

Chapter 6

Consortial Benchmarking: Applying an Innovative Industry–Academic Collaborative Case Study Approach in Systemic Management Research

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ABSTRACT

Case study research has its virtues in theory refinement and theory building. At the same time, this research method is criticized for low validity, poor generalizability and theory-induced bias that may reduce managerial relevance. Consortial benchmarking, where practitioners and researchers jointly benchmark “best practice” firms on a particular research question, is a new form of multi-case research that maximizes rigor, innovativeness and relevance as well as allowing researchers to take a systemic viewpoint when building theories in management. This chapter describes the concept and the application of consortial benchmarking. Consortial benchmarking contributes to unearth phenomena buried under traditional theories; it enhances existing approaches and contributes to building innovative theories. Due to the method’s multi-case nature results are sufficiently generalizable. Since the consortiums comprise academics and practitioners, researcher bias is minimized and relevance and validity are maximized.

INTRODUCTION: BRIDGING THE PRACTITIONER-ACADEMIC DIVIDE THROUGH A PARTICULAR FORM OF CASE STUDY RESEARCH, CONSORTIAL BENCHMARKING

Although case study research has supposedly been in a crisis for decades (Yin, 1981), Eisenhardt and

Graebner suggest that “...papers that build theory from cases are often regarded as the ‘most interesting’ research...” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 25). Researchers agree that case study research can provide a powerful research strategy for theory-building in management research (Stake, 2006; Eisenhardt, 1989; Larsson, 1993; Weick, 2007; see Halinen & Tornroos, 2005; Wilson & Vlosky, 1997 and Weick, 1993 for examples of theory-building from cases). However, to fully utilize the potentials

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-668-1.ch006

of the case study methodology researchers need to develop methods that improve rigor, innovativeness and relevance of case study research.

We propose consortial benchmarking as a novel research tool that can contribute to the revitalization of case study research. Its particular strength lies in bridging the practitioner-academic divide regularly discussed e.g. in special issues of top tier journals like the *Academy of Management Journal* (2007 and 2001) or the *British Journal of Management* (2002). This is particularly – but not exclusively – true with research settled in a complex environment.

From a background in systems theory it may actually be self-defeating to rely on a single theory for analysis, only (Wallis, 2008). Systems theory challenges this reductionist approach and asks to (re-) contextualize observations and embed them in the system they are a part of (Capra, 1996). Consortial benchmarking, by including academics and practitioners in the discourse, can prevent an analysis from being based on a single theory, which is often to be found in purely academic inquiries.

Consortial benchmarking is a research-oriented partnership between industry and academia that meets a growing need in management research (Hatchuel, 2001, Tranfield, Denyer, Marcos, Burr, 2004, Trim & Lee, 2004). It brings together a group of investigators (the consortium) who are interested in finding an answer to a specific research question. The team is composed of practitioners from several firms and academics who add theoretical knowledge and enhance methodological rigor. The consortium visits advanced firms (different from those of the sponsoring firms) and collects data about the research topic. It analyses the data jointly and discusses the emerging constructs and possible relationships between different constructs and/or variables. As opposed to a classical multi-case study research, with consortial benchmarking not only the academic researcher is asking questions, but also the practitioners who are in the role of co-researchers. In practice, this means that a

team of a dozen persons is visiting several firms. The research team agrees on a common set of questions. Researchers originating from different organizations and having different backgrounds as well as many different perspectives come together. In this setting, many different angles are applied to understanding the phenomenon. This is a chance to get a more holistic perspective on a research topic.

This chapter's contribution is to introduce a four-step approach to conducting a consortial benchmarking study. We focus on how to organize a consortial benchmarking project, but also embed this method in the methods discussion. In this way, we aim to enhance case study methodology and offer a blueprint for researchers who want to apply consortial benchmarking. Furthermore, since consortial benchmarking produces rich data that embeds different perspectives it allows to analyze a question from different angles, is open for surprising results and thus supports researchers in capturing the complexity of a non-linear managerial phenomenon, a precondition of systemic research. Thus, our chapter also contributes to systemic thinking and theory building in management.

This chapter is organized as follows: while illustrating the strength of consortial benchmarking in theory-building, we first take a closer look at the limitations of “classical” case study research methods and then discuss how consortial benchmarking can reduce or even overcome the objections discussed. Then consortial benchmarking is introduced in detail and we show how a consortial benchmarking study can be conducted.

REQUIREMENT OF CASE STUDY RESEARCH: INNOVATIVE ENQUIRIES AND THEORY-BUILDING FROM CASES

Generally, case study research is a preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions arise

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