductor.
- The international marketing management decisions of UK ski tour operators.
- Managing the acquisition from the middle.
- Sangita's career.
- Managers' challenges when dealing with change.



## Self-check answers

- 5.1** You would need to stress here that your principal interest would be in getting a deep understanding of why car owners join manufacturer-sponsored owners' clubs. You would discover why the owners joined these clubs and what they thought of them. In other words, you would establish what you set out to establish and, no doubt, a good deal besides. There is no reason why your discussions with owners should not be as valid as a survey questionnaire. Your initial briefing should be skilful enough to elicit rich responses from your interviewees (Chapter 10) and you may also use prompts to focus on themes that emerge in the narratives of your participants.

Of course, you may alleviate any fears about 'validity' by using a mixed methods research methodology and delivering a questionnaire as well, so that your findings may be triangulated!

- 5.2** The questionnaire will undoubtedly perform a valuable function in obtaining a comprehensive amount of data that can be compared easily, say, by district or age and gender. However, you would add to the understanding of the problem if you observed managers' meetings. Who does most of the talking? What are the non-verbal behaviour patterns displayed by managers? Who turns up late, or does not turn up at all? You could also consider talking to managers in groups or individually. Your decision here would be whether to talk to them before or after the questionnaire, or both. In addition, you could study the minutes of the meetings to discover who contributed the most. Who initiated the most discussions? What were the attendance patterns?

- 5.3** There is no easy answer to this question! You have to remember that access to organisations for research is an act of goodwill on the part of managers, and they do like to retain a certain amount of control. Selecting whom researchers may interview is a classic way of managers doing this. If this is the motive of the managers concerned then they are unlikely to let you have free access to their employees.

What you could do is ask to see all the employees in a particular department rather than a sample of employees. Alternatively, you could explain that your research was still uncovering new patterns of information and more interviews were necessary. This way you would penetrate deeper into the core of the employee group and might start seeing those who were rather less positive. All this assumes that you have the time to do this!

You could also be perfectly honest with the managers and confess your concern. If you did a sound job at the start of the research in convincing them that you are purely

interested in academic research, and that all data will be anonymous, then you may have less of a problem.

Of course, there is always the possibility that the employees generally are positive and feel as if they really do 'belong'!

- 5.4** This would be a longitudinal study. Therefore, the potential of some of the threats to internal validity explained in Section 5.8 is greater simply because they have longer to develop. You would need to make sure that most of these threats were controlled as much as possible. For example, you would need to:
- account for the possibility of a major event during the period of the research (wide-scale redundancies, which might affect employee attitudes) in one of the companies but not the other;
  - ensure that you used the same data collection devices in both companies;
  - be aware of the 'mortality' problem. Some of the sales assistants will leave. You would be advised to replace them with assistants with similar characteristics, as far as possible.

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# Chapter 6



## Negotiating access and research ethics

### Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be:

- aware of issues associated with gaining traditional and Internet-mediated access;
- able to evaluate a range of strategies to help you to gain access to organisations and to individual participants;
- aware of the importance of research ethics and the need to act ethically;
- able to anticipate ethical issues at each stage of your research and in relation to particular techniques, and aware of approaches to help you deal with these;
- aware of the principles of data protection and data management.

### 6.1 Introduction

Many students want to start their research as soon as they have identified a topic area, forgetting that access and ethics are critical aspects for the success of any research project. Such considerations are equally important whether you are using secondary data (Chapter 8) or collecting primary data through person-to-person, Internet-mediated or questionnaire-based methods (Chapters 9–11). Over the recent past, concerns about the ethics of research practice have grown substantially. Consequently, you need to think carefully about how access can be gained to collect your data, and about possible ethical concerns that could arise through the conduct of your research project. Without paying careful attention to both of these aspects, what seems like a good idea for your research may flounder and prove impractical or problematic once you attempt to undertake it.

Business and management research almost inevitably involves human participants. Ethical concerns are greatest where research involves human participants, irrespective of whether the research is conducted person-to-person. In thinking about undertaking business and management research you need to be aware that universities, as well as an increasing number of organisations, require researchers to obtain formal Research Ethics Committee approval (or a favourable ethical opinion) for their proposed research prior to granting permission to