

## Ideas for Case Research

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### Introduction

Dr. Cara Peters, Associate Editor of *Journal for Case Studies*, has a long-time friend from graduate school who used to be an active member of the Society for Case Research. This was the kind of guy that everyone liked and when she saw him at past summer workshops he had interesting, well-written cases. Well, after not seeing him at the workshop for quite some time, Peters sent him an email telling him encouraging him to continue his case research. Her friend answered that he had hoped to be back sometime but he just hadn't any opportunities to work with companies that could lead to a case for awhile.

Well, that conversation created an "a-ha" moment for Peters. There was no particular reason that we in SCR had not seen her friend in awhile, other than he did not have an idea for a case. We, as editors, know that problem can be addressed and that sent us on the search for researchers who have written about how to get ideas for cases. Within our very own SCR newsletter, we found that Ann Hackert shared her thoughts on how to get inspiration for cases in fall issue of 2012. We also found others outside of SCR, such as Management Professor Gina Vega (2013), who discussed in her case writing book where to find case subjects.

In her book, Vega (2013, 21) stated

cases are all around you, everywhere. You are your own best sources for cases. You have had a wide array of experiences and have interacted with many different people and organizations over the course of your professional and private life.

Vega recommended that a researcher take the first step by, "identifying what you want your students to learn and then brainstorming on all of the contacts you have who may be able to share a good story" (p. 22). While Vega is suggesting a good place to start is with what you want the students to learn, we feel that approach may be limiting. Most of us are very familiar with topics and theories in our own field. If we were limited only to writing cases about our own specialty areas, then we may be overlooking ideas and opportunities for identifying other interesting case material.

Hackert (2012) stated that inspiration for cases can be found all around us. In her words, “inspiration can be found anywhere there is a good story to tell...friends, relatives, alumni, students and local businesses” (p. 5). However, Hackert’s (2012) approach does not suggest starting with the learning objectives of the students. Her approach appears to be a bit broader. If you begin with inspiration from stories told by friends or relatives, for example, their “problems at work” may be outside your field of expertise. For example, your neighbor may be talking about a personnel problem he is dealing with at work. As a specialist in marketing, you may know very little about human resource management. Nonetheless, we believe that should not deter you from writing a case. As long as you have a good story to tell and permission from the case subject, the SCR is full of potential co-authors that can help you find the right theory, develop appropriate learning objectives, and write the answers to the human resource questions in the teaching note.

Despite the differences between Vega (2013) and Hackert (2012), they share common ground. Both researchers encouraged us to examine our world to identify good ideas for cases. Not all of us understand this intuitively, such as Peters’ friend who had not had any interactions with companies that probably had incidents that could have been excellent case writing material. Perhaps we are not looking beyond the small, daily interactions that have potential to turn into cases. Most cases are not derived from a consulting project where the professor is approached by a company to help solve a problem. Cases come from a wide variety of sources. We need to dig deeper into our daily conversations and interactions that we have in both our professional and personal lives.

Hackert (2012) recommended the following ways to find inspiration for cases:

- Read the popular press
- Ask students to tell you about their work experiences
- Ask alumni about decisions they make at work
- Contact local businesses and ask them about challenges they currently face
- Look at issues bubbling up within your university
- Ask visiting executives within your university to share experiences, and
- Look to your service to the field, such as board memberships.

We have developed our own list of ways to get ideas for cases, which builds upon Hackert’s (2012) work. Our list included the following:

- **Consulting Projects** Have you completed any consulting projects in the recent past? While consulting projects are different from cases, they provide the researcher with a

company that has a problem and is willing to share details with him/her. To make an easier transition from consulting project to a case, the researcher may want to ask the company to agree to let the professor use the results of the consulting report for educational purposes, as part of the negotiations in the contract prior to the start of the project.

- **Guest Speakers** Do you (or any of your colleagues in your department) bring in guest speakers to classes? We find the guest speakers already care deeply about college education. They are giving up their time to come visit with college students. In addition, these people are often “in the trenches” and have lots of stories to share with students about “working in the real world.” Listen to these stories and ask the speaker if you could follow up to learn more and write a case about his/her experience.
- **In the Press** Like Hackert (2012), we have also been inspired by reading newspapers, magazines, and the popular press. The media have presented the story; so, part of the case has been developed. However, you will often need to expand your research to additional published materials in order to have enough material for a case. Moreover, a company that has its problems being broadcast in the news may not want to agree to a release for publication. So, if the press is a source for inspiration, you may end up writing a descriptive case based off of many secondary sources.
- **Friends** Do you have friends, neighbors, and family members that own their own business or are willing to ask for permission from their employer to help you write a case? Some small business owners like the idea of getting the name of their company promoted through an academic publication. Other friends and family members may just want you to tell their story and are willing to help you navigate their company for permission in order to get their story published.
- **City or Town Organizations** Does your city or county have a Chamber of Commerce or other professional organizations that you can join? You may already belong to a local, professional organizations that includes working professionals. Once established as a member of the organization, you know these people and you may ask them about their challenges at work and then inquire about whether they would be willing to let you conduct further interviews with them in order to write a case on them or their company.
- **Small Business Development Center** Does your university (or a university in your state) have a Small Business Development Center? The U. S. Small Business Administration provides grants to states and universities around the country that have lead to business schools housing a small business development center on campus. These centers often look to faculty for consultation and some have their own professional staff working with

small business owners who need help solving problems. These small business owners, in exchange for your consultation, may be open to letting you write a case about their company or new start up.

- **Class Project** Do you do class projects with your students? Some classes require students to write business plans for new start-ups. Others have students work with non-profit organizations or small businesses that are looking for consulting, marketing, and other types of business expertise that can be provided by your students. These class projects provide another opportunity to learn about the company and ask the client if he/she would let you write a case about them or co-author the case with you.
- **Alumni** Like Hackert (2012), we have also found that alumni can provide a source for potential case material. Involved alumni care deeply about the university and often want to maintain personal connections with their past professors or want to give back in some way to their alma matter. Thus, alumni can be receptive to requests to meet for interviews, assist in getting permission, and agreeing to let you write a case about their experiences and those of their employers.
- **Advisory Boards** Many programs have advisory boards that meet at least annually. The professionals who participate are also committed to the program and student development. Their stories about work life and challenges they face often generate excellent information for case research.
- **Students** And finally, we concur with Hackert (2012) that students may be an excellent source for case ideas. At our universities, the majority of both graduate and undergraduate students work, providing ideas for cases. Graduate students with high level (i.e., executive level) work experience have many stories that can easily be turned into cases. They may provide ideas and suggestions for problems they have seen at their company. You can also assign them to write a case or critical incident for a class project or independent study. While these students do not know the elements of case writing, they often may provide you with a full idea, background on the company, its problems, and also help you access those at the company who need to give permission.

When we integrated our list with that of Hackert's (2012), a model for case development emerged, based on internal and external sources (See Figure 1). Internal sources include opportunities that the case researcher finds in his/her everyday life. External sources are determined by the case researcher having built professional and business connections or gleaning information from the popular press. While not mutually exclusive, we discovered that some sources for cases were the result of social and professional connections.

### **Figure 1: Inside-Outside Model for Case Development**

<b>Internal Sources</b>	<b>External Sources</b>
Students (both graduate and undergraduate)	Popular press stories
Relationships with alumni	Cold call local businesses
Issues within the university	Visiting executives to the college
Consulting projects	Board memberships
Guest speakers you have in your class	Chamber of Commerce
Family, friends, neighbors	Other professional organizations
Class projects (with clients, non-profits, etc.)	Small Business Development Center
Advisory boards	

### **The Approach**

Now that you have ideas for how to get ideas for case material, you have to do the leg work required to get the company to agree. In other words, assuming your sister has a problem at work that would make a great case, you now have to obtain permission from the company in order to be able to research, write, and publish the case. As we propose in our previous JCS article, “The Importance of Permissions in Field Research,” it is best to approach the company for permission at the beginning of the project (Cellucci and Peters, 2013).

We have the following suggestions for how to approach the company to request permission. The following suggestions will help the company understand what exactly you are asking for and whether they would be comfortable with the final product that will be published.

- When you first approach the company, bring along a copy of a past case you have published or a copy of a good case that was recently published by someone else in the *Journal of Case Studies*. Showing them the final product will illustrate that other companies are comfortable with case writing and also specifies what kind of information they will need to make available to you and communicated publicly about the company via the final publication.
- In the approach, make it completely clear that the publication is for educational purposes only. They need to understand that cases are adopted by other professors and used as a basis for classroom discussion and class exercises. Because the publication process is long (i.e., often more than a year), it is likely that a competitor will not be able to glean any timely, useful, competitive information from the case. An employer might be more receptive if he/she understands that the timeline for publication is very long.
- If the company has concerns about competition or confidentiality due to proprietary information from the case, you should explain to them that you can disguise the names of the characters, the name of the company, and the location in order to not reveal information that would put their competitor at an advantage. In addition, financial

information can be disguised or not even presented, if the company has a particular concern about that information being revealed.

- A positive selling point of allowing you to write the case is that the company has potential to get free marketing from the publication. The case can help spread the word about the strengths of the company. Many entrepreneurs like the idea of helping get the word out about their company and the case also provides a venue for him/her to tell his/her story of success. So explain the marketing and promotional benefits of them letting you write a case may help them to be more receptive when you are asking for permission.
- Finally, writing a case can also give the company some free consulting work. Assuming the case did not develop from a paid consulting project, you could write the case and then, along with students in your classes, develop ideas for solutions to the case problem that you would then present to the company. This is a form of free consulting work that some companies may value. Getting that input may be valuable to a company, especially if giving permission and letting you do a few short interviews, is all that it costs them.

### **In This Issue**

The cases in this issue illustrate both internal and external sources to find ideas for good cases. Four cases rely upon internal sources; four on external sources; and one used both. Fowler and Krueger's case *Tico Manufacturing: A Case Study of Entrepreneurial Growth*, was based on internal sources:--a personal relationship. The case elaborated how a Teamster strike in 1994 provided an unusual entrepreneurial venture.

Johnson and Kaupin also found their idea via internal sources as they focus on the hiring process and the experiences of a professor that served as chair of a hiring committee in *Selection of an HR Generalist at a Public University*. Beal and Tarter, *Flat World Knowledge and the College Textbook Market: A Revolution?* relied upon archival research gathered via a university case writing initiative. They ask the students to assess Flat World's business model and make recommendations to protect its market position. Last, Brennan and Lundquist in *Independent Contractor or Employee: the Exotic Dancer Cases* uses internal sources based upon personal experience as a participant observer. They ask the students to decide whether workers were classified more appropriately as independent contractors or employees using Internal Revenue Service and common law criteria.

Minkow, Kastantin, and Rick's case, *Front Office Trading: I Want to See the Positions!* relied upon external sources as the information came the popular press. They present how J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. Chairman and Chief Executive Officer James Dimon experienced many critical management decisions because of unusual trading positions created by the front office trader. Stellern and O'Connor case, *Tom Hoenig and the \$600 Billion Bailout*, also was based upon

external sources –documentation from the U.S. government agencies as well as meeting minutes from the Federal Open Market Committee and speeches from professional conferences. They examine the economic conditions before Tom Hoenig’s vote on the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) and the vote to support or not support the purchase of an additional \$600 billion in government bonds in 2010 to respond to one of the worst recessions, the Great Recession of 2008. Finally, Blake and Berger, *Amazon Kindle Fire Claims an Important Market Position*, use external sources to have students evaluate an e-tailer’s effort to successfully compete in the tablet pc market.

The idea for Gaharan and Foust’ case, *Cost of Quality -- AT&T's Customer Service*, is unique in that it came from both internal sources (personal experience) and external sources (AT&T public documents). They center their case on customer service issues as one person attempts to communicate with a large company about her emailed billing problems.

### **Conclusion**

We encourage you to consider the resources employed as you read the cases in this issue. Good ideas for cases come from our classroom, our interactions with other professionals, and at times, merely from reading an article in a newspaper that perks our interest. As Vega (2013) noted, cases are all around us. Looking forward to hearing about your good ideas for future issues.

### **References**

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