

A student's guide to analysing case studies

The purpose of this guide is to help you to maximise your learning when using case studies. It outlines some key issues in using case studies for improving learning.

After reading this guide you should be able to:

- Understand what a case study is
- Appreciate the benefits of using case studies in the learning of strategic management and how their use can help develop key managerial skills
- Understand the key steps in analysing case studies
- Apply theoretical concepts and frameworks to the material in the case
- Identify and appreciate different ways to present case analysis

1. What is a case study?

A case study is a particular account of a set of circumstances faced by an industry, specific organisation or individual. It provides information about a real life business situation and gives examples of how strategic issues are managed by real organisations. A case study describes an actual situation, such as the current state of an industry and factors influencing it or, for example, specific problems facing an organisation. Typical case scenarios in strategic management might include, for example: an analysis of the external environment in which an organisation is competing; the resources of the organisation; and its core competences. In such a scenario you could be asked to undertake a strategic analysis and identify the key issues facing the organisation, now and in the future. Other scenarios might outline the strategic direction the organisation is pursuing, where the task is to evaluate those strategies. Alternatively, it might assess how an organisation has implemented their strategy or the problems it has encountered in doing so. Whatever the question(s), it will relate to a specific part(s) of the strategic management process. When undertaking such analysis, you would be expected to utilise relevant theoretical concepts and frameworks.

2. The benefits of using case studies when studying strategic management

In learning about strategic management it is likely that you will engage in lectures and tutorials on a weekly basis. The lecture material presented will identify the key theoretical concepts and tools of strategy as well as some of the key issues facing business managers in today's competitive environment. Whilst the lecture programme might identify some of the key skills required in management practice today, they will not give you the opportunity to actually develop some of those skills yourself. To learn a new skill, you need to practice it. The case study allows you to engage in the practice of strategic management by putting yourself in a decision maker's position and forcing you to grapple with real life business scenarios facing actual managers in the workplace. At the same time, it allows you to test your understanding and application of theoretical concepts and frameworks. The table below illustrates some of the key skills you, the student, might develop in using case studies.

Table 1: Key skill development in using case studies

Analytical skills Case studies will usually contain both qualitative and quantitative data. You are forced to think through this material, draw conclusions and justify why you have reached those conclusions.

Decision making skills When drawing conclusions, it is likely that you will make decisions or identify a specific course of action for an organisation. In doing this you will first have had to consider alternative courses of action, evaluate those alternatives and select the most appropriate. You will also need to justify why that course of action is the most appropriate.

Application You will have the opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of theoretical concepts and frameworks through their application to the given facts and figures in the case. It is likely that you would be awarded marks for such understanding in an assessed piece of work.

Communication skills It is likely that you will be required to present your findings to the rest of the group or tutor verbally, as will the rest of your colleagues. In doing that you must be prepared for others to challenge what you present.

Remember, there is unlikely to be a definitive answer to set questions in strategic management; there might be several alternative solutions.

However, what you will have to do is to justify your decisions, course of action etc. from the analysis you have undertaken.

Usually you will work in groups in analysing cases. This enhances your social skills through discussion, debate and compromise. These are important skills in the world of work, where many people work on projects or set tasks as part of a team. You might also be expected to use case analysis as part of an assessment. You must therefore be able to

summarise information succinctly and identify the most important points in the case, rather than merely regurgitating the case word-for-word

3. Key steps in analysing cases

Read the case prior to class discussion! You will learn very little from others' presentations or discussion if you have not familiarised yourself with the material and issues involved in the case.

Read the case initially to familiarise yourself with its basic content and issues under discussion. What is the case all about? What are the strategic issues highlighted? It might then be a good idea to examine the questions set by your tutor and reread the case thoroughly with these questions in mind. Maybe using a highlighter pen as you reread in light of the task. In doing this, you should hopefully be able to identify how the tools and frameworks of strategic management could be used to answer the questions set. It might be useful to read any set questions prior to you rereading the case, as these can often give you a feel for the type of strategic issues the case may be addressing.

Often, there will be tables and charts exhibited in the case. These will be telling a story. You need to study these carefully to identify the story being told. If such exhibits contain data and financial information then this may require you to undertake some analysis of those numbers to examine, for example, growth in an industry, or employ, for example, financial ratios to assess the company's performance. Analysis of such information will help you to justify decisions you make about particular issues or recommendations and could help in validating what you are presenting.

You might feel you have inadequate information in a particular case. This is real life. It is unlikely that a manager will ever have all of the information he/she requires to make a decision. It is practice therefore in case analysis to make reasonable assumptions but explicitly state why you feel it is a reasonable assumption to make. In summary:

- Read the case before the class
- Read the case questions to understand the strategic issues you are expected to address
- Reread the case bearing in mind the case questions
- Make sure you understand any numerical information outlined in tables, charts etc.
- Make sure you explain the rationale for any assumptions made in your analysis
- Draw conclusions from issues identified

4. Using theoretical concepts and frameworks

Strategy tools allow you to better understand the different specific strategy issues in different situations and contexts. Using these tools will allow you the opportunity to demonstrate to your tutor that you fully understand the rationale

of applying tools, which tools can be applied in different cases and the limitations of some of the tools in certain organisation contexts.

- Not every tool or model will be relevant in every case. As you work your way through the strategic management process it is likely that you will use specific cases to analyse specific issues, for example:
- Undertake a strategic analysis and identify the key issues facing the organisation. This would require the application of tools such as PEST, Porter's Five Forces Framework, resource audit and value chain analysis
- Evaluate a firm's choice of strategy
- Identify what the key implementation issues are and how might problems of implementation be addressed, this might require you to apply the cultural web force field analysis or the seven S framework. The issues being addressed in the case should become clear as you read and reread the case through several times.

5. Different ways to present case analysis

Usually you will be asked to present your findings from a case via one of three ways: oral presentations; a written analysis via a management report or examination; or a general class discussion. These three methods are discussed below.

Oral presentation of case findings

As with a written report, an oral presentation requires you to identify the key strategic issues, draw conclusions and make recommendations. A clear structure is essential, just as it would be in a piece of written work. This might typically include:

- An introduction to the team presenting and a clear statement of the overriding aim and objectives of the presentation. These will usually be derived from the case questions set by your tutor.
- An outline of how you undertook the analysis and an identification of the key models and tools applied.
- The main content of the presentation will outline material relating to the set questions.
- Conclusion – you might wish to draw a conclusion from each of the models applied. This tends to be an area where students are weak. You need to look at the rationale/objective for using the models and frameworks and make sure that your conclusions relate to this. You can then provide an overall conclusion which summarises the pertinent points from your previous discussion.
- It is usually customary to allow some time for the audience to ask any questions or points for clarification.
- You might wish to provide the audience with a short handout of key points covered in the presentation and any sources of information that might be useful to expand on the situation in the case.

Visual impact

It is likely that you will need to use some sort of visual impact to maintain the

audience's attention and reinforce the key points to be drawn from the case. You will usually do this by using Microsoft's PowerPoint tool. When preparing the content of the presentation you might want to consider some of the following points:

- Telling the audience who you are and identifying the scope of the presentation.
- Identification of the objectives of the presentation.
- An outline of the models/frameworks used in your analysis of the case.
- An analysis to the questions posed in the case.
- A statement of recommendations which are clearly supported and justified in light of the previous analysis.
- Consideration as to how you can make the slides interesting for the audience. The use of colour, charts, tables etc. can all help in improving the presentation style.
- Think about timing. Most presentations will be expected to last a certain amount of time. That time frame will have been set by the tutor who will be experienced in knowing relevant time frames for specific tasks. Therefore if you have been allocated 20 minutes, you will realise that something is wrong if, when practising, your presentation lasts 40 or 5 minutes!

Paramount to effective presentations is planning beforehand how you are going to complete it and then practising to make sure it satisfies the requirements of the brief you have been set. If this is the first presentation you have ever undertaken then it is often better to practice presenting to some friends before you present to your peers and tutor, especially if it is an assessed piece of work.

Written presentation of case findings

A written report, like an oral presentation, will most likely require you to identify certain strategic issues and develop a plan of action or make recommendations based on your analysis. The following points are worthy of mention in your preparation and compilation of the report:

- Identify your target audience and the purpose of the report, as content might vary depending upon whom, and what purpose, the report is being compiled for.
- Check whether you are required to take on a role when writing the report, for example, a consultant to the organisation or the role of a senior manager presenting to your board.
- Check whether there is a word limit or whether the findings are to be presented in any particular format.
- A title page, table of contents and executive summary are usually basic requirements of a management report. The remainder should be logically structured and broken down into headings and sub headings.

A typical structure might include a basic introduction to the industry or firm in the case. A statement of the objectives of the report. These will be clearly linked to the questions set by the tutor. Apart from the conclusion, the remainder of the report should be clearly structured

around the set questions. These can be used to provide key headings. So, for example, a question might require you to undertake an external analysis. The main heading would therefore read, "External analysis of the UK food retailing Industry", whilst sub headings might include the key frameworks applied in undertaking this analysis such as PEST, Porter's Five Forces framework, competitor profiling etc. As in oral presentations, you will be expected to draw conclusions from each model applied and finally, a conclusion to the overall report.

- An appendix can be included but should only be used to provide supporting information to the pertinent points in the main body of the report. It should not be used to "dump" specific answers into because you are running out of word count!
- Make sure you read and understand the assessment criteria against which the analysis and presentation in your report will be judged. All too often it is evident in student's work that they have not done this. For example, 10% of the marks might be awarded for presentation which includes visual impact, effective referencing and including a table of contents. Many students omit such elements, suggesting to the tutor that they have not read the set criteria for assessment.
- If you do use tables, graphs, charts etc. make sure they are correctly labelled.
- Proof read! You should read your completed report several times prior to its submission to check for spelling, grammar and punctuation. Tools within Microsoft Word can help you to do this. Alternatively, ask a friend or relative to proof read it for you.

Class discussions

A key objective of class discussion is to maximise student learning. The role of the tutor in this process is merely facilitation; making sure that the key issues are tabled in for discussion and debate. The tutor's role is to ensure the student thinks about the situation, the issues and the possible courses of action with, perhaps, an outline of the best way forward. This can only be achieved if you, the student:

- Has prepared the case thoroughly prior to the class discussion
- Is willing to participate in the discussion
- Is prepared to be challenged and justify your contributions
- Is prepared to listen to the views of your peers and challenge them on what they have to say

As the old saying goes, "you only get back what you put in." Effective learning will not take place without a good quality discussion by the students themselves. Many students feel uncomfortable in this setting initially but if you have prepared the case material and set tasks prior to the discussion, this should give you more confidence to make a meaningful contribution which you know you can justify when challenged by your peers or the tutor. You may later reflect on your analysis and contribution in light of the contribution of others. This is all part of an effective learning process.

6. Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion that in preparing yourself for case

analysis there is much to take on board. The key points are highlighted below:

- A case study describes an actual situation with which you can practice your skills of strategic management.
- You will practice and develop many important managerial skills when working on a case study. These include decision making, communication, numeracy, report writing and presentation skills etc.
- In analysing case studies there are key steps that you should engage in, such as reading the case before the class and reading the case questions to understand the strategic issues being addressed.
- There are three main ways to present case analysis: oral presentations, written reports/examination and general class discussions. Whichever is adopted, a clear and logical structure will be required.

Remember, there is no right or wrong answer. Managers attempt such analysis and evaluation and base decisions upon it. Sometimes it works, other times it fails. Students need to learn to live with this element of uncertainty. Using cases repetitively can aid the individual in developing structured and disciplined decision-making processes which are relevant to any problem solving activity presented to the individual. Identifying the issue, gathering the information, undertaking the analysis and drawing conclusions become established parts of the manager's skills inventory.

Cases give you the opportunity to practice and hone your management skills. When entering the world of work, these should help you to meet the management challenges ahead. By transferring these skills to any problemsolving activity in the workplace, you will be in a position to stand out from the crowd and gain a competitive advantage over your peers.