Case Studies for Harvard Business School

What Is a Case?

A case is a description of a management situation. Most cases range in length from two to twenty-five pages of text and exhibits; the latter often present quantitative material. So-called field cases are largely based on data provided by the organization that is the focus of the case. Library cases are drawn from published material in the public domain. A case is not written to illustrate correct or incorrect handling of an administrative situation, nor is there an editorial bias that implies a particular conclusion.

A chronological series of cases based on a single organization is sometimes used to expose the student to the organization's cumulative experience with a situation.

How Are Cases Used?

Cases are used for class discussion in a variety of educational programs. At the Harvard Business School, these include short programs for executives as well as the two-year program leading to the degree of Master of Business Administration (MBA). The cases offer students experience in dealing with complex, realistic situations. The emphasis is on decision making. In most courses, the cases are arranged so that a conceptual structure is built up during the course. Cases are often supplemented with readings and short lectures.

In the MBA program, the student most often has three cases to prepare every day, each for a different course. A case usually is discussed for one class session.

Many cases developed by Harvard Business School are available to other educational institutions through the HBS Publishing Division.

How Are Cases Developed?

Each faculty member responsible for a course typically has a group of issues or situations for which cases are needed. Cases are often developed in response to these explicit needs. At other times, organizations suggest particularly interesting situations to faculty members.

Who Writes the Cases?

Faculty, research assistants, and—occasionally—students may be involved in casewriting. Research assistants and students work under the close supervision of members of the faculty.

In general, extensive writing, editing, or revising by the host organization does not aid case development. These responsibilities are most satisfactorily performed by people outside of the firm.

Who Pays the Expenses?

Harvard Business School commonly pays the direct expenses of case development. There are exceptions, however, and certain casewriting ventures are undertaken by an association or an individual firm.

What Is Expected of the Host Organization?

A case cannot be used until it is formally approved by the host organization. An initial discussion between the faculty supervisor and the host organization establishes the preliminary scope of the case. This understanding may be confirmed in a written summary or outline. An agreement to continue with the project signifies the organization’s willingness to provide information relevant to the situation and important to the decision makers involved in the situation. Such information is crucial to the development of an effective teaching vehicle.

The initial agreement also affirms the organization’s general willingness to approve Harvard’s use of a case of the nature and scope discussed. If there is real doubt about the likelihood of approval, it is usually better to call a halt to the venture rather than to risk the development of an unapproved case and the consequent loss of substantial time and money.

This note was written by Professor Benson P. Shapiro.
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How Much Effort Does the Host Firm or Organization Invest?

It usually takes two to four days on-site to gather the data for a field case. During that time, the casewriter talks about the situation with all appropriate members of the organization and, on occasion, with informed outside sources, such as an advertising agency or a trade association. Some cases will, of course, take more or less of the organization’s time.

The casewriter’s job is facilitated by the use of company memos and reports, and industry studies or articles. Information of this nature usually improves the case substantially because the data are already presented in a clear, concise form. In most instances, the casewriter will need access to cost, investment, and profit data generally considered proprietary. The confidential nature of such material, however, can generally be maintained.

How Is Confidentiality Maintained?

Before a field case can be used, it must be formally approved, in writing, by a responsible executive of the host organization. Prior to approval, the case and the information upon which it is based, are treated with the utmost care and confidentiality. The officers and staff of Harvard Business School take extremely seriously the School’s reputation for this care and confidentiality. Over thirty thousand cases have been developed with company trust and cooperation, and the School considers it essential that this record be maintained. Experienced casewriters have developed the ability to perform this task well.

Sometimes a firm is hesitant to release specific data to the public. In most such instances, numbers can be changed so that they are still realistic and useful for discussion and pedagogy but no threat to the firm.

In some situations, the organization desires to disguise itself. This, too, is possible in many instances. However, a firm that is unique because of size, market position, or situation, cannot be disguised without destroying the integrity of the situation. The case becomes so artificial that the student’s ability to play the role of manager is restricted. Thus, it is important to define the nature of material to be disguised at the beginning of the casewriting process.

The company often also loses some benefits of case development when the case is disguised.

What Are the Benefits to the Host Organization?

There are four major benefits for the host firm or organization. Most important and most elusive is making a substantial contribution to management education. Harvard Business School and its sister organizations throughout the world depend on up-to-date, realistic cases for effective management development and education. All organizations and companies benefit from progress in administrative education and practice.

Second, the organization develops a relationship with Harvard Business School, its faculty, and its student body.

Third is the use of case material for in-house training programs. Material on an organization’s own situation is sometimes more useful in its management-development programs than other less focused material.

Finally, some firms have gained added perspective by seeing a case written by an outsider that explicitly describes their own situations. Obviously, there are many instances where this does not happen. On the other hand, an unbiased review is often of more than passing value.

With an eye to these benefits and to others less tangible, thousands of organizations have collaborated with Harvard Business School in the development of cases. These organizations have generally found the collaboration worthwhile— involving little or no direct cost while affording absolute control of sensitive material and resulting in a positive contribution to management education.