Business Research Methods

Year 2

Assignment 1

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Contents

1.   Executive summary

This report plans how I would go about researching the question; a study of the role of Human Resource Management (HRM) today, in Britain. I have outlined what exactly I will be researching and what type of research process I would be going through to conduct the study. I have identified a range of secondary sources I will use to collect data and their relevance to the investigation. I have also described what methods I am going to use to collect primary data, and why. In the operational tasks I have shown what type of data sampling I would use. I have also broken down the tasks and constructed a critical path to emphasis the sequence in which they will be carried out. In the appendices there is a Gantt chart showing the week by week plan of these tasks along with examples of secondary source literature which I could use in my investigation.

2.   Objectives

My research project will be an exploratory study because I am trying to discover 'what is' current HRM. The project is split up into two sections; establishing what is HRM, and the discovery of recent HRM theories and practices. I am not concerned with any specific industry just HRM theory and practice in Great Britain. For the first part, which will be the foundation of my project, I will have to look at the origins of HRM and how it has developed in both theory and practice. The second section of my project is answering my question, what is the role of Human Resource Management today? Here I need to discover current developments in the area of HR. For this I will need to consult secondary sources to find out what information is already available. When I have gathered this information I will be able to identify what further research is needed to answer the question which I can obtain through a variety of primary research methods.

3.   Research plan

Using the research process onion (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2000) I was able to plan how I was going to answer my research question. The onion splits up the process of researching into five layers; research philosophy, research approaches, research strategies, time horizons, and data collection methods, which must be dealt with in sequence. For research philosophy I discovered I was more a phenomenologist because I agree you cannot generalise HRM theory. It is "complex" and can be tailored to "unique" business situations. But I do not solely fall into this category because I wanted "to assume the role of an objective analyst, coolly making detached interpretations about those data that have been collected." (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2000:pg84).

I am taking a more inductive approach in my research strategy. This is because I am collecting and analysing the data and "the result of this analysis would be the formulation of a theory" (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2000:pg88). My research strategies will be mixed, from surveys, grounded theory and action research this will help me develop the data collection methods to use. The time scale will be cross sectional because I am trying to discover current up to date theories and practices of HRM.

4.   Secondary sources

The secondary sources data found will be the foundations on which my research will be based. The main advantage of using secondary data is that it saves time and

money. It also allows the researcher more time to analyse the data and to concentrate on the theory involved in the project. There are various types of secondary source publications; electronic journals, textbooks, research papers, newspapers and websites. These can all come in different formats; printed paper copy, online databases, compact disc and audio/visual tape.

Electronic journals can be divided into three types of publication; academic journals, general business magazines, and trade and technical press publications. Academic journals are used in education, written by students or university lecturers, they are based on research and development, reviewing current issues in depth and report on new work and ideas. General business magazines are aimed at reaching a wide audience. They often contain articles on many subjects without specialising in one area such as HRM. Trade and technical press publications are for specialist interest.

After searching these, accessed through the university database, I will able to discover a lot of information to support my research. In appendix one there is an example of an abstract and article which will help me answer the first section of my project, what is HRM? This shows "the evolution of human resources management (HRM) in organisations in Great Britain." I also found electronic journals which help me explore the current HRM studies. Appendix two shows a list of articles from the People Management trade press publication all current and relevant to my research. Appendix three is an example of one of these articles with the abstract.

The internet is an excellent source of information because it links information on computers worldwide. I will use the internet to research the first section of my project. By using search engines and by typing in the key word HRM I had many hits back and after sorting through the result I found a small selection of accredited websites dedicated to HRM such as HRMGuide.co.uk as shown in appendix four. The HRM Guide Network is an independent, internet-based organisation that provides HRM related information. The advantages of using the internet are that you can access a wide variety of data and information is updated on a regular basis. The problem with the internet is that commercial suppliers who provide extremely current and completely reliable information do not always supply that information free of charge.

Newspapers contain the most voluminous and current source of information on the business world. The articles can be accessed online for free on such sites as www.ft.com. The problem that could arise from newspaper articles is possible political bias. Here the information could be skewed to project the newspaper's political stance. I will also study academic and professional textbooks specialising in HRM. These have to be published no later than 2002 so that they are up to date on the development of HRM. These textbooks provide additional information to answer what is HRM, as well as outlining theories both past and present.

5.   Primary sources

After collecting secondary data I would expect the information to be missing from my research are examples of current HRM theory being practiced. For this I would contact the chartered institute of personnel development (CIPD) asking for a list of their members who are HR managers. I would then construct a short descriptive questionnaire which primarily asks what new HRM practices they have implemented recently and how it has affected their company's performance. The advantage of

obtaining these examples of case studies is that they could support my findings on current theory of HR in a more standardised frame which will make it easier to extract the information. I would then send this questionnaire to a random sample of 100 HR mangers via email to ensure a faster response time.

I would send this questionnaire to a larger number to allow for a poor return rate. Once I had received a minimum of twenty questionnaires back and analysed the data extracting any new relevant information. I chose this method so that I could discover on a larger scale a number of case studies to support my theories. From this large number I could then extract a few interesting scenarios based on my judgement and then re-contact the HR managers involved for an in depth interview. These will be semi-structured interviews where I would have "a list of themes and questions to be covered which may vary from interview to interview" (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2000:pg244). I would hope to conduct these interviews in person but if the distance to travel is too great some may be conducted over the telephone. This may lead to disadvantages such as less time spent on interviewing the HR manager which also could be an advantage if time becomes scarce. The interviews allow me to explore the findings from the questionnaires and explore topics on HRM practice missing from my report.

I would also interview a university lecturer who teaches HR or People and Management. They would be up to date on all current aspects of HRM and if my data collected from the interviews with the HR managers is not sufficient their links with the business community could provide me with additional HR managers to interview. This would be a form of snowball sampling which is when additional interviewees are acquired via referrals from initial respondents.

6.   Operational tasks

From the CIPD member list I will have to take a sample. The advantage of this is that it would be more practical because it would take too long to analyse the descriptive questionnaires from all members of the CIPD. From the sample frame of the member list I will use random sampling. Each member will be given a number, and numbers are drawn at random until the sample size of 100 is complete. Every member has an equal chance of being selected. When I receive back the questionnaires I will take a judgement sample of 5 HR managers who if they agree I will carry out an in depth interview with.

The tasks to be carried out are as follows:

Activity	Task	Estimated time (wks)
A	Decide research question.	1
B	Search electronic journals for work similar to my project.	1
C	Using sources found from journals search internet.	1
D	Search additional sources via internet i.e. newspaper archives.	2
E	Search textbooks.	2
F	Analyse and interpret data.	2
G	Decide what additional information is needed.	1

H	Contact CIPD	1
I	Design descriptive questionnaire	1
J	Take random sample	1
K	Send out questionnaires to sample	3
L	Design interview questions for HR managers	2
M	Design interview questions for university lecturer	2
N	Analyse received questionnaires.	2
O	Interview judgement sample	2
P	Interview university lecturer	1
Q	Analyse, interpret data and dram conclusions.	2
R	Write up report.	1

Critical path

7.   Appendices