

Welcome to Qualitative Research

Week 7 *Lecture 2*

Research & Research Problem

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The role of the problem

- The problem is almost as important as its solution.
 - Is the real problem looked at?
 - Will the answer solve the problem?
- Formulating the problem is crucial for designing the research.
 - What do we intent to find out?
 - Do we measure what we want to measure?
 - What do we want to measure?

(Saunders *et al.*, 2016)

Research problem & process formulation



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Type of research & the research problem.

Research	Type of problem	When applied
Exploratory	Recognising & defining the decision problem.	Early stages of the decision process.
	Identifying courses of action.	Identifies relevant variables.
Conclusive	Evaluating or selecting a course of action.	Descriptive: frequency & characteristics of phenomena. Causal: why things happen. What mechanisms are involved.
Performance monitoring	Implementing a course of action.	Tracks what is happening in key performance areas.



The role of the problem

"If you don't know where you are going, you will often end up somewhere else."

-Yogi Berra

- The problem identification is necessary to determine a suitable research approach.
- All effort, time & money spent is wasted if the problem is misunderstood or ill-defined.
- Refining is necessary to formulate specific research questions.

(Butler, 1994)



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What is the research problem?

- Difference between the current & a more preferred condition.
- A formulation of how to achieve the solution.

(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013; Malhotra, 2010)

- *“Gap between the way things are now & the way things could be better.”*

(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013, p. 111)

Research problem & process formulation

What is the research problem?

1. Actual performance is worse than expected.
 - Sales/profits below target.
 - Higher than expected employee turnover.
2. Actual performance is less than possible performance.
 - (Implies management knows what is possible.)
3. Expected performance is greater than possible performance.
 - (Perhaps management has unrealistic view on what is possible.)

(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013)



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How to identify a research problem?

- What are your own interest?
- Make use of discussion, conversations or media reports.
- Look at past projects & even dissertations.
- Search the literature on subjects that interest you.

Take notes whenever an idea pops up in your mind.

Be open minded. Be prepared to make changes in direction (this is normal).

→ This process will result in a more & more precise definition of the research problem.

(Malhotra, 2010)



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How to identify a research problem?

1

- Understand the situation.
- Identify the key symptoms.

2

- From the symptoms, identify the key problems.

3

- Set up corresponding managerial objectives.

4

- Determine the unit of analysis.

5

- Determine the relevant variables.

6

- Formulate the research question &/or hypotheses.

(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013)



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Step 1: Situational analysis.

- What is the purpose?
 - Gaining awareness of the current situation.
 - Put the situation in a context.
 - Identify the key symptoms.

Difference symptom & research problem?

(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013)



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Step 1: Situational analysis.

- What is a symptom?
 - More visible than a problem.
 - The visible facts of an underlying problem.

How to narrow down symptoms to identify their source (the problem)?

→ Probing: process of repeatedly exploring the significance of the problem.

(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013)



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Step 1: Situational analysis.

Example situations	Symptoms
22-year-old neighbourhood swimming association seeks research help.	Declining membership for 6 years. Increased attendance at the new water park. Less frequent usage among members.
A new microbrewery is trying to establish itself.	Consumers seem to prefer national brands over local microbrewery products. Many customers order national brands with the microbrew itself. Customers seem hesitant to try new microbrew flavours.



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Step 2: Symptoms to problems.

- The probing & narrowing down is crucial to avoid tackling a superficial symptom.
- The aim is to identify the likely underlying problems.

(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013)



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Step 2: Symptoms to problems.

Example situations	Symptoms	Likely problem(s)
22-year-old neighbourhood swimming association seeks research help.	Declining membership for 6 years. Increased attendance at the new water park. Less frequent usage among members.	Outdated facilities; not appealing to young families. Younger families have negative image of the pool.
A new microbrewery is trying to establish itself.	Consumers seem to prefer national brands over local microbrewery products. Many customers order national brands with the microbrew itself. Customers seem hesitant to try new microbrew flavours.	Existence of a negative flavour gap? Is the microbrew approach appreciated enough by customers? Do they appreciate the full beer tasting experience?

Step 3: Corresponding objectives.

- Each of the symptoms & their underlying problem(s) needs to be captured into a decision statement (business problem).

What sets a business problem apart from a research problem?

→ What the firm needs to DO vs. what the firm needs to KNOW to do it.

→ Action-focussed vs. analytical-focussed viewpoint.

- Each decision statement then needs to be rephrased into objective.

(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013)

Research problem & process formulation



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Step 3: Corresponding objectives.

Research objectives:

- “*Are clear, specific statements that identify what the researchers wishes to accomplish as a result of doing the research.*”
- States a corresponding outcome of the research project.
- They are *deliverables* of the project, thus the researchers *must* be clear on what the research can deliver.
- Needs to answer: what information is needed to address the situation?

(Saunders *et al.*, 2016, p. 726)

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Step 3: Corresponding objectives.

Research objectives:

- They start with action words:
 - Evaluate
 - Identify
 - Assess
 - Determine
 - Measure
 - ...

(Saunders *et al.*, 2016)

Research problem & process formulation



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Step 3: Corresponding objectives.

Likely problem(s)	Decision statement	Research objectives
Outdated facilities; not appealing to young families. Younger families have negative image of the pool. 'Old' market is aging.	What things can be done to energise the market? What can be done to create more favourable attitudes towards the swimming association?	Determine reasons why families choose to (not) join a swim club. Determine attitudes held towards swim clubs.
Existence of a negative flavour gap? Is the microbrew approach appreciated enough by customers? Do they appreciate the full beer tasting experience?	How to encourage more consumers to come to the microbrewery & try the products? Should we re-design the brewery to be more inviting?	Describe how what & how situational factors influence beer consumption & consumer attitudes towards beer products. Determine factors that are likely to improve attitudes towards microbreweries.

Step 4: Unit of analysis.

- Each study indicates what or who should provide the data, & of what level of aggregation.

For example:

- Individuals (customers, employees)
- Households (families, extended families)
- Organisations (businesses, business units)
- Departments (sales, finance, marketing, HR)
- Geographical areas (countries, regions, locations)
- Objects (products, advertisements)

(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013)

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Step 4: Unit of analysis.

For example:

- Clothing purchases: individuals may be the appropriate level of analysis.
- Brand performance: customer purchases aggregated on the household level.

Who are the likely unit of analysis for the 2 example situations:

1. Swimming pool
2. Microbrewery

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Step 5: Define variables.

Variables are (individual) elements or attributes upon which the data will be collected.

What is the difference to a constant?

Variables	Constant
• Varies or changes from one instance to another. • Represents the differences. • In: value, magnitude, strength, etc. • We either observe or manipulate them.	• Does not respond to change. • Not immediately interesting for managers (& hence research).

(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013)

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Step 5: Define variables.

- Variables are crucial to formulate research objectives & question.
- Each objective mentions at least one variable to be analysed.
- Types of variables:
 - Continuous (values that correspond to some quantitative amount)
 - Categorical (classify units into categories)

Gender; age ranges; whether or not a product was purchased; etc.

Consumer attitudes towards different aspects of airline safety, seat comfort, etc.
High: positive
Low: negative relationship.

(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013)

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Step 5: Define variables.

- Types of variables (cont.):
(in descriptive or causal research, the following are crucial)
 - Dependent (outcomes explained by other variables)
 - Independent (usually influence dependent)

F.e.: average customer restaurant loyalty as a dependent variable may be influenced by restaurant food quality, service or ambience.

(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013)

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Step 6: Question....

- What is the overarching research question?
- It guides your research.
- What question would I like to have answered & do my objectives capture this (& vice versa)?
- Translation of the issue that is intended to be resolved.
- Translation of the problem into an enquiry.

Too vague = no useful insights.

Too narrow = unlikely to capture all objectives.

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(Zikmund *et al.*, 2013)



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Points to summarise...

- Defining the problem is about the most important step of the research process.
- Analysing the environment leads to a better understanding of the context of the situation the problem is based on.
- Understanding the current situation, helps determining symptoms.
- Symptoms indicate towards the more hidden business problems.
- Objectives capture the symptoms.
- The lead research question captures ALL research objectives.

Week 9: Proposal presentation.

