

# Research Methods for Managers

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Business processes today are more interrelated than ever.<sup>1</sup> It can be difficult to see all the consequences of a particular action. As complexity grows executives have to be thoughtful of their actions. As Daniel Kahneman observed, when feedback of our actions is delayed, experience does not produce learning.<sup>2</sup> Systems thinkers call this phenomenon the difference between *immediate* and *systemic causation*.<sup>3</sup> In these cases it is almost impossible to take any action, observe the results and draw the right conclusion from it. In these cases, we need rigorous research that can address the root causes of a phenomenon, not just the immediate and visible consequences. Today's managers need to address the secondary consequences of their actions. If they don't take the time to solve the underlying reason behind an unexpected problem it will come to the surface again.<sup>4</sup> Continuously trying to solve the immediate problems lead to "fire fighting" and *micromanaging*.<sup>5</sup> Managers who don't take the time to understand the real underlying cause of a problem often feel a sense of lost control and unpredictability. But it does not need to be this way. That is why today not just scientists but also managers need to be familiar with the process of conducting research. By better understanding a problem they can take more appropriate actions and prevent the same kinds of problems from occurring again.

Research has the potential to critically analyze the strategic and operational strengths and weaknesses of an organization. By doing research we can make sense of large amounts of data, convert it to knowledge and gain insights into various business problems.<sup>6</sup> According to strategy expert Julia Sloan executives need to draw a line between *data*, *information*, and *knowledge*.<sup>7</sup> By analyzing data, organizing it into coherent and understandable parts we can create useful information. By critically examining the available information and attaching

meaning to it we can gain knowledge about a particular problem we are addressing. As our knowledge grows throughout the years of experience we can gain *wisdom* about a particular industry, procedure, know-how, or situation we are in.<sup>8</sup> However, everything should start with data, the most fundamental particle of understanding.

Throughout the last few decades data has become a fundamental part of doing business. In his insightful book, *The World is Flat* Thomas L. Friedman argues, with the rise of the information age we have undergone a process of information democratization.<sup>9</sup> Today we have more data than our ancestors could've ever imagined. The majority of the people can access the majority of the available data, which means that almost every piece of information is available for almost everyone. Consequently, today the most important skill is not creating data, but understanding it.<sup>10</sup> Critically examining data, gaining insight from it has become one of the most important skills an executive can possess. (Some thinkers call it "*metacognition*"; in other words, thinking about thinking.)<sup>11</sup>

Since the rise of Big Data, businesses have developed much better data analytic systems. As uncertainty and complexity grow the use of data analytics has become critical in today's business environment.<sup>12</sup> When people research complex phenomena they depict reality by simplifying it.<sup>13</sup> By building theories researchers represent the complex nature of the problem more simply. By building a theory we are also building a model of reality that makes the phenomena understandable. Many scholars call these "*maps*" mental models.<sup>14</sup> They are representations of reality that make the situation, phenomena or problem more comprehensible, transferable and understandable.

Jeannette Wing, a computer science professor at Columbia University and former corporate vice president of Microsoft Research argues, the ability to deal with large amounts of data is crucial.<sup>15</sup> As complexity grows, making sense of data has become as fundamental as reading or writing. This process is called *Computational Thinking*. It is a way to solve problems by specifying step-by-step solutions for those problems.<sup>16 17</sup> It has 4 basic parts. The first step is the *Decomposition* phase. We break down complex problems into smaller, more understandable and manageable components. In the second phase, we look for patterns and structural similarities between components. In the third phase, we use *abstraction* to understand the problem. We focus on the important details of the problem and ignore the ones that are not important to us. As the last step, we can develop algorithms by specifying a

step-by-step solution or rules to solve the problem. This way we can better understand data, and build practical, usable and transferable solutions.<sup>18</sup>

To effectively conduct research it is necessary to follow the steps of a scientific research process perfected by research scholars.<sup>19</sup> After considering a particular research topic we can develop a research proposal. Then we have to critically review the research literature to gain an understanding of theories that have already been developed. After that, we have to clarify our research philosophy and potential approaches we would use while conducting the research. After that, we can formulate our research design, negotiate access to reliable information and address ethical issues. After we are done with this we can plan the data collection process, considering one of the following methods: sampling, using secondary data, observation, interviews and research diaries, questionnaires. After collecting data we can analyse it quantitatively and qualitatively. After we analysed the data we can prepare our presentation. Let's examine these steps a little further.

When researching the first step we should clarify the research topic. First of all, we have to examine the idea itself. We should start by examining the researcher's relation to the topic itself. It is beneficial to conduct research about a topic that has personal significance. If the problem is meaningful and the researcher is passionate about it, it is more likely that he or she will persevere despite difficulties.<sup>20</sup> Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi, who studied creative achievements argues if people enjoy their work it is more likely that they will create something meaningful and personally significant.<sup>21</sup> It is also important to have the necessary skills to conduct the research and also to have access to all the relevant data you will need. There is an ongoing debate among scholars about what makes research relevant.<sup>22</sup> Speaking about management research relevance is most often measured by practical implications of the particular research.<sup>23</sup> It is also beneficial to draw a *Relevance Map* to have insight into the areas or processes your research might affect. Visualizing information makes it much easier to understand.<sup>24</sup>

Finding relevant research ideas need not be a coincidence, it can be practised and planned for. One way is to use *critical thinking* to find ideas that might be potentially game-changing.<sup>25</sup> We can critically examine every taken for granted assumption in the respective areas of life. Taking reality as the baseline we can find out the legitimacy and accuracy of our thoughts, beliefs, mental models and scripted solutions to certain problems.

As an example think about Copernicus who critically examined the taken for granted belief that the Earth is the centre of the universe and successfully disproved it.<sup>26</sup> Another approach to generating potentially relevant research ideas is using our creative thinking processes. Creative thinking focuses on possibilities and connecting seemingly unrelated ideas to find something new.<sup>27</sup> It is highly beneficial to keep an open mind and expose yourself to new ways of doing things. Indeed, studies suggest the more significant a researcher's contribution is to the scientific community the more likely the person has interests outside his or her main professional world.<sup>28</sup> For example studies show Nobel laureates are twenty-two times more likely to partake as amateur actors, dancers, magicians, or other types of performers.<sup>29</sup> A few tools we can use to come up with ideas in a creative way are: *lateral thinking*,<sup>30</sup> *brainstorming*,<sup>31</sup> *analogical reasoning*,<sup>32</sup> *metaphoric thinking*<sup>33</sup> among many others.

After we have found a topic we want to study we can write a research proposal.<sup>34</sup> It can be very helpful for organizing ideas and putting them on paper. It can also serve as a communication tool, we can communicate with our audience, clients or tutor and make sure they understand our intentions. The research proposal usually contains the following elements: title, research background (the context within the literature), research questions and objectives, method, the timescale of conducting the research, resources and references. It is key to keep it simple, brief, and easy to understand. We also need to be flexible for any changes at this stage of the research process. As we gain a new understanding of the topic we are researching and as new findings come to light our research may completely change. For example, if we find something that contradicts our initial assumptions we need to keep an open mind for modifying our beliefs. It is also beneficial to the quality of the research not to jump to conclusions prematurely.<sup>35</sup> We can easily fall into the trap of gathering evidence that supports our initial assumptions. Even the most experienced professionals can fall prey to this *confirmation bias*.<sup>36</sup> Instead, a better approach would be to start the research from a broad perspective and ask general-focus research questions. Then continuously narrow the circle of unknowns as empirical findings come to light.

If we already have our research questions and objectives we should critically review the literature.<sup>37</sup> It helps us discover existing material and the perspective of other researchers who were interested in the same questions. It can help us organize valuable ideas that can serve as

an anchor while conducting our research. It is an iterative process. We start with our initial research questions and objectives and at the end of the literature review process, we will have written a critical review of all existing material. Literature reviewing processes can be categorized into two broad categories. We use a deductive approach if our research is theory-driven. It means that we initially develop a hypothesis, a theory and test that theory against the data and empirical evidence. Using an inductive approach is basically doing things in the opposite order. We start with the data and empirical evidence first, then we develop theories. According to Mark Saunders, there is not one single best approach to conducting research.<sup>38</sup> By reviewing the existing literature we can develop a critical perspective of the problem we want to better understand. It means not just accepting previously taken for granted assumptions but critically aiming to disprove existing theories and models. A good scientific theory is one that we can prove wrong.<sup>39</sup> If something can not be proved wrong it can not be proved right either.

By critically reviewing existing literature, we can better evaluate the different research by comparing existing theories with each other. It also helps us to relate our findings to other similar ideas and theories other researchers developed before us. This way we can put our research topic into a wider perspective and make sure we won't miss any critically important aspect of the question.

After finishing the literature review it is important to put our research into a larger context. We can do that by understanding and relating to existing research philosophies and approaches.<sup>40</sup> Data doesn't exist in the vacuum. The same data can have very different meanings when we put it into different contexts. A useful guide for understanding research philosophies and approaches is the *Research 'onion'* developed by Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill.<sup>41</sup> They argue, every research exists in increasingly broader theoretical realms that enclose one another. If we try to visually represent it, it would look like an onion. The broadest theoretical "ring" is the philosophical realm. The term itself (*research philosophy*) "refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge."<sup>42</sup> In terms of research philosophies we can distinguish between *positivism*, *critical realism*, *interpretivism*, *postmodernism*, *pragmatism*. The next realm is based on how we approach the theory development process. As I mentioned above, if we develop a theory first and then look for confirming or disconfirming evidence we follow a *deductive* approach.

If we start with the data and just after proper research develop a theory we are using an *inductive* approach. If we are doing theory development and data analysis at the same time we follow an approach based on *abduction*. By making a methodological choice we can better design our research process. The *quantitative research designs* are the *Mono method quantitative study* and *Multi-method quantitative study*. If we construct qualitative research designs we can choose between Mono method qualitative study and Multi-method qualitative study. If we design our research conducting complex and simple mixed methods studies. Based on the different research methodologies we can have entirely different findings. For example, when researching customer preferences, choosing between quantitative and qualitative methods can make an enormous difference in our understanding. After making the right methodological choice we can choose an appropriate research strategy. These can be an experiment, a survey, archival research, a case study, an ethnography, action research, a grounded theory and a narrative inquiry. It is also crucially important to choose the right timeframe for the research. A *longitudinal study* for example will require very different resources and management than a *cross-sectional study*. After we have examined the respective research philosophies, have chosen the right approach for theory development, made a methodological choice, clarified our research strategies, choose the right time horizon we can apply the different techniques and procedures for data collection and data analysis.

When the research design has taken shape it is also crucial to make sure we can gain access to the right resources.<sup>43</sup> When there are problems that businesses need to address it would be a much better approach to understand the *root cause* of a problem and not just apply quick fixes to solve the most immediate problems.<sup>44</sup> In other words, conducting research by which we can better understand problems and find opportunities would be most important in times of crisis and disruption. Stanford researcher Carol Dweck warns us of the common tendency of executives to see confirming opinions in times of change.<sup>45</sup> Seeking comfort rather than truth however can be a costly mistake. However, as we all know when things are not going well, research and development become low priority activities. Clayton Christensen argues, resource allocation and innovation are two sides of the same coin.<sup>46</sup> Businesses that fail to allocate resources to research purposes on a regular basis will risk sacrificing long-term gains for short-term improvements. In today's highly interrelated business settings the researchers' job is not just actually conducting research but also to communicate the

importance of doing research to other stakeholders. Researchers also need to make sure they comply with the appropriate ethical guidelines. Researchers have to make sure their behaviour concerning the rights of those who become the subject of or are affected by their work will be appropriate.<sup>47</sup>

After we are certain all the resources we need will be provided we can focus on designing the data-collection process.<sup>48</sup> We can collect data by considering one of the following methods: *Sampling*, using *Secondary Data*, *Observation*, *Interviews and research diaries*, and using *Questionnaires*. I will discuss these methods in detail below.

By collecting data through sampling we can optimize the effort we spend on doing research. It is impractical and in many cases impossible to survey the entire population or every single stakeholder involved. By selecting a smaller *sample*, we can achieve the same results with the same accuracy. It is very important for the sampling to be representative. It means that the preferences of the selected individuals need to be in synchrony with the preferences of the entire population. Sample size matters. We have to collect data from the smallest representative sample size.<sup>49</sup> If the sample size is small we sacrifice accuracy over efficiency. However, if the sample size is too large we waste precious resources collecting and analysing unnecessary amounts of data. We need to find the "breaking point" when additional amounts of data do not increase the accuracy of our findings. By selecting the sample, we can choose from the following five sampling techniques: *simple random sampling*, *systematic sampling*, *stratified random sampling*, *cluster sampling*, *multi-stage sampling*.<sup>50</sup>

We can also use secondary data for conducting research.<sup>51</sup> By using data that have already been collected for other purposes we can make the research more efficient. It will require less amount of time, energy and financial investments. However, researchers might need to do extra organizing, prioritizing and analysing the respective data, especially when it was collected for a different type of research. Another great advantage is related to time frame. We can conduct multiple longitudinal studies with basically no extra time because the data has already been collected throughout the respective periods.

Secondary data can be categorized into three broad categories: *Documentary* (this include written and non-written materials); *Multiple source data* (this include area-based

data, Time-series based data) and *Surveys* (this include: censuses, continuous and regular surveys and ad hoc surveys).<sup>52</sup> Using secondary data can have its benefits. However, we need to critically evaluate the potential secondary data sources to make sure the data is suitable for our purposes. First, we need to assess the overall sustainability of the data for our research. We need to take a careful look at the measurement validity and coverage of the respective data. As a second step, we have to evaluate the data based on validity, reliability and related to measurement to make sure the data is accurate and unbiased. The third factor to consider is the opportunity cost of choosing secondary data sources.<sup>53</sup> We need to judge whether it is the most effective way of collecting data, compared to other alternative sources.

Collecting data for ourselves and conducting research based on primary data has its benefits. If we collect data for ourselves we can make sure it will be optimized for our purposes. By systematically observing, recording people's behaviour<sup>54</sup> we can make sure that the data is as close to the source as it can be. We can classify observation into two distinct categories: *Participant observation* and *Structured observation*. Participant observation involves the discovery of the meaning attached to people's actions.<sup>55</sup> For example, in a buying situation it tries to answer the question, why people are buying. It's qualitative research that can help us gain insight into people's behaviour. Structured observation is primarily concerned with the frequency of the actions.<sup>56</sup> For example, in the same buying situation the primary question is related to the quantity and frequency of the purchase.

However, observation can have its limitations. As researchers are trying to get closer to the scene of action which might affect the behaviour of people they are trying to observe. We need to keep a healthy distance from the subject of the research to avoid *observer bias*<sup>57</sup> and keep the findings of the research as unbiased as we can. Primary observation can also be time-consuming and can be difficult to undertake.<sup>58</sup> However, if we succeed there is a high chance that we will possess invaluable insight into the subject of our research. It can be a significant competitive advantage.<sup>59</sup>

Collect primary data by conducting *interviews*,<sup>60</sup> examining *research diaries*<sup>61</sup> and asking people to complete *questionnaires*<sup>62</sup> has many advantages. By collecting qualitative data we can gain a deep understanding of the subject of our research. Qualitative data can be a valuable source of competitive advantage in today's turbulent business environment. However, we need to avoid biases as much as we can. Phenomenological studies show us,



people's perception can be affected by the slightest external stimuli.<sup>63</sup> There is also a large amount of scientific evidence that customers can not articulate their buying preferences.<sup>64</sup> Most of the time the real reason behind a purchase remains hidden. Social scientists Kevin Simler and Robin Hanson examine this phenomenon in detail in their insightful 2017 book.<sup>65</sup> That's why it is imperative to analyse data from a critical perspective.

While presenting the information to others there are a few important things to focus on. Having a clear structure makes the readers' or listeners' job easier. The most widely used structuring method that researchers and executives are familiar with is the following: *abstract, introduction, literature review, method, results, discussion, conclusions, references, appendices*.<sup>66</sup> While writing an abstract we should clarify our research questions, the way we will answer those questions, how we found responses to those questions and our conclusions. In the *Introduction* part, we can state the research questions and objectives, also a brief background presentation. While presenting the literature review we can put our findings into a larger context supplemented with already existing research and developed theories. We can also discuss our research methods, including the setting, participants, materials and procedures.<sup>67</sup> Then we can present our findings and the result of the research. We can also discuss our findings attaching meaning to them and positioning it in a larger context. Then it's time to summarize our conclusions, present our references, appendices and perhaps a few actionable steps for busy executives.

Researchers also need to be extraordinary communicators. They often face difficulties when trying to plan and conduct research. Also, the findings of the research are sometimes rejected because of the personal preferences of executives with higher status.<sup>68</sup> To be relevant, the research needs to be the basis of real action. It is really important to *frame* the problem appropriately. Research suggests, presenting information in different contexts can have very different influences on people's opinions and behaviour as well. (For example, the *Ebbinghaus Illusion* is an extraordinary visual representation of this phenomenon.<sup>69</sup> It is also known *Framing Effect*.<sup>70</sup>) Stanford University professor and decision making expert Carl Spetzler suggest while choosing the right *frame* of presenting a problem we should clarify these three things: *purpose, perspective* and *scope*. What is the *purpose* of the decision? What are we trying to accomplish? By putting the problem into the right *perspective* we can define

it more clearly. *Perspective* is a part of our mindset, influenced by many taken for granted beliefs and assumptions. By sharing different perspectives with others we can try to develop a better understanding of the problem. By clarifying the scope of a particular solution we can set priorities. We can clarify what are the crucial aspects of the situations we want to focus on. Presenting our research to executives in the right frame can have a huge persuasive advantage. Clarifying the *purpose* and *scope* of our research and putting our findings into the right perspective can make it more tangible, concrete and actionable. Studies also suggest if we let people discover insights by themselves they will have a strong sense of ownership that can ultimately lead to greater engagement. Harvard psychologists Chip and Dan Heath call this “*tipping over the truth*”.<sup>21</sup> It is a much more powerful way of presenting our findings than just letting people passively “consume” our presentation and hoping for the best. For example, we can ask people to imagine a better future state of the organization. Then we can present our findings that refer to a much less rosy current state. Letting people fill the gap between the current and desired state by themselves can be a powerful way of encouraging action. It can sound counterintuitive, but sometimes the best way of offering a solution is not talking about solutions at all.

As we have seen, conducting research has become a crucial business activity today. It is not just the job of scientists, but managers also have to take an active role in organizational research projects. Today we have more data than even in history. Data is a powerful tool that we can use to create an ultimate competitive advantage. This way we can create greater customer value, make better business decisions and ultimately build a more successful organization.

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