

 **Analysing a case study**

Case study analysis is an integral part of a course in human resource management (HRM). The purpose of a case study is to provide learners with the experience of applying strategic HRM concepts to an organization they have been asked to study or to their own organization. Case study analysis provides learners with an experience of HRM problems that they have probably not had the opportunity to experience in their own workplace. Furthermore, case study analysis will provide you with the opportunity to practise your research skills and your oral presentation skills when presenting your report in class.

Detailed analysis of a case study should include six key areas:

1. the history, development and growth of the organization
2. the identification of the organization's strengths and weaknesses
3. the identification of the organization's external opportunities and threats
4. the kind of business strategy pursued by the organization
5. the nature of the organization's structure (hierarchical or 'flat' structure – see Chapter 4), control and human resources (HR) systems and how they align with its strategy
6. recommendation(s).

The following is a guide to the steps you can take to analyse the case material.

Executive summary

The major problems, causes and recommendations are clearly stated in a single paragraph on the first page of the report, permitting the reader a quick insight into the logic of the analysis: 'The major problems are ...', 'The causes of these problems are ...' and 'Consequently we recommend that ...'. This format quickly and understandably conveys the authors' conclusions.

Background/summary of the facts

Present briefly (in no more than two pages) the key facts and major assumptions. Explore the significant factors in the organization's internal and external environments. Include any important assumptions made.

Diagnosis of the problem(s)

Include a concise statement of the major problem(s) identified, prioritizing these into major and minor. Identify the relationships between problems. This should be a relatively brief section, more like a list than a detailed analysis, which will take place in the next section. Include any opportunities facing the organization, as well as any problems.

Cause(s) of the problem(s)

This is the heart of the case analysis. It is very important to distinguish between symptoms (outward manifestations) of a problem (for example a fever) and the underlying causes (for example a bacterial infection). Be sure the causes are related to the problem(s). A causal diagram (with arrows) will usually be of assistance. Clearly apply the course material to defend your stated opinions on the causes of the problems.

Alternative solutions

Indicate a number of possible realistic solutions, including maintaining the status quo. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of each one in terms of the firm's objectives, the characteristics of its internal and external environments and the presenting problem(s). Also include the expected outcomes of each.

Implementation of the solution and evaluation

The solution will be some combination of the above alternatives. Specifically state what will be done, by whom, when, how, where and, most importantly, why. Justify the decision with sound theoretical logic. Why will this approach work? Apply the course concepts to the solution. Additional research may be necessary and is encouraged (that is, consult other textbooks, leading management journals and so on). Ensure that the solutions do indeed address the identified problems and causes. Outline how one would go about assessing the effectiveness of the developed plan.

Remember that you must be sensitive to the needs of the organization and tailor your analysis to suit the specific issue discussed in your case.

1. This guide to analysing a case study draws upon the work of Charles Hill and Gareth Jones (1998). *Strategic Management Theory: An Integrated Approach*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.