THE EXPERIENCE OF DELIVERING CASE AWARD RESEARCH IN A PUBLIC SECTOR SETTING

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ABSTRACT

The CASE Award PhD is a relatively new approach to completing academic research degrees, aligning the ideals of comprehensive research training and cross-collaboration between academics and organisations. As the initial wave of CASE funded PhD research begins to near completion, and indeed become evident through the publication of results, now is an appropriate time to begin the evaluation process of how to successfully deliver a CASE PhD, and to analyse the best practice approaches of completing a CASE Award with an organisation. This article intends to offer a picture into the CASE PhD process, with a focus on methods of communication to successfully implement this kind of research in collaboration with an organisation.

KEYWORDS: public sector, communication, mixed methods

1 INTRODUCTION

CASE Award PhDs are a new way of implementing PhD research training, aiming to generate research that delivers applied relevance in collaboration between universities and external partners, while developing a generation of researchers possessing skills learned in academic and non-academic settings. The author began her CASE Award PhD in 2009, being among the first of the CASE Award students to go through this within the Business School. The CASE Awards that were awarded during that period are now currently being submitted, or are nearing completion, and this provides the perfect time to evaluate and reflect on how these CASE Awards were successfully implemented and develop some best practice understandings of this approach to degree by research. This article aims to develop some best practice approaches from the experiences of a CASE researcher being embedded within an organisation. Specifically the communication approaches utilized for the successful completion of this research will be discussed and related to the context of the public sector, within which the research was conducted. The article also discusses the potential challenges CASE researchers face and provides real life examples of a CASE Award PhD in action.

2 CASE AWARDS

The CASE Award PhD completed by the researcher was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in 2009.The nature of CASE Awards induce a more encompassing approach to research, aiming specifically to create not only theoretical contributions to the academic literature, but to also include practical requirements for the case organisation. While this may not be unique with regards to research agendas, the uniqueness comes from the structure of the CASE Award approach, through the development of a well-rounded researcher that understands the approach to working within organisations in a different way. Rather than being an external researcher that enters and leaves the organisation they are studying, the CASE approach requires that researchers become embedded in organisational life, becoming like a member themselves, while maintaining their role as a researcher and as a student. This balancing act becomes an important part of the life of a CASE researcher.

Furthermore, the focus on strengthening cross-collaborative working between academics and universities with organisations in all sectors is a fundamental concept within the CASE approach. CASE Awards provide a mutually beneficial exchange for both parties, with the researcher gaining unique skills that may not be achieved through the traditional PhD approach (creating a more all-encompassed researcher once qualified, which ultimately benefits universities in the future); with the organisation receiving the benefits of three years of research work from an individual that is engaged with the organisation, ultimately receiving benefits such as suggestions for areas of improvement, policy suggestions, implemented interventions or tailored tools that they can continue to use after the departure of the researcher. This approach to research-based degrees is becoming increasingly popular in academia to develop student skills and encourage collaboration between theory and practice (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2010).

The CASE Award undertaken by the researcher required that she be embedded into a department within the organisation – in this case the Human Resources function – for three days per week for the first two years of the project; while simultaneously completing the research degree training provided by universities. The practical element allows the researcher to develop a clear picture of the organisation, the problems at hand and the processes of change and culture that the organisation experiences. The benefit to the organisation is a resulting practical application of the results and the associated tools developed for the business. Additionally, the researcher is required to provide formal reports on progress and findings to the business, at least on a yearly basis.

3 BACKGROUND TO THE CASE ORGANISATION

The research conducted by the author took place in a large local authority within the UK public sector, serving a population of over one million residents, and possessing a culturally diverse workforce of approximately 59,000. During the period of study (2009-2011), the organisation was undertaking a change process involving organisational redesign through strategic human resource management (SHRM) initiatives. These initiatives consisted of flattening the management structure; devolving transactional HR responsibilities to line managers in order to allow the HR function to act more strategically; a focus on front line employee engagement; implementing new technology systems; workforce planning, succession planning and talent management; and streamlining services through cost efficiency ideas such as hot-desking and home working.

The researcher was embedded within the HR department that was leading the change from HR being a transactional service to a transformational and influential department within the business, for a period of approximately 18 months. Following this, the researcher shifted the focus of the research to one service area in order to collect the data for the project. The researcher embedded herself within this service for two to three days per week during the data collection period.

The service consisted of 74 employees, including their management team, employed in four different teams – Commercial, Community and Surveying Services on the technical side, and the Administration team; offering building control services to the general public and to commercial clients. The service was classified as 'high performing' by the organisation, and as such wished to understand the reasons behind this to create transference of skills to other parts of the business. The service had experienced on recent organisational change (computerisation of their work, paperless office and electronic system replacement), and were working in partnership with HR to implement pilot schemes surrounding workforce and succession planning and talent management. They also provided a unique perspective due

to the business operations side, working in a private sector domain with competition from private sector firms, but as a public sector operation.
While working with the service, the UK was going through the global recession, and this created, over a period of time, recruitment freezes, cut backs and eventually voluntary redundancy exercises and organisational restructures within services.

4 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

The CASE Award undertaken by the author involved the examination of innovative behaviours and work engagement, with a focus on line manager responsibility, within a public sector service undergoing organizational change. This was achieved through a mixed methods approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), utilizing qualitative methods of focus groups, individual interviews and ethnographic approaches, alongside a quantitative survey. The process of the CASE Award took approximately three years, with an additional year for writing up the research as a PhD thesis.

One of the challenges faced as a CASE researcher is that of balancing roles of researcher, student and additionally your responsibility to the business. CASE students' responsibilities extend beyond doing good research and adequately representing the views of respondents, with the addition of mandatory situation within the organisation as an active citizen, shaping the way in which organisations work, and communicating with various stakeholders requiring differing methods of communication and an understanding of when these are required, and with whom. The unique nature of the public sector business structures and approaches created the opportunity for communicating with a variety of key stakeholders within the business. The interconnecting nature of the public sector workforce and the political implications existing within the framework provides a foundation for the researcher to learn how to develop the appropriate communication strategies for successful research implementation.

Entering the process of beginning a CASE Award research project with no prior examples to follow can be a challenging and daunting process for a research student. The already tumultuous relationship one can experience with a research agenda is enhanced by the lack of prior guidance and exemplary work upon which to base the experience. As such, the process of completing CASE research in an effective manner provides a basis for evaluation of how CASE awards work in practice, and how best to fulfill the role expectations attached to CASE research.

5 COMMUNICATIONS IN CASE RESEARCH

The CASE Award PhD provides a unique approach to studying behaviour in organisations. In particular, the embeddedness of the student researcher within the case organisation, operating both as a researcher and as a member of the business. The associated practicalities of communicating the research agenda, obtaining participation from the population and the associated relationships that develop through this embededness demonstrate a somewhat different underlying experience than that of a 'typical' PhD research project. Communication within organisations is never 'neutral' in context (Hoogervorst, van der Flier & Koopman, 2004). Differing cultures, structures, policies and management practices all impact upon the way in which communication is both delivered and received across organisations. In the public sector, culture, policies, systems and managerial approach can differ widely, not only across the organisation, but also within directorates and service areas; creating microclimates of organizational culture. This creates an added difficulty for the researcher in standardizing their approach to communicating research agendas.

Stakeholders within the public sector ranged from working with top management and political figures, line management within service areas, directorate leaders and all other levels of management, as well as with highly trained technical staff and those perceived as being at the bottom of the ladder hierarchically, typically those in manual jobs or on the front-line of services. Regardless of the area within which the research is conducted, external individuals and those from other areas of the business are either involved in your research, or affected by it. During the research journey of the author, communications were conducted not only with the teams and individuals that formed the service, but with the upper echelons of management, with the legal team, with external public sector colleagues and with trade union members. The interconnecting political relationships make working in the public sector as a researcher as challenging as it is fascinating.

Challenges faced by CASE researchers in this particular setting highlight the potential difficulties of working within this realm of research, and how cross-collaboration is not always at the forefront of the business, particularly with regards to underlying political issues affecting the research, However, with the purpose of the CASE approach being to provide a well-rounded learning approach for research students, the experiences whereby things went wrong were equally as important as when it all ran smoothly, particularly with regards to the best practice approaches to completing a CASE.

6 CROSS-COLLABORATION THROUGH CASE AWARD EXCHANGE

Essentially the collaborative process of working with organisations and the people that compose them boils down to developing trusting relationships within which the researcher can be trusted on all levels – this equates to delivering work when they say they will, being trustworthy with regards to data confidentiality and field work, and demonstrating a positive attitude towards working with the business regardless of potential problems and pitfalls the individual may face during cross-collaboration. Trust is defined as being willing ‘to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor’ (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995: 712; Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006), and is typically something which individuals must build up over time (Meyerson, et al, 1996). In the case of CASE research, there is an element of this long term development insofar that the student embeds within the business. However, the actual nature of the research is that it is still relatively short-term and project based. This is somewhat reflective of the ongoing nature of modern organisational life (Miles & Creed, 1995), and somewhat reflected the nature of the business conducted by the service with people coming together to work on a projects basis. Essentially, the trust relationship developed with an organisation is that of *communication of trustworthiness,* defined by Kasper-Fuehrer & Ashkanasy (2001: 238) as ‘an interactive process that affects, monitors, and guides members’ actions and attitudes in their interactions with one another, and that ultimately determines the level of trust that exists between them’. Regardless of the length of time within which trust is developed, the underlying principle remains the same – being reliable and working ethically (Hosmer, 1995). Kasper-Fuehrer & Ashkanasy (2001) refer to this short-term trust development as common business understanding, whereby individuals share a vision and expectation of the result of their transaction and understanding of their roles within the exchange (Scott & Lane, 2000)

One issue faced by the researcher in delivering on promises that is likely to be typical specifically to the sector within which the research was conducted, was that of minor bureaucracy and red tape. Specifically the time frame within which gaining approval for work to be carried out in particular created problems that not only impacted upon the delivery of work based on the timetable initially presented to the service area and to the HR service with which the researcher worked, but also delayed progress with data collection and ability to proceed with the duty of writing the PhD. The primary example of this for the researcher occurred with the necessary approval of a quantitative survey measure that had to be approved by several individuals prior to being approved by a steering committee board, which took a period of several months, delaying the delivery of the project and creating months where little could be provided to the business.

Through these problems and stalls in the research process, the short term trust development becomes central to the communication approach between researcher and organisation members. The key to this appeared to be managing and fulfilling expectations, and being explicit with members when things were delayed and the reasons why. Best practice communication approaches within the research process included active listening. Active listening is essential for depth of understanding and avoids the potential for missing vital information (Fielding, 2006), and develops the trust that individuals place in the

researcher. For example, during the ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author, many participants were willing to share highly sensitive information about their working lives. One example was that of a participant experiencing a negative relationship with their manager, frequently revealing the nature of the relationship due to the active listening of the researcher – as an external and somewhat neutral actor within the fieldwork, the trust placed in the researcher is evident as short term, but highly concentrated.
The role of the researcher in a CASE organisation such as this, with a variety of key stakeholders, is to spend time researching the role of the individual so that the researcher may enter the initial meeting with the stakeholder with an understanding of the individual's purpose in the organisation and how they contribute to the research. The effort-making process of gaining understanding of the individual inspires trust in the researcher, which aids in the successful implementation of a research programme. The author spent time researching the industry within which the business members operated in order to understand and maintain conversations regarding technical details. This effort in learning about the organisation and the business engendered a greater degree of trust in the participants, demonstrating a more openness to communication throughout.

7 BEST PRACTICE RECCOMMENDATIONS

For CASE implementation to be successful, the key recommendation to participants is to go the extra mile in learning about your organisation. Being knowledgeable about the business and the industry helps with communication and gives the participants peace of mind that the researcher understands and has the organisation's, and the participants, best interests at heart. This development of knowledge base creates a platform from which the essential trust can be developed.

CASE students should expect to deal with difficulties in research processes in an efficient manner and be prepared for delays in research, particularly with regards to public sector bureaucracy channels. The key to this is ensuring that communication with the business is not lost, as regaining the trust and willingness to participate of some employees can be difficult. The author experienced this during her own delays due to these channels – through delay in the approval of ethnographic research creating a time barrier of approximately 10 months between data collection waves, the trust relationship with these employees had to be built from the beginning, with some members of staff being unwilling to re-engage with the author regardless of communication attempts. CASE students should be prepared, however, to treat this non-response as equally important data to that which has been collected from willing participants. If the key to successful implementation is trust, and the trust process requires frequent interactions between members, then this delay in contact can create negative feeling. The author attempted to combat this by ensuring that reports were sent to the organisation detailing progress, and where data from respondents was utilised, this was sent to participants for comment in order to ensure their views were adequately representing, maintaining the trust relationship.

Ultimately, the CASE PhD is about building trustworthy relationships that typically rely on the trust in the researcher being high, and reliance on the organisation being low. The nature of public sector services means risk averse approaches, which create delays. Researchers must find ways to continue to connect with their participants to maintain trust and to ensure that their research continues to progress regardless of the organisation's imposed delays. CASE researchers should enter the field with the aim of developing long term relationships that are trustworthy, productive and mutually beneficial.

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