



COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT

## **Overview of Case Study Models and Methodology**

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# CASE STUDY APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGIES

## Introduction

A case study is a story about how something exists within a real world context that is created by carefully examining an instance. It recounts real life situations that present individuals with a dilemma or uncertain outcome. The case describes the scenario in the context of the events, people and factors that influence it and enables students to identify closely with those involved. When multiple cases are examined then it is called a comparative case study.

A case study as a general approach to understanding phenomena can involve many specific methodologies such as interviews and direct observation. The art and science of creating case studies is known as the case method. Thus the case method is a set of specialized research and writing techniques designed to create rigorous case studies. It also refers to ways of teaching with case studies.

## The Case Method

The case method has long been accepted as an important method for training managers and administrators. It is a method of learning based on active participation and cooperative or democratic discussion of a situation faced by a group. The method of discussion also replicates the manner in which most decisions are taken in practice. It also involves replicating discussions with supervisors, peers or subordinates. If properly used, it has the power to improve the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

There is no unified case study method in public administration. Instead, a variety of methods exist each emerging at different points in time and addressing different research needs. The proliferation of different methods however does not preclude the creation/development of hybrid approaches/methods. Below are four dominant approaches to case methods.

### 1. Traditional Approach:

Attempts to understand a subject through systematic gathering of empirical data. Emphasis is on ensuring that the research evidence is accurate and unbiased. As a result much of the case study report is spent describing and justifying the specific methodological decisions made and elaborating on detailed findings. It involves accurate observation and rigorous collection of evidence. Variants of this approach include:

- **Illustrative Case Study:** is a descriptive account of the main characteristics of a real world example to clarify an idea or reinforce an argument.
- **Exploratory Case Study:** Attempts to understand what happened within a case by looking beyond descriptive features and studying surrounding context.
- **Explanatory Case Study:** Attempts to explain why certain behaviors occurred by determining causes and effects.

### 2. Business School Approach

It emphasizes analyzing decisions and actions of managers and their consequences through using real world examples to better prepare students for on the job challenges. Variants include:

- **Field Case Study:** Involves the gathering of original research by gathering data within the context being studied. Usually involves direct observation and interviews.
- **Literature Case Study:** Developed by looking exclusively at already existing/published materials.
- **Armchair Case Study:** Explains a management idea by presenting a hypothetical scenario.

### 3. Learning History Approach

This method involves collectively reflecting on experience in order to draw constructive lessons. It analyzes actions, events, and episodes from multiple points of view in order to gain insights.

### 4. Best Practice Approach

This method emphasizes analyzing the worthwhile and replicable practices likely to improve the way an organization operates i.e. analyzing factors likely to contribute to success or failure. The primary aim is to identify techniques that can be replicated elsewhere. Variants of this method include:

- **Implementation Case Study:** Focuses on the change management aspects of putting a practice into effect within the workplace. Here the scrutiny is placed on each major stage of the process, not necessarily the long-term outcome.
- **Success Case Study:** Looks at those practices that have proven successful in terms of outcomes. Involves isolating success factors and likely causes of failure.
- **Failure Case Study:** Looks at situation where things went wrong with the intention of generating ideas about the practices that could have been implemented to prevent problems from happening or make recommendations for recovery.

## Summary of Case Study Typologies

Business School Case Studies	Best Practice Case Studies
<p><b>Field Case Study:</b> Gathering of original research. Usually involves direct observation and interviews.</p>	<p><b>Implementation Case Study:</b> Focuses on the change management aspects of putting a practice into effect within the workplace. Focus is on major stages of the process, not necessarily the long-term outcome.</p>
<p><b>Literature Case Study:</b> Developed by looking exclusively at already existing/published materials.</p>	<p><b>Success Case Study:</b> Looks at those practices that have proven successful in terms of outcomes. Suggests methodologies where similar practices can be used in other areas of Public Administration.</p>
<p><b>Armchair Case Study:</b> Explains a management idea by presenting a hypothetical scenario.</p>	<p><b>Failure Case Study:</b> Looks at situation where things went wrong with the intention of identifying lessons learned.</p>

## Conclusion: Recommended Case Studies Structure

Though a multiplicity of case methodologies exist, it is important to select methodologies to fit to a specific teaching and learning context. This is because not all of case approaches are appropriate for applications in training and development contexts. As illustrated in the diagram below, Field Case, Implementation Case and Success Case methodologies seem most plausible for training purposes for the following reasons:

- Challenge: these approaches generally tend to highlight why an event is worth discussing
- Context: highlight salient points about the context and circumstances affecting an issue at hand.
- Strategy: highlight approaches adopted to address identified challenges
- Outcome: show results achieved and lessons learnt and finally
- Discussion Points: facilitate discussions through issues and questions readers may identify.

