

Writing Your Management Dissertation or Project Report



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Writing Your Management Project Report

The way your management dissertation or project report should be organised, formatted, structured and referenced is well-covered in the respective MA and MBA guidelines. However, this guide offers particular advice on how to prepare for writing and how to make your report more interesting, persuasive, and readable.

The booklet is divided into three sections:

1. Writing your Management Dissertation or Project Proposal

- A framework for writing the project proposal

2. Preparation for Writing the Main Report

- Understanding what goes in the main body of the report – and why
- The '5W and 1H' Approach to project writing

3. Writing Tips

- Ten writing tips
- Proof-reading

Plus

How the Effective Learning Service can support individual students

Suggested additional reading on this topic

Appendix 1: Example of an **introduction** from a Masters project report

Appendix 2: Example of a **conclusion**, from the same report

1. WRITING THE DISSERTATION / MANAGEMENT PROJECT PROPOSAL

You need to pick a project topic that is feasible, which means 'do-able' in the short time that you have.

What is 'feasible'?

Many student project proposals are initially over- ambitious. They are often very wide-ranging in their focus and could present significant problems for students in collecting primary data.

The best projects are those where:

- The topic is of particular interest to you.
- You can easily collect information – the information is readily available, or you can collect and analyse it easily, and within a short time period
- The aim of the project is **focused** on a particular aspect of a chosen topic

Example

Not Feasible	Feasible
<i>"The importance of the WTO rules governing exports for the future of Chinese exports"</i> (Too vague and over-ambitious)	<i>"The impact of WTO rules governing the export of Chinese textiles to Europe"</i> (The focus is on a particular commodity in a particular location, and the information will be readily available)

Remember

You must be able to complete the project given the time and resources that are available this may mean that:

- Primary research will be difficult unless you have very good access to the people you want to obtain information from and you are sure that they will provide the information that you will need within the time.
- In most cases, secondary research (desk research) will be the best option, using data already available and easily accessible.

Getting Started

OK, you have an idea for your project. Now you need to prepare a project proposal.

The following offers a framework for preparing your Dissertation/Management Project proposal, and for discussion with your tutor or supervisor. Write in the spaces shown.

What is the main aim of your research? Write just one or two sentences that summarise the overall objective of your project.		
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Now identify specific research questions that flow from this main research aim.

But first, ask yourself **will you be able to find answers easily to them?** Will you be able to get access to information that can lead to possible resolution of the questions raised? If 'no', then identify questions where information is more accessible.

Don't forget, this is a small scale research project, so you should aim to generate a manageable number of research questions. If you have more than three questions in mind, discuss these with your supervisor first.

Question 1

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Question 2

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Question 3

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Background

What is the **background** to your interest in this topic area and in pursuing this research area? Summarise briefly the reasons why this topic is likely to be of interest to the business community - and to you.

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Literature Review

In the literature review section of the proposal you outline what previous research has been done on the topic and how it has guided or informed your own research. You can engage with some or all of the following questions:

Your notes

What previous research has already been done on this topic?	
Who did it, when and, perhaps, why?	

What conclusions did previous researchers reach?	
How relevant are these conclusions today generally and for your own research?	
How relevant are these conclusions today generally and for your own research?	
How will your research build on previous research? How is it similar or different?	
What theories, models or practices are particularly relevant to prepare or analyse your research topic and findings?	
How has previous research influenced your own intended research methodology and methods?	

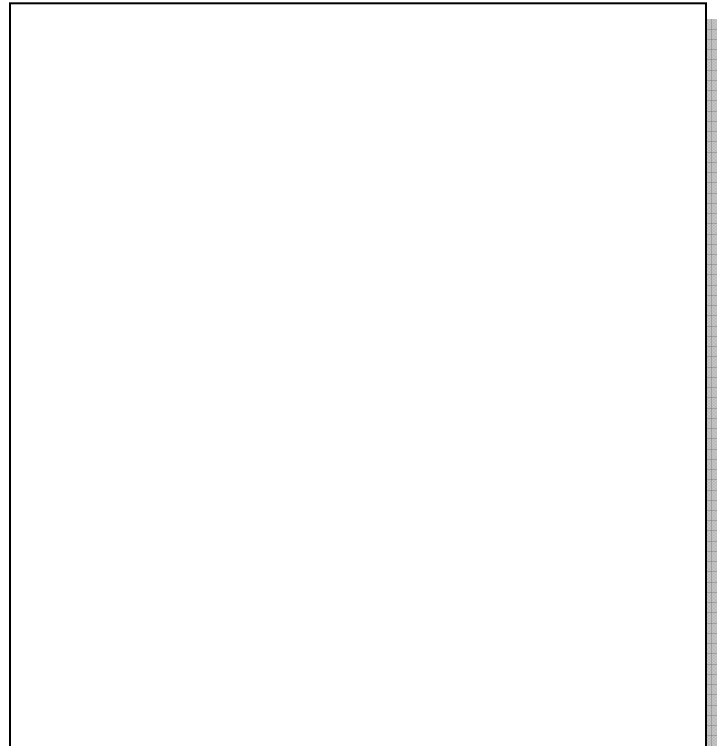
Don't forget

The research topic, the research questions you intend to raise and previous work done on this topic, will influence your methodology; see next section.

Methodology

What methods do you intend to adopt to gather information in pursuit of answers to your research questions? Note down brief answers to the following questions:

- Where and how will you gather **secondary data**? Is it easily available?
- Where, how, and when will you gather **primary data**, if applicable? Remember, it may be difficult to gather primary data, and you may have to settle for analysing secondary, and more easily available data.

Secondary data**Primary data**

Types of research

You also need to think about the overall theoretical nature of your research.

This topic will have been presented and discussed in your Research Methods module, and is outlined in detail in most research methods text books.

However, just to remind you of a few basic points:

Types of research (your research proposal may contain more than one type):

Exploratory	Descriptive	Analytical	Predictive
Exploratory research is undertaken when few or no previous studies exist. The aim is to look for patterns, hypotheses or ideas that can be tested and will form the basis for further research. Typical research techniques would include case studies, observation and reviews of previous related studies and data.	Descriptive research can be used to identify and classify the elements or characteristics of the subject, e.g. number of days lost because of industrial action. Quantitative techniques are often used to collect, analyse and summarise data.	Analytical research often extends the Descriptive approach to suggest or explain why or how something is happening, e.g. underlying causes of industrial action. An important feature of this type of research is in locating and identifying the different factors (or variables) involved.	The aim of Predictive research is to speculate intelligently on future possibilities, based on close analysis of available evidence of cause and effect, e.g. predicting when and where future industrial action might take place

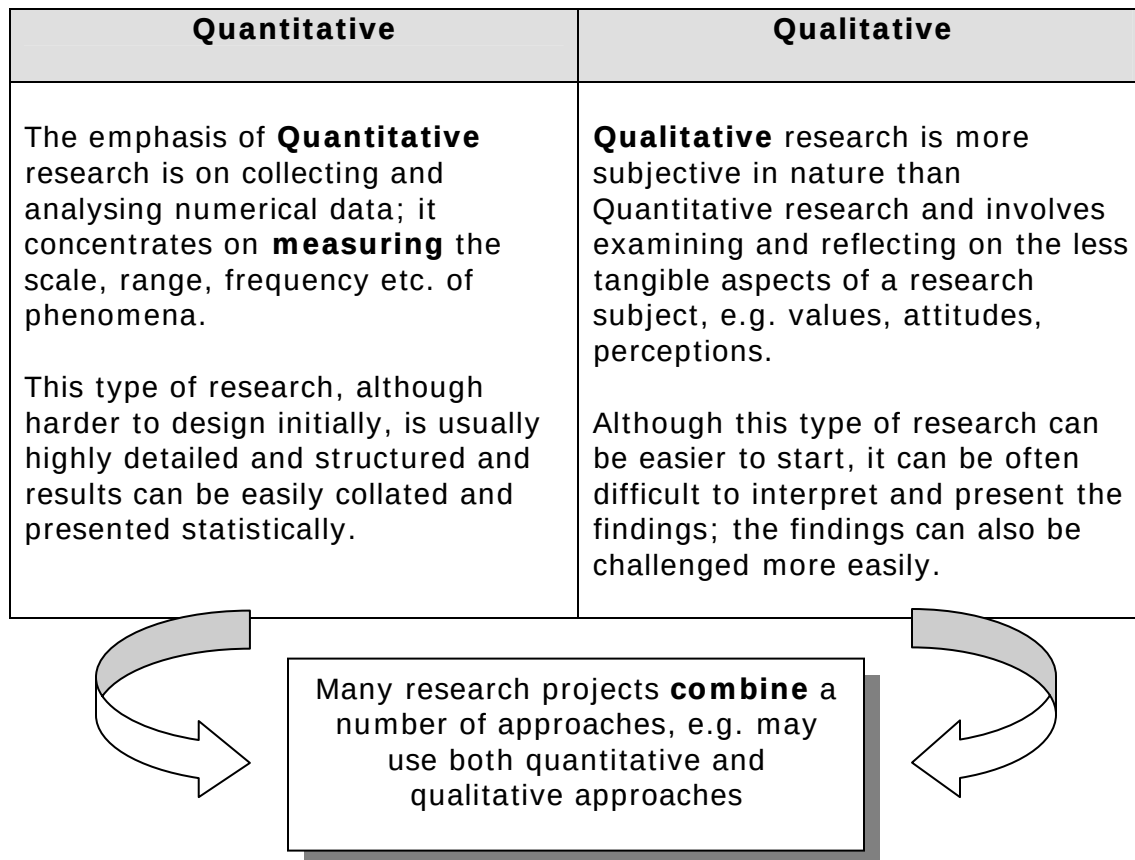
Research approaches:

Research can be approached in the following ways:

1. **Quantitative / Qualitative**
2. **Applied / Basic**
3. **Deductive / Inductive**

See next two pages for more detail on these.

1. Quantitative / Qualitative research



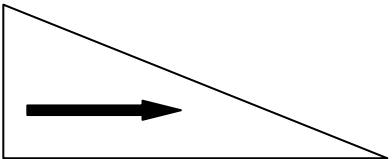
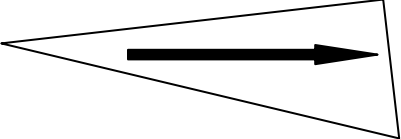
2. Basic / Applied research

Basic Research: the primary aim is to improve knowledge generally, without any particular applied purpose in mind at the outset.

Applied Research is designed from the start to apply its findings to a particular situation.

Note: students at the school of Management are expected to engage with an applied research or problem solving research project, so it is most likely your research will fall into this category.

3. Deductive / Inductive research

Deductive	Inductive
General ideas  Particular Situation Deductive research moves from general ideas/theories to specific particular & situations: the particular is deduced from the general, e.g. broad theories.	Particular Situation  General ideas Inductive research moves from particular situations to make or infer broad general ideas/theories.

So, summarise your overall research approach in the space below, e.g. type of research; research approach.

You can now move on to thinking about the time scale for this work. When you are thinking about the data collection stage, **allow ample time** for this, as if you are trying to arrange to talk to people, or gather data from questionnaires, it can take much longer than you think to organise.

It can be notoriously difficult to contact busy people and agree a meeting time when both the researcher and interviewee are free. Busy people often put questionnaires to the bottom of their in-tray, so do not expect high responses from questionnaires.

2. PREPARATION FOR WRITING THE MAIN REPORT

Main Body of the Report

Let us assume now, you have completed your research and you are ready to start writing the main report.

It is important to understand what needs to go into your project and how it should be structured. This will form an important part of the discussion with your supervisor and each project will be approached in its own unique way. However, it helps if you are clear in your own mind on the purpose of each report section.

The main body of your report will be sub-divided into sections. Each will have an introduction, a main body and a conclusion that leads the reader easily on to the next.

The sections you might typically find in a project or dissertation report are, as follows:

- Introduction
- Background
- Literature Review
- Methodology
- Results
- Discussions
- Conclusions

Although all research reports will include engagement with all the broad sections described above, the sub-headings chosen will vary from one report to the next (see examples on page 5). Some sections may merge and be titled different to the sub-headings shown above.

What should be included in these sections?

Broad Sections	Main Aim of Each Section
Introduction	The introduction to your report is very important – don't be tempted to leave it to last. If you make this the first writing item, you immediately begin to focus on what you need to say and how you need to say it. Indeed, you should be thinking about what you want to say in your introduction at an early stage of your research. The introduction should shape the remainder of the report – not vice versa A good introduction sets the tone and direction of the report. It informs the reader what the research is about, presents the overall research objective and specific research questions – and why these have been selected and pursued. In particular, you need to make it clear what specific business related problem or issue is being addressed. What does your project contribute to address this particular problem or issue? What contribution do you hope to make to help business with the problem or issue you have identified and addressed? The introduction may also present and summarise the contents of the remaining sections to the reader. (See an example of an introduction to a Masters report, appendix item 1.)
Background Information	The background information puts your work into a particular social, commercial, theoretical or historical context and helps to explain the research. For example, if your project is centred on a particular company, you would describe the nature of the company and its organisation and then outline the background to the issue, situation or phenomena you were investigating.

Literature Review	A main aim of the literature review is to inform the reader what previous research has been done on the topic and how it has guided or informed your own research. For example, you may want to test or challenge findings from previous research, or approach your study from a different perspective. Or you may want to explore how relevant today are the conclusions reached from earlier studies both generally and for your own research?
Methodology	The methodology section informs the reader what overall research methodology you adopted – and why - and what research tools (or methods) you adopted to gain and analyse your result. It also describes the participants involved (how many/how they were selected/their characteristics etc). It is also an opportunity for you to present an objective reflection on the limitations of the methodology and methods used. This is important, as all research has its limitations and there is no shame in admitting this; indeed, it will be expected of you.
Results	The results section presents a summary of the data or other information you gathered. This section presents the data information without discussion of the implications of your findings - this goes into the next 'Discussion' section.

Discussions	This section presents analysis and discussions of the result, including implications, consequences and issues raised. It will also compare and contrast results with previous research findings, identified and discussed earlier in the Literature Review. If it is a project, it may also include recommendations, although these could go into a separate 'Recommendations' section if there are a significant number to be made.
Conclusion	<i>'Every ending is a beginning'.</i> It is the end of your report, but, hopefully, the beginning of positive contribution to knowledge or organisational change as a result of your work. This need not be on a grand scale; some of the best projects focus on affecting small but important changes within the business concerned. The conclusion to the report reminds the reader of the main aim of your research, your methodology, the findings and what this means for the business community or organisation studied. You are also likely to point out the limitations of your research findings and how future researchers might take your work a stage further. Finish well – leave the reader with something significant to think about. (See example of a conclusion from a Masters report, appendix item 2).

Choose Appropriate Sub-headings

Although all research reports will include engagement with the broad sections described on pages 2-4 of this booklet, the sub-headings chosen to label them will vary from one report to the next, according to which research approach has been chosen. The order in which the information is presented may also vary a little; see four post-graduate research report examples below:

1. Title: <i>'Shopping in China – an Examination of Consumer Perception and Evaluation of Branding Strategy of Wal-Mart in China'</i> Sub-headings in main body of this report: 1. Introduction 2. Literature Review 3. Background 4. Methodology 5. Survey Findings 6. Discussion and Recommendation 7. Conclusion	2. Title: <i>'To Develop a Human Resource Competency Framework for the Manufacturing Operation of Dunlop Latex Foam Limited'</i> Sub-headings in main body of this report 1. Introduction 2. Background: Human Resources within Dunlop Latex Foam 3. Background: Competency and Skills Framework 4. Background: Delivering Strategic Aims 5. Summary of Key Literature 6. Key Performance Measures 7. Identifying a Framework for Business 8. Business Benefits 9. Conclusions and Recommendations
3. Title: <i>'Changing Personnel Management? An assessment of the personnel function leading business change in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises?'</i> Sub-headings in main body of this report: 1. Introduction 2. Scrutinising the Personnel Function and the Search for Status <i>(a background section divided into five sub-sections)</i> 3. Methodology 4. Results 5. Discussion 6. Report Conclusions	4. Title: <i>'A Knowledge Management Strategy for a Leading Provider of E-Commerce Related Services'</i> Sub-headings in main body of this report: 1. Introduction <i>(which included sub-sections on background, brief literature review and methodology)</i> 2. Interviews 3. Interview Findings 4. Styles Survey 5. Survey Findings 6. Literature Search 7. Evaluation of Strategic Options 8. Recommendations

So, whilst all research projects will contain information that connect with the broad section categories outlined on pages 2-4, they may be included in an order best suited to assist the logical flow of ideas in the report. It may be necessary to sub-divide long sections into sub-sections (see *examples 2, 3 and 4 on page 6*) to make the information more accessible and readable.

How to plan and approach writing each section?

The '5w and 1h' Approach to Project Writing

This is a technique that can work effectively for students who need to become more analytical in assignments. It works by asking six interrogative questions of any theory, model, practice, or in this case, your research. It can be used as a guide to help you focus on information you may need to present in each section.

Examples:

WHO?	Who: might benefit/be disadvantaged/is or is not involved/developed the idea?
WHAT?	What: are we taking for granted/assumptions are we making/ is implied that may not be true/ is missing/ is the background to this idea/is the wider significance/the advantages and negatives of the idea?
WHERE?	Where: can it be applied/would it not be applicable/else could it be relevant?
WHY?	Why: has this idea been developed/been introduced/should we pay any attention to it?
WHEN?	When: is the idea applicable/not applicable/reasonable or unreasonable to apply/should we start or stop?
HOW?	How: will the idea work in practice/be introduced/are people likely to react/will the idea be evaluated/we know or recognise success?

Questions in Action

The following grid and checklist will give you some examples of how these questions can be applied to each of the broad sections of a research report. These are just examples; not all will apply to your research and there may be other questions you need to ask.

Section	5W and IH questions	Checklist ✓
Introduction	➤ What was the overall subject of your research? ➤ What was the main aim of your research? ➤ What specific business related questions or issues did you address in your research? ➤ Why did you pursue these questions or issues in your research? ➤ Did you have any expectations of what you might find out at the start of your research? If so, what and why, and have these changed, and why? ➤ How is your report organised? What are the main features of each section of your report? ➤ What should the reader especially look out for in your report (i.e. key points)? ➤ What makes your research different to previous research?	
Background Information	➤ What are the main goods and services of any company involved? ➤ What is the historical/social/ economic background of any company or organisation researched? ➤ What are the values, culture or policies underpinning any organisation being researched? ➤ What is the background to the particular situation or phenomena examined? If relevant, why has a particular situation arisen?	

Literature Review	➤ What previous research has already been done on this topic? Who did it, when and why? ➤ What conclusions did previous researchers reach? ➤ How relevant are these conclusions today generally and for your own research? ➤ How does your research build on previous research? How is it similar or different (e.g. similar/different models or methods used etc), ➤ Who are the principal commentators and theorists in the subject you researched?	
Methodology	➤ How has previous research influenced your research methodology and methods? ➤ What philosophical approach did you take to your research, e.g. Qualitative/Quantitative? Inductive/Deductive? ➤ Why did you adopt this approach? ➤ In retrospect was this the correct approach? ➤ What methods (to gather primary/secondary data) did you decide to use and why? ➤ What criteria did you adopt for collecting this data (e.g. target number, age, gender, occupational etc) and why? ➤ If relevant, who are the main people involved in the research and their roles and responsibilities? ➤ What was the target sample number? What type of sample was it, e.g. a random sample? ➤ What was the actual number you achieved? Why was there a shortfall? ➤ Where did you collect the data? When did you collect it? How did you collect it? ➤ Who was involved in the collection? ➤ How did you analyse it? What analytical method(s) did you apply to draw your results? ➤ What logistical or other problems did you encounter in collecting or analysing it?	

Results	➤ What was the result of your findings? ➤ Were the results affected in any way by any event, situation or phenomenon? ➤ If there was a shortfall in the amount of data you gained, how have you compensated or dealt with this situation? ➤ How does the amount of data collected by you compare or contrast with previous research in this area of enquiry? ➤ What is the best way of presenting these results in the report?	
Discussions	➤ How do the findings connect with your overall research aim and research questions? ➤ What do the findings mean in theory and/or practice? ➤ How unexpected/expected were some or all of the findings? ➤ How can the findings be applied? ➤ When can they be applied? ➤ Who could apply them? ➤ What recommendations can you make based on your research findings?	
Conclusions	The introduction of your report was the place to tell the reader what you are going to say. The conclusion is an opportunity to remind readers what you have told them! This may sound trite, but in a long report it is important to do this, to remind the reader of important points you made earlier in the report. The conclusion pulls the threads of your research together and leaves you and the reader with a sense of accomplishment and finality. The concluding section therefore can contain the following answers to these questions: (continued...)	

Conclusions: some questions to ask	➤ What are the main aims and findings of your research? ➤ What are the practical or applied applications of your findings for others? ➤ What were the unexpected problems that arose and the limitations of the research? ➤ How future research might build on where you left off? ➤ What will be the last sentence you will write? Make it a good one.	
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Example of a final sentence in a project report:

At a recent lecture Sir John Harvey Jones remarked that people were led “...*by example, rather than by exhortation*”. A company’s knowledge management strategy fundamentally relies on the willingness of its people to share and to learn: such a culture is defined or denied by the actions of senior managers.

The final sentence should try and capture what your research project has been about (*in the example above, it was about knowledge management*) and give the reader something to think about.

3. WRITING TIPS

1. Good writers have to continually revise and rewrite until they are satisfied with the final result. Don't underestimate the time this takes.
2. Talk to people about your research and explain it to them. By explaining it to others you will explain it to yourself (see also the role of the Effective Learning Officer, p.14)
3. Always keep in mind your original research aims and research questions and **remind the reader of these at regular intervals**: in the introduction, literature review, methodology, findings – in virtually in every section - you need to remind the reader (and yourself) what your research is about – see also item 6 below.
4. Always keep in mind the **central point or findings** of your report and emphasise these in your writing. Emphasise them in the results section and emphasise them again in the conclusion.
5. **Start writing early**. Write a section at a time as you complete them; don't try writing the report all at once. Give yourself plenty of time for revision, correcting and for formatting the document – this can be very time-consuming. Discuss and agree with your supervisor arrangements for sending and returning completed text to each other.
6. In a long report, it is necessary to remind the reader of the main points in each section. Summarise the main points made at the end of each section and build the anticipation of the reader for what is to come next. The example below illustrates how a student concludes his literature review and sets the scene to move on to the next section.

The literature has demonstrated a range of views regarding change agency and the extent of their adoption can now be assessed through a survey relating to the role of the personnel management function in UK SMEs. This study now assesses the extent to which modern conceptions of the personnel function, in particular business change, exist among UK SMEs and the nature of such a business change role.

7. Write with the ear. A sentence may look correct on paper, but often sounds jumbled or rambling if read aloud. Listen to your sentences in your head as you write and do not write anything that sounds false or uncomfortable to say aloud.
8. Write for the eye as well. Make the document visually appealing, and use plenty of white space in margins, between sections and paragraphs to make the document look good (see the guidelines on line spacing and type font in your MA or MBA dissertation or project guidelines).
9. Keep your writing clear and simple. Avoid long, convoluted sentences - and don't fill them with jargon or pretentious waffle.
10. Don't use twenty words, if ten will do; good writing in reports is plain, clear and succinct. Be ruthless with your pruning of redundant words and sentences. Look at the following introduction to an assignment in the left column below.

Before Pruning	After Pruning
Before embarking on an approach to analyse the business model there is a need to explore the meaning of the business model. Paul Timmers (2000) has defined the business model as 'an architecture for product, service and information flows, including a description of the various business actors and their roles'. Although there are different kinds of business model they have got one thing in common and that is they are designed to make money for their owners in the long run. (81 words)	Before analysing the business model, there is a need to explore its meaning. Timmers (2000) defined the business model as 'an architecture for product, service and information flows, including a description of the various business actors and their roles' (p.32). Although there are different business models, they have one thing in common: they are designed to make money for their owners. (60 words)

The pruned version says the same as the original, but more succinctly.

Proof-reading

If you are concerned about your spelling and grammar, have your sections proof read before you hand them to your supervisor. A good proof reader will point out any spelling or grammatical errors - but leave you to decide whether to make the corrections or not; the control, therefore, still rests with you.

This is not a task you should expect your supervisor, tutor or any member of staff at the School of Management to do, as it is not their responsibility.

You could ask a friend, relative or another student to help, or ask a self-employed proof-reader to do it. The Effective Learning Officer can supply you with a list of local or regional proof-readers. Their fees vary, so you would need to negotiate directly with them and give them plenty of time to read your work.

How the Effective Learning Officer (ELO) Can Help You:

- The ELO is someone to talk to, or communicate with by Email, about your work (see item 2 in the 'Top Ten Writing Tips' on page 12).
- The ELO can advise you on the structure and organisation of sections, and on referencing and presentational issues, but will not comment on the validity of content issues; that is between you and your supervisor.
- The ELO can advise you on writing techniques and strategies to make sure you get your points across clearly.
- The ELO can discuss with you how best you can express a point or idea you want to make.
- The ELO will not proof-read your report, but can give you a list of professional proof-readers who will, for an agreed fee, point out spelling and grammatical errors.

You will always be in the control of what you write; the Effective Learning Officer plays an advisory role only – you decide whether to accept or reject any advice offered.

Contact: Effective Learning Officer, Room 0.10 Airedale Building.

Additional Reading

- Collis, J. and Hussey, R. (2003). *Business Research: a practical guide for undergraduate and postgraduate student* (2nd edition). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (Chapter 9: Writing up Research).
- Saunders, M., P. Lewis, and A. Thornhill (2007). *Research Methods for Business Students* (4th edition). Harlow: Prentice Hall.
- Levin, P. (2005). *Excellent Dissertations*. Open University Press.

Other Relevant Effective Learning Service booklets

- Research Methods
- Foundations for Good Research
- References and Bibliographies

Available in printed form or via the School Home Page: 'Resources' – 'Effective Learning Service' – 'Workbooks'.

APPENDIX 1: Introduction

This is an example of an Introduction from a Masters dissertation and illustrates how the '5W and 1H' technique can be applied. The student immediately engages the reader with three quotations from commercial organisations. These serve to put into context the main topic, background and overall aim of the study. The aim and purpose of each chapter of the report is then summarised; this gives the reader a clear sense of direction.

INTRODUCTION

"It is our people who make the difference where it matters most..."
(Tesco 2002)

"This is a global success story made possible by the quality and determination of over 100,000 people worldwide." (Vodafone 2002)

"...we believe that competitive advantage is achieved through our people..."
(Kellogg 2002)

Employees are important to the competitive success of organisations and yet the role of a business function dedicated to the management of people has never been a glamorous one. Over the past 50 years in particular it has been subject to heavy criticism and has sought to re-invent itself to attain the status and the respect of other management functions.

Writing in 1955, Peter Drucker asked "Is Personnel Management Bankrupt?" In concluding that it was not, he heavily criticised the state of the function. Describing it as:

"...largely a collection of incidental techniques without much internal cohesion."
(p243)

... he demonstrated that the personnel function had failed to deliver on the promise of relating how workers and work elements may be managed (p253/4). Given this view, it is unsurprising that he perceived personnel workers as constantly worrying about an inability to prove their worth to the organisation (p243).

Consequently the function has sought to identify new ways in which a valuable contribution can be made and demonstrated. The most recent trend to emerge from this search has been a desire to become business change agents and there is evidence suggesting that this approach has been adopted in some large UK businesses.

This study assesses the extent to which a change agent role forms part of the personnel management function¹ in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). It also aims to survey attitudes towards the effectiveness of, and establish a future direction for, the function in this role. In doing this, the study builds on the work of Storey (1992), Caldwell (2001) and others who identified the presence of a change agent element in the responsibilities of the modern personnel manager. However, unlike these studies of large organisations with personnel specialists, this assessment considers a group of organisations reported to be less sophisticated in their approach to people management issues (Duberley and Walley, 1995).

Contents of this report

¹ The term “personnel management” is used throughout to describe a function, or set of functions, aimed at systematically managing people. The debate surrounding personnel and human resource management is covered elsewhere in the literature and is not strictly relevant to this study, however the main differences are outlined below in the section headed “*The Search for Status*”

Chapter Two introduces personnel management in SMEs before considering the function as viewed through academic literature. This will outline how the challenges to its validity and business-worth have resulted in an “introspective neurosis” (Guest 1991, p165). This concern with status as a theme of personnel management is traced through the principal works of the past 25 years to the identification of business change as a factor of the role. The nature of this new component is then contrasted with the views expressed by authors working in the discipline of business change.

Having established the development and current state of the function, Chapter Three is concerned with the survey methodology and Chapter Four presents a report of key findings. Chapter Five has three broad sections. The first establishes that SMEs perceive a need for business change capability and consider the ability to change an important factor in their continuing business success. In light of this, the second section looks at how effective the personnel management function is thought to be at undertaking a spectrum of change activities. In the final part of Chapter Five, the themes arising from the preceding appraisal are compared with the literature surveyed in Chapter Two, demonstrating the extent to which the survey findings break new ground. This informs the identification of a new form of change agent.

Chapter Six forms a review of the key ideas outlined here, their practical application, and a look towards how this research could be developed. This includes a brief consideration of how this study is limited and how such issues could be improved upon in subsequent work.

APPENDIX 2: Conclusions

This is an example of a conclusions chapter from the same Masters dissertation introduced in Appendix 1. In this chapter the student first reminds the reader of the aims of the study and of the research findings; second, the practical implications of the findings for business are presented; third, the limitations of the study are highlighted and suggestions made as to how others might build on what the student has learned.

REPORT CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the most recent elements of personnel management's search for status. It has demonstrated that the emergence of the personnel management change agent can be viewed, in part, as a response to the challenges laid-down by established management thinking. In considering the extent to which this element of personnel management has been adopted in workplaces this study has referred to a range of literature and engaged in primary research aimed at understanding the nature of the personnel management role in SMEs with particular reference to business change. What has emerged is a function based on role-sharing rather than dedicated functional specialism. This role-sharing characteristic is true of the personnel management responsibilities, for example fulfilling advisor, service provider, specialist regulator and change agent roles, and broader business roles, for example Operations Directors holding personnel management duties. A consequence of this integrated approach in SMEs is that previous models defining particular change agent sub-types fail to adequately explain the personnel management change agent behaviour exhibited in this study. To remedy this, the change mogul characterisation has been presented as the most promising route forward for personnel management in this context. However the risks associated with this

approach have also been addressed. More generally, it is unclear how adoption of change management responsibility tackles Drucker's criticisms that personnel management is "...largely a collection of incidental techniques without much internal cohesion." (p243) It could also be reminiscent of Legge's criticism (1978, p64) of a function more concerned with being busy than delivering value. An additional risk is that other functions can fulfil many of the tasks associated with personnel management business change, and if they choose to do so, personnel management will need another way through which to demonstrate its worth.

This assessment of the personnel function leading business change in SMEs has revealed that there is a role to be fulfilled and that presently it forms an important part of the personnel management function, however the longer-term security of this position is uncertain.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE FINDINGS

This study suggests that those primarily responsible for personnel management in their organisations regard business change as an important component of their organisation's future competitiveness. If they are to meet this challenge, the change mogul role alone may struggle to deliver. This is because of personnel management's reported lower effectiveness in operational and support aspects of business change. Without a means of realising change programmes the contribution of the change mogul role will be limited. Therefore those who are currently tasked with personnel and change management duties need to strengthen these implementation aspects. The appropriate line management and

supervision (Larkin and Larkin, 1996) may best achieve this rather than seeking to expand the role of the personnel management function. This approach offers change moguls the ability to deliver effective results, whilst it also acknowledges the level of “role-overlap” that featured in the study sample. Ultimately, each organisation must consider its particular needs and resources when evaluating the optimum role for the personnel function and accomplishing business change. The limitations of this study, which are now considered, prevent more general recommendations being made.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY AND NOTES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Studies of this nature are subject to certain limitations that can impact upon the results received and the conclusions drawn. Limitations in this survey include the high rate of neutral responses, which represent blind spots in the data. The reasons for this are unclear.

The issue of low response rate is also an important factor. The effect of this could be that individual results attract undue significance and thereby distort the view of the function presented. Differing interpretations of questions and the interests of the respondent could compound this problem. Also, the survey only collected data from those organisations acknowledging personnel management as a business issue, it does not indicate how many businesses failed to respond because there it is deemed irrelevant. Furthermore the study was restricted by geographical area. The result of such limitations is that more general conclusions should be made with caution.

This study has also highlighted matters that must be addressed in subsequent investigations of this area. Future work could benefit from a shorter questionnaire which, being quicker to complete, may attract a higher response rate. This could be achieved by a more focused survey concerned specifically with the role of personnel management and business change. Greater standardisation of responses could be achieved by supplementing the questionnaire with personal interviews; these could also provide opportunities to further understand how tactical personnel management issues are addressed in respondent organisations. Furthermore, the interviews could aid the formulation of a theory that could be tested by a larger study.

Accepting these limitations, it is submitted that this study has advanced the debate surrounding the role of personnel management, with particular reference to its role in business change. This is because it has addressed a critical sector of the UK business community so far neglected by research into this area. It is hoped that this research will be extended so that a greater understanding of personnel management across the business community may be achieved.

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