PART 1

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

Investigating and Researching HR Issues

CHAPTER OUTLINE

LEARNING OUTCOMES

This chapter should help you to:

- define what is meant by research in HR and how it contributes to effective policy and practice
- identify the different components of an effective research project and the skills needed
- compare different approaches to HR research and the opportunities presented by an investigation of a business issue
- discuss the implications of being a 'practitioner-researcher'.

RESEARCHING HR ISSUES

This book is aimed at people who are undertaking an HR research project as part of a qualification-related course. You may be a part-time student who is

investigating a business issue in the role of a 'practitioner-researcher' or a full-time student who will be researching into an HR issue either inside or outside of a particular organisation or group of organisations. You may be studying in your own country or abroad.

The ability to undertake good-quality research which leads to relevant practical outcomes and contributes to the knowledge-base of the HR profession is an important skill. Qualified professionals should be able to research relevant topics and write reports that can persuade key stakeholders in the organisation to change or adopt a particular policy and practice. Most people who make use of this book are likely to be: final-year undergraduate students of management or HRM; students undertaking professional HR courses such as the CIPD Intermediate or Advanced level programmes or students undertaking a taught master's course (usually an MSc or MA in HRM or a related subject).

Making a start with a big piece of work like a research project is a daunting prospect and you may be tempted to put off the moment of making a start. This book is intended to help you make a start and then to see the project through to a successful and rewarding conclusion. The book aims to be practical, accessible and relevant. It should provide you with ideas and resources to apply to your research. I hope that you will use it as a resource to develop knowledge, understanding and the practical skills you need to make best use of the research process you are undertaking and to communicate what you have learned in a convincing and credible way. The book is not a substitute for regular attendance at research methods classes nor does it replace the need to communicate with your supervisor or project tutor.

Research projects are rarely completed quickly and they compete for attention with many other important and urgent matters. Different chapters of the book will be relevant at different stages of your project from initial project idea and research proposal to submission of the final report or dissertation.

When research is done well it can provide a 'win-win' opportunity for you and the organisation or organisations that have participated in some way. Your organisation(s) can learn from the findings and decide whether to implement your recommendations. You can gain valuable personal and professional development in a wide range of areas. Each chapter in this book ends with a self-test so that you can check your understanding and there is an opportunity to review and reflect on your achievements so far. This can inform any continuing professional development (CPD) record that you will maintain if you are a member of a professional organisation, such as the CIPD. Ideas about useful reading are also included at the end of each chapter to enable you to go further or deeper as appropriate.

GETTING STARTED: THE RESEARCH PROCESS AND THE SKILLS YOU NEED

ACTIVITY 1.1

A NICE PROBLEM TO SOLVE

Imagine that a good friend contacts you and invites you to join them for a 'once in a life time' holiday somewhere very special. You are very keen to follow this up but you need to know what would be involved in terms of your time and money and the implications of such a trip for your work and other responsibilities. How will you set about finding out more about the country your friend is keen to visit and the different options that might be appropriate for you?

FEEDBACK NOTES

In order to make decisions about whether to accompany your friend and, if so, how to organise the trip, there are a number of questions that you must find the answers to. These might include:

- What are different parts of the holiday destination country like?
- What climate might you expect at different times of the year? What would be the implications for shopping in advance for clothes and equipment?
- What modes of travel are possible? How much time would be spent on getting there, getting around and getting back?
- What facilities does the country or different accommodation options have to offer?
- What is the opinion about the proposed destination by other travellers who have visited?
- What are the cost implications?
- What health insurance and immunisation requirements are there?
- How safe is the country considered to be?

To answer these questions there are a range of sources of information that you might draw on. These include:

- Internet information sites
- travel brochures/publicity materials
- opinions of others (either given to you face-to-face or through social network media)
- recommendations of experienced travellers
- price comparison sites.

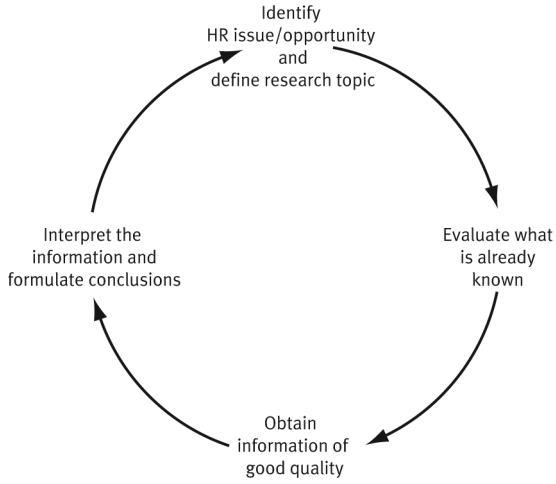
With a situation like this, the more sources of information you can draw on, and the more variety of types of information you can gather (opinions as well as sales brochures; statistics as well as recommendations), the more confident you are likely to feel in your ultimate decision. Merely booking a holiday because it is cheap, it was suggested by an acquaintance you do not know *that* well and it was the first option you stumbled across are less likely to result in a happy time. To enhance the fact-finding process you must first be clear what it is you are really looking for. Then it is necessary to find out what is already known about the

destination and the travel process. Next you search for further information, obtaining as many different types of data as possible. Finally, you make sense of all the information and make your decision.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Activity 1.1 is, at a basic level, a small and personal research activity. It involves the systematic enquiry into an issue to increase knowledge and underpin effective decision-making. The activities it would involve are, however, indicative of the components of any research process (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Components of the research process



Often research is represented as a series of discrete and linear stages, and this book is structured in a similar sort of way. However, the reality of organisational research is that each stage is often interrelated with the others and experiences in later stages often lead to reconsideration of earlier ones (Saunders et al 2012).

For research undertaken to meet the requirements of the CIPD Advanced level qualifications, the general model in Figure 1.1 is elaborated on by the chief examiner, who emphasises the requirement for CIPD students to:

- diagnose and investigate a live issue of significance to a work organisation
- locate their work within a body of contemporary knowledge
- collect and analyse data
- derive supportable conclusions
- make practical and actionable recommendations
- reflect on implications for professional practice.

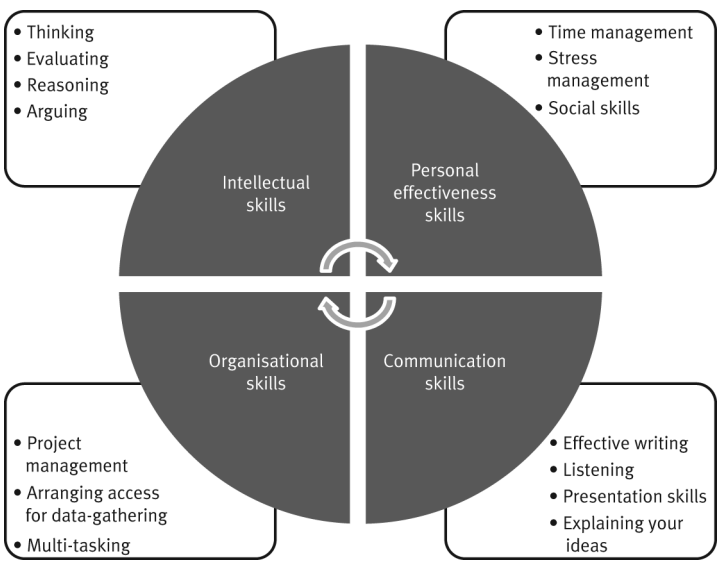
Each of these stages is considered in more detail in subsequent chapters of the book, but an indication of the skills you need to carry out these different elements is provided now.

THE EFFECTIVE RESEARCHER

Four interrelated skills underpin any effective research project (see Figure 1.2). You will need:

- **Intellectual and thinking skills:** knowing a lot about your topic is important, but other skills will enable you to undertake a more successful project. When you undertake research you have to act as an independent learner and this involves you being able to ask questions, probe deeply into issues and develop and justify your own thinking about the issues involved.
- **Personal effectiveness skills:** HR professionals are already aware of the importance of good interpersonal effectiveness in people management; the skills you have developed can be put to good effect in your research project, particularly your skills of time and stress management.
- **Organisational skills:** a research project is very like any other work-based endeavour: it has to be project-managed. Knowing how to break down components of a large piece of work, estimating the time requirements for different task areas, undertaking more than one task in parallel when appropriate and keeping track of progress are key skills that you can make use of and develop further.
- **Communication skills:** much of your research project involves you working on your own, but high-level communication skills are also necessary. In particular, you will need to orally articulate your ideas to your colleagues and tutors, listen actively (to get advice and also when gathering your data), share your findings within the organisation through effective presentations and produce a lengthy and well-written research report or dissertation.

Figure 1.2 The skills of an effective researcher



INITIAL FEELINGS ABOUT RESEARCH

It is possible that you are very excited about getting started with your research project. However, most students have mixed feelings at best, or strong doubts at worst, about their ability to complete a research project alongside all the other pragmatic and practical issues and problems facing them in their 'out of study' life.

Table 1.1 Common objections to doing research

Research is:

- just a way of proving what you already know
- best left to academics or to experts
- just a way of justifying what the CEO wants to do anyway
- too difficult
- too time-consuming
- removed from reality
- unable to change anything
- too scientific and statistical
- boring.

(Blaxter et al 2006, Jankowicz 2005)

Table 1.2 shows some recollections by students about their feelings when they were just starting out on a work-based research project required for their CIPD course.

Table 1.2 Feelings about getting started with a research project

I felt overwhelmed; I had never done anything like it before; I was anxious about choosing a 'good' topic. (Lee)
I felt nervous and concerned about how to get going. (Jane)
I was enthusiastic, but found it very daunting; where would I start? (Mike)
I felt daunted; I knew it would be a lot of work; where on earth would I begin? (Lisa)

If these sentiments reflect how you are feeling, read on (Table 1.3) to find out how much more positive the same students were once their projects had been completed.

Table 1.3 Personal benefits from undertaking a research project

I discovered that I can be highly motivated and disciplined. I found that once I feel 'passionate' about a topic I can 'throw myself into it'. (Lee)
How to deal with procrastination! Once I got going I enjoyed the work and found it interesting. I learned different ways to stop putting it off and to deal with the time pressures. (Jane)
I discovered what I was capable of! Self-determination, dogged enthusiasm and perseverance to achieve a significant challenge. (Mike)
I felt relieved and proud to learn that I can be more disciplined in my approach to time management than I ever thought possible (I normally leave things to the last minute!). (Lisa)

It would be foolish to say that doing research in HR is easy; challenges are likely for even the most confident and experienced practitioners and researchers. Personal qualities such as self-motivation, self-confidence and self-centredness will be important for your success (Biggam 2011):

- **Self-motivation:** you will need to maintain your interest and enthusiasm over quite a long period of time. Choose a topic that you are genuinely interested in and try to tackle all the different stages in the process with a positive attitude and curiosity for what you can learn.
- **Self-confidence:** self-doubt is an occupational hazard of all researchers at some point in the research process, so remember that your ideas are just as valuable as those of an established researcher or a chief executive. If you are able to learn from the advice of your tutor and student colleagues, there is no reason why your work should not be more than creditable when the time for assessment comes around.
- **Self-centredness:** the need to undertake your research over a sustained period means that, from time to time, you will have to turn down requests from family members and friends. Wise judgement is required in these circumstances, but it is important to make clear to everyone from the beginning that your project is a priority and you will appreciate their understanding and patience for its duration. Of course, after it is all over you can repay their patience many times over…

BENEFITS FROM RESEARCH

ACTIVITY 1.2

IDENTIFYING BENEFITS FROM RESEARCH

Imagine that you still have to decide what to do for your project. The chief executive of the organisation for which you work has been to a government-backed seminar on employee engagement, and your manager thinks that 'something to increase engagement' would be a good project for you to undertake.

If you feel it would be helpful to find out more about engagement before tackling this activity, you might:

- listen to (or read the transcript of) the CIPD podcast on employee engagement, where four HR leaders from different types of organisation discuss what employee engagement means for their organisations

and the issues raised for engagement when organisations are going through tough times: http://www.cipd.co.uk/podcasts/_articles/_employeeengagement37.htm?view=transcript

- skim-read some of the CIPD resources about employee engagement: http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-topics/employee-engagement.aspx
- access the MacLeod Report to the UK Government, *Engaging for Success: Enhancing performance through employee engagement*: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.bis.gov.uk/files/file52215.pdf

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Identify three benefits of tackling a project like this from your own perspective.
2. Identify three benefits from the perspective of your employer.
3. What problems might you foresee if you were to take on this project?

FEEDBACK NOTES

1. There are a number of benefits that may have occurred to you. Undertaking this sort of high-profile project might be good for your career prospects. Engagement is a very 'hot topic' in HRM and may well sound like an area you could get personally interested in. There should be a good level of support for you from both managers and employees as both sets of stakeholders may feel they have something to gain. You know the organisation and can have access to a considerable amount of information. Most of the work could be undertaken in work time rather than at home at weekends.
2. Your organisation also stands to benefit from such a project. Interest in employee engagement by senior managers and HR managers is high. Engagement seems to be right at the top of management's HR agenda. This may also be an opportunity for the HR department to enhance the credibility of its strategic contribution.
3. In spite of some benefits there are also some problems that would probably occur to you in this sort of situation. Practical issues such as your own time constraints may be of concern as well as the extent to which this would be a project that is interesting to you personally. Other questions you might pose include:

- Over what timescale would the employer expect you to work on this project?
- Is it possible to satisfy both your employer and the requirements for your qualification?
- Given that you are (probably) not a senior manager, how would you go about identifying urgent action for senior people in the organisation?
- Is the organisation *really* interested in this project?

Perhaps these concerns might be summed up with four questions:

1. What exactly would this project involve?
2. Is it feasible as a topic for a student project?
3. How would it add value to HR practice in the organisation?
4. How might it add value to the HR community beyond your specific organisation?

The purpose of this chapter is to explore these general questions so that you are in a better position to understand the contribution of research to real organisational situations and consider the role of the practitioner-researcher. This should help you to work out how to use this book to plan and execute your own research project.

WHAT IS RESEARCH IN HR?

There are many different ideas about what 'research' actually is (see, for example, Yin 2009 Silverman 2009). A useful and simple definition to start with is: **finding out things in a systematic way to increase knowledge**. Research is a key function of higher education and informs much of what goes on in work organisations. As a result, universities and colleges as well as professional bodies are increasingly requiring elements of research-based or enquiry-based learning at all levels of study.

HRM involves practical application of up-to-date understanding in the context of 'real world' organisations. Reliable knowledge built on accurate information is needed. To undertake effective HRM, it is important that good-quality information underpins decisions and informs the actions of those involved in the employment relationship, such as trade unions, individual employees, outsourced service providers and professional organisations (Bamber et al 2004, Therborn 2006). The definition of research in HR in this book is: **the systematic enquiry into HR issues to increase knowledge and underpin effective action**.

HR RESEARCH – THE VALUE OF APPLIED RESEARCH

Many writers about research methods distinguish between 'pure' and 'applied' research (see, for example, Van de Ven 2007, Starkey and Madan 2001), although the distinction is not always clear-cut and is best seen as a continuum relating to the purpose and context in which the investigation occurs. The main focus of pure research (sometimes referred to as 'mode 1 research') is on gaining knowledge to describe and explain phenomena, develop and test generalisable theories and make predictions (van Aken 2005, Burgoyne and James 2006). Applied research (sometimes referred to as 'mode 2'), by contrast, is more concerned with developing knowledge that can be used to solve problems, predict effects and develop actions and interventions that are applicable in particular organisational contexts. Although applied research is not always accorded high academic prestige, it may require greater skill across a broader range of areas than pure research demands.

Figure 1.3 Pure and applied research

Applied research	Pure research
Problem-solving	Gaining new knowledge
Predicting effects	Establishing causes
Concern for action	Assessing relationships between variables
Time/cost constraints	'As long as it needs'
'Client' orientated	'Academic' orientation

(Robson 2011, Easterby-Smith et al 2003, Saunders et al 2012)

Most HR research that is undertaken as part of a taught course of study is at the 'applied research' end of the continuum, involving a relatively small-scale investigation in one organisation or using information from a relatively small sample of people or organisations. This book works from the position that, in HR at least, applied research is at least as valuable as pure research. HR research that is carried out in a rigorous way can lead to more effective practice than decisions based mainly on intuition, common sense or personal preferences. Common sense tends to take many features of organisational situations for granted. A systematic process of research, however, makes it possible to challenge 'taken for granted' assumptions and so generate new ways of understanding situations that can form the basis for innovative approaches to solving complex problems. A key capability for effective HR practitioners is the analysis of HR situations and the use of systematic investigative techniques to underpin decision-making and problem-solving.

The basis of this book is that HR research is about advancing knowledge in a way that is relevant to changing organisational priorities, solution of HR problems and the continuous development of organisations involved in the research process itself.

ACTIVITY 1.3

WEB-BASED ACTIVITY

Visit the website of an HR magazine such as *People Management* (http://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk), *Personnel Today* (http://www.personneltoday.com), *HR Zone* (http://www.hrzone.co.uk) or *Training Zone* (http://www.trainingzone.co.uk)
Run a search using the word 'research'. If you can, limit the dates of the search to the most recent one or two calendar months.

FEEDBACK NOTES

An activity such as this demonstrates how important research is to the development of HR practice. Research evidence is used to justify why certain HR practices are beneficial and is also used to evaluate the success (or otherwise) of HR policies and practices. Research contributes to the development of HR at strategic, policy and operational levels.

WHAT KIND OF A RESEARCHER ARE YOU?

Models of the research process and figures showing skill requirements can lead to an assumption that there is 'one right way' to undertake research. This is not the case and every individual HR practitioner or student is likely to undertake research in their own unique way. Indeed, research in the HR and management arena is characterised by diversity and it is important, at an early stage in your project planning process, to clarify for yourself a response to the question: 'what kind of a researcher am I?' This will help you to think more clearly about potential topics that you might investigate and how you might go about it (Brown 2006, Fox et al 2007).

INSIDER OR OUTSIDER?

Are you an insider or an outsider? There are two possible types of insider. One type is the person who will be involved in researching their own area of work in their own place of employment. The second type of insider is the researcher who is keen to find out what is going on *inside* the people that they are researching; their meanings and understandings. Two types of outsider are also possible. Outsiders are those who will be involved in researching in their own organisation but in a different place or part of it, or those who will undertake research into situations and/or organisations where they truly are an outsider. Your position as an insider or an outsider will have implications for your research. Outsiders may find it easier to establish facts and to discuss 'universals' rather than particulars. Insiders, by contrast, may be led to research that contains more 'narrative' than numbers. Examples of the different ways that a topic might be taken forward by people who are insiders or outsiders are shown in Table 1.4. The examples in this table use the illustration of talent management, but the same principles would apply to most HR projects.

Table 1.4 Insiders and outsiders? Examples of different options for research projects

Insider/outsider	Example of research project topic
Insider – who is undertaking research into their own organisation	An evaluation of talent management at XYZ Ltd
Insider – who wants to know about what is *inside* the people that they are researching; their meanings and understandings	An assessment of perceptions and attitudes towards a talent management programme at XYZ Ltd
Outsiders – who will be researching in a different part of their own organisation	An investigation into the implementation of talent management in the information systems division
Outsiders – who will research into situations and/or organisations where they have little or no connection	Research into the application of talent management programmes in retail organisations in the UK

'DETECTIVE', 'DOCTOR' OR 'EXPLORER'?

In addition to the distinction between research as an insider or as an outsider, most HR researchers have different 'mental pictures' of the purpose of their research. Brown (2006) characterises three different ideal types, which are depicted in Table 1.5. Many researchers find that they identify with more than one type. Which of these are you *most* like?

Table 1.5 Researcher similes

Researcher as detective	Researcher as doctor	Researcher as explorer
You have a clear idea about the research **problem**; for example: 'talent management programmes favour younger workers over older employees'. The researcher as detective gathers relevant information to get the clues needed to solve the problem and then marshals the evidence to prove that the solution that they have reached is the correct one.	The researcher as doctor recognises the need to work from the symptoms they are presented with to diagnose the **cause** of the situation before any appropriate 'treatment' can be prescribed. The researcher as doctor looks for the reasons behind the research issue;for example: 'what factors lead employees to be negative about talent management programmes?'	The researcher as explorer loves to enter 'unknown territory' and keep a record about what they find; for example: 'what happens in an organisation that has been acquired and is required to implement the talent management programme of the new parent company?'

(Brown 2006)

Descriptive research

If you see yourself mainly as a detective or perhaps as an explorer, it is likely that you will be interested in carrying out **descriptive** research where you set out to provide an accurate profile of situations, people or events. A descriptive research project focuses on 'what, when, where and who'. Having investigated and described the issue, you can then go further and analyse the data to ask 'why?'

and 'so what?' Both qualitative and quantitative data are useful in descriptive studies.

Explanatory research

If you see your role as a researcher to be like that of a doctor or perhaps as a detective, it is likely that you will undertake **explanatory research** by setting out to explain a situation or problem, usually in the form of causal relationships. Your focus will be on 'why' and 'how', seeking to explain organisational problems and, through assessment of the causes, to recommend changes for improvement. Both qualitative and quantitative data may be useful for achieving these research purposes.

Exploratory research

If you see your role as a researcher as more like that of an explorer, **exploratory** research will appeal to you. The purpose of exploratory research is to seek new insights and find out what is happening. There is an attempt to ask questions and assess phenomena in a new light. A more qualitative approach often (but not always) underpins this sort of research and the focus is on obtaining new insights into new or current situations and issues.

ACTIVITY 1.4

HOW REAL IS REALITY TV?

Reality TV (as distinct from documentaries or other non-fictional TV programmes such as sports coverage and news) is a form of television programming that has become prevalent in almost every TV network since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Examples from UK channels include talent searches such as: *The Apprentice* and documentary-type programmes such as *The Only Way is Essex* and *Masterchef*. Reality TV shows claim to show ordinary people in unscripted and real situations. Identify and think about three different reality TV shows that you know about. If you do not watch reality TV shows yourself, you can find out about them from friends or from broadcasters' websites. You might also enjoy reading commentary on *The Apprentice* in John McGurk's (CIPD Adviser for Learning and Talent Development) blog at http://www.cipd.co.uk/blogs/members/j.mcgurk/default.aspx

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How real is reality TV?
2. In what ways is reality TV *real* and in what ways is reality TV *not real*?
3. To what extent is 'heartbreak' real?
4. In what sense are dreams real?

FEEDBACK NOTES

Discussion about reality TV can evoke strong reactions. Some people watch reality TV programmes with enthusiasm and commitment; they want to decide for themselves about the qualities shown by those involved and may also identify strongly for or against one or more of the participants. Other people might describe reality TV as 'tedious', 'worthless' and 'manipulative'. The extent to which the programme that is broadcast is contrived or the effect of the editing

process on what we watch might, however, be seen to make reality TV less real than its name would imply. The discussion about the 'reality' of reality TV makes us wonder how we can *know* about *reality* and this is an important issue for everyone who aims to carry out research in the *real* world.

When discussing the extent to which heartbreak is real, your opinion might be different depending on your current emotional circumstances and relationships. For others their view would not depend on their context or circumstances – they would argue that heartbreak is a feeling rather than a real thing. Others might say that they know what is real when they come across it and are able to distinguish between what *seems* real (dreams and/or heartbreak) and what actually is real as evidenced by the behaviours that they experience. Even those of us who prefer to rely on the evidence of our senses to identify what is real find ourselves challenged by the digital and technological opportunities of the twenty-first century to 're-master' or alter what we see and hear. This can lead us to wonder whether reliance on the evidence provided by our senses or on our experience is a sufficient basis from which to know about the real world (Saunders et al 2012).

WHAT IS YOUR REAL-WORLD VIEW?

Work in HR, and this includes research work in HR, takes place in the real world and is about real world issues (Robson 2011). Most of the time most of us do not trouble ourselves with thinking much about the nature of the real world; we just get on with our lives and our jobs. Before you start with your research, however, you will need to think about your own take on the nature of the real world.

When addressing the question 'what is real?' there are three prominent options (Brown 2006, Fox et al 2007). One answer is that reality is **'out there'** and this corresponds to what is termed an **objective** world-view. If your view is that reality is **'in here'** (that is, a feature of your perceptions and feelings), you may feel more comfortable in what might be called an individually **constructed** world-view. You might think that reality is **'in here'** but influenced by **'out there'**. This would be represented by what is often called a **socially constructed** world-view.

The extent to which you subscribe to an objective, socially constructed or individually constructed world-view may well be influenced by your own personal and professional background. Economists, for example, tend to operate within an objective world-view; social and care workers tend to be most comfortable with a socially constructed world-view. HR researchers are difficult to generalise about: some adopt a socially constructed world-view and others work from an objective world-view. Your assumptions about these issues, therefore, may well be different from other HR practitioners and researchers that you come into contact with. The nature of your thinking in response to these issues, however, is likely to be important for the way that you tackle your project.

If you are most comfortable with an objective world-view, it is likely that you will want to establish objective facts that can be generalised independently of the beliefs, perceptions, culture and language of different individuals and groups. This perspective is often associated with what is termed a **positivist** approach to research, which is outlined in Chapter 2. If you are more comfortable with a

socially constructed world-view, it is likely that you will value information from observation or interviews mostly gathered in the form of words and meanings, pictures and other artefacts and value qualitative rather than quantitative data. This world-view is often associated with the **interpretivist** approach, which is also introduced in Chapter 2.

CASE ILLUSTRATION 1.1

Research into the psychological contract

Alex was a part-time student in a retail organisation where performance and the achievement of targets were key features of organisational culture. Anecdotal evidence led her to be concerned about the way sickness absence was managed in her organisation, the extent to which management responses to sickness absence affected levels of employee engagement in her organisation and whether managers' understanding of the 'preventative' effects of their actions with regard to sickness absence was perceived by employees as 'punitive' and the effect this had on engagement. For her research project, Alex decided to measure employees' and managers' perceptions of the absence management process and indicators of engagement, and to compare these with indicators of preventative and punitive approaches to absence which she found in the literature.

From her reading of the literature, Alex identified questionnaire items related with measures of engagement and absence management. These items included such things as: different features of managing absence (which she obtained from CIPD surveys on absence management); factors that maximise attendance at work; perceptions of absence review processes; and engagement measures (which came from her company's regular staff satisfaction survey). Alex set out to gather and analyse the data from a range of different people who worked in a sample of the retail outlets to make some generalised conclusions about the effects of the organisation's approach to managing sickness absence.

Kingsley was also interested in taking forward research into employee engagement. However, he took a different approach. He focused on finding out about the beliefs, values, expectations and aspirations of employees through a series of in-depth interviews. Kingsley wanted to find out about the different feelings of engagement people might have even if they worked in jobs at the same 'level' and in the same organisation. Through conducting interviews, therefore, Kingsley set out to gather information that was grounded in the experiences and perspectives of those involved to provide an in-depth understanding of the issues from the different participants' perspectives.

Discussion Questions

1. What world-view underpinned the approaches to their research adopted by Alex and Kingsley?
2. To what extent (and why) is it possible to decide which approach is 'superior'?

FEEDBACK NOTES

The approach adopted by Alex was indicative of the objective world-view. She sought to measure features of absence management and engagement as indicated through generalised patterns of questionnaire responses. Kingsley's approach was indicative of the constructed world-view and he was interested in the way in which employee engagement is differently felt by different people on the basis of their unique experiences and contexts.

The different research world-views described here are distinct, but you may also have highlighted that there are overlaps between them. No experience (of employee engagement) is wholly individually and uniquely experienced; some aspects will be shared between individuals and groups. Also, 'socially derived' views (about executive pay, for example) can become so universally accepted that they can be researched as an objective fact.

You may feel that both objectivist and constructivist perspectives are useful ways forward, and research that works from more than one world-view is quite common (although not required or compulsory) within HR. The important thing is to be clear about your world-view – to yourself and to those who will read your work – so that this can be taken into account in making sense of your research and the conclusions that you draw. You may well be reflecting at this point that you can see the benefit of both objectivist and constructivist world-views, and you may be thinking about incorporating both approaches into your research. Within research in HR there is a strong tradition of what is sometimes called a 'mixed methods' approach, characterised by elements of both world-views within a project. Such approaches are discussed in Chapter 2. However, bringing insights from both world-views together can have implications for your research project that can be very time-consuming and difficult to express within a word limit of 7,000 words (which is often applied for CIPD management or business research reports).

ACTIVITY 1.5

WHAT KIND OF A RESEARCHER ARE YOU?

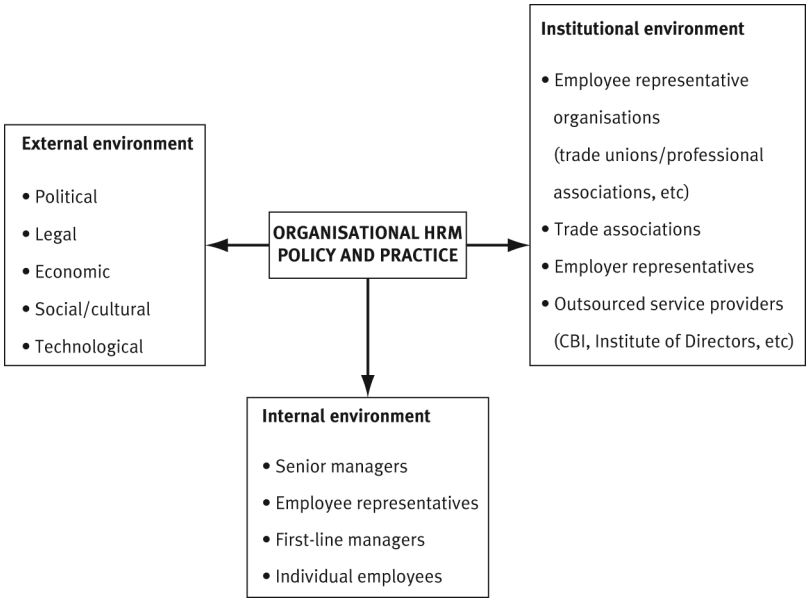
Think about yourself: your situation, your world-view, your preferences and your interests. Write your comments to the questions on the left in the spaces provided on the right.

About you	Response
Are you likely to undertake research in your own organisation or one where you might be considered an outsider?	

About you	Response
Are you interested in general facts and universal trends or are you more interested in getting *inside* the meanings behind particular issues and experiences?	
To what extent is your preferred research role similar to that of a doctor/explorer/detective (or a combination)?	
Which world-view do you feel most comfortable with: 'objectivist world-view' or 'constructivist world-view'?	

Your responses to these questions might be useful to share with your tutor or supervisor as you discuss potential research topics and the way you might take your research project forward.

Figure 1.4 Factors affecting the employment relationship



THE AUDIENCES FOR HR RESEARCH

ACTIVITY 1.6

AUDIENCES FOR HR RESEARCH

1 Use Figure 1.4 as a prompt and write down a list of different groups of people who may be interested in the implications of research into HR issues in your organisation (or one you are familiar with).

2 For each group of people that you identify, try to work out how they might find out about relevant research that has been undertaken.

FEEDBACK NOTES

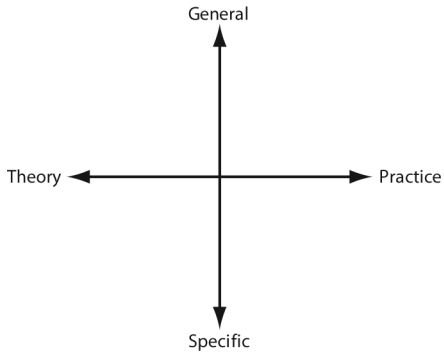
Your list of likely 'audiences' for HR research might include: individual practitioners; individual managers; members of trade unions; people in central government departments; members of your local authority; specialist organisations/pressure groups; professional associations; academics; consultants; employer/trade bodies; trade union members; students; providers of outsourced HR services.

When it comes to finding out about research, there is an equally wide range of publications and opportunities that different groups might use. These include:

- newspapers
- webpages
- specific reports (may be internal or external)
- books
- trade journals
- professional journals
- attending conferences/seminars
- academic journals
- social networking sites
- unpublished research (dissertations, projects, etc).

Each of these different vehicles for communicating knowledge will do so in a different way to meet the needs of its audience. As a result they will engage to different extents with both theory and practice and with the general or the specific.

Figure 1.5 Orientation of different research outputs



ACTIVITY 1.7

ASSESSING DIFFERENT RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

Study one copy of the following types of HR publication:

- academic peer-reviewed journal (for example, *Human Resource Management Journal*, *Human Resource Development International* or *International Journal of Human Resource Management*)
- professional journal (for example, *People Management* or *Personnel Today*)
- practitioner report (for example, IDS Report or a CIPD Research Insight report (http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/research/)

Skim-read the publications and try to 'plot' each of the features of the research articles/reports guided by the two axes shown in Figure 1.5.

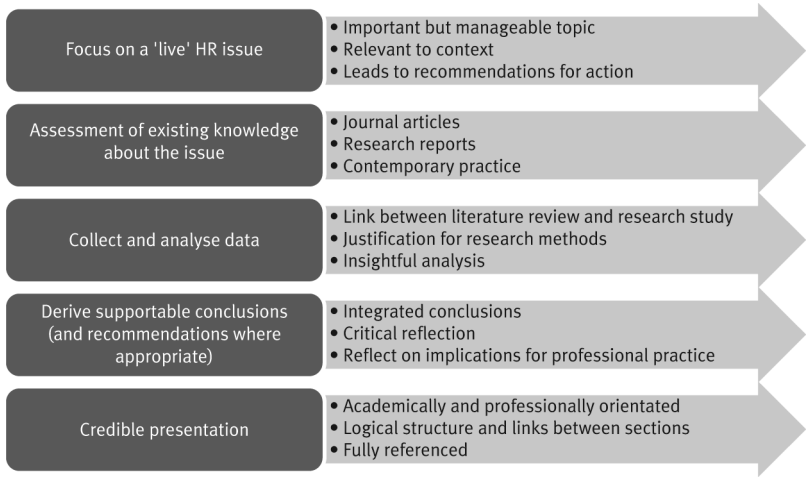
FEEDBACK NOTES

It is likely that different articles from each of the first two types of publication may need to be plotted differently. Some studies, even within one publication, are very concerned with one specific situation and others are more general. What is easier to characterise is the different levels of engagement with theories, models and concepts. Papers in a peer-reviewed academic journal such as *HRMJ* will be significantly concerned with evaluating theories as well as with practically focused investigations. Practitioner reports, by contrast, are more concerned with describing practice than with explicitly locating it within any conceptual framework. Feature articles in practitioner journals vary somewhat, although theory is rarely a major feature.

REQUIREMENTS FOR STUDENT PROJECTS

If you are working towards a professional or educational qualification, the principal readers of your work will be interested in its academic features as much as the practical outcomes for the organisation(s) in which your research project is situated. Therefore it is important that your work corresponds to the characteristics shown in Figure 1.6.

Figure 1.6 Characteristics of a research project in HR



FOCUS ON A 'LIVE' HR ISSUE

Choosing a topic can be a challenging decision for first-time researchers and this issue is addressed in Chapter 2. A good project will be interesting for you to undertake and will provide the opportunity for added value to those who will read about your results (HR practitioners, student colleagues and academic tutors). Choose something that will be manageable (not too big – your time is short) but something that is challenging enough to merit an academic qualification and will be interesting to those who will find out about your work.

ASSESSMENT OF EXISTING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE ISSUE

Most published HR research, particularly reports that are produced for a practitioner audience, do not engage explicitly with theories, models and frameworks. Research written for an academic audience found in academic journals, by contrast, is **explicit** about theory. If your research forms part of a qualification-bearing course, an explicit use of theory is expected. You must take a constructively critical approach to the current state of knowledge in your topic area and work out how your project fits into the wider context. It is worth finding out now about the expectations of your tutors about the balance between theory and practice for your research report or dissertation.

COLLECT AND ANALYSE DATA

All projects undertaken as part of an HR programme of study require the collection and analysis of data. This may be secondary data (which has already been generated for some other purpose) as well as primary data (which you will gather to answer your research questions). If you are undertaking a CIPD course, you must collect and analyse primary data as part of your research. In many cases your data will come from one organisation, but in some circumstances data will be gathered across a range of individuals or organisations. Some HR research involves a new analysis of secondary data sources.

DERIVE SUPPORTABLE CONCLUSIONS

Once you have gathered your data and analysed it to make sense of what you have found, you will need to draw some overall and integrated conclusions. This will require you to reflect in a critical way about the limitations of your data as well as the insights you have achieved. Most HR research projects fall into the category of applied research and so you will also be able to reflect on the implications of your research findings for professional practice.

CREDIBLE PRESENTATION

Your research report or dissertation may be the longest document you have ever written and you will expend a lot of time and energy in producing it. The final product must be persuasive to those who read it; academic and professional credibility are important. The way the report is presented, the quality of your written communication, careful proof-reading, helpful graphics and charts, and the quality of referencing and citation you exhibit will all make a difference to both the persuasiveness of your report *and* to the mark your work achieves.

WRITING YOUR RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Whether you are undertaking a dissertation, business research report or other form of investigative inquiry, it is likely that your study centre will require you to write a research proposal. This is your first opportunity to write down what you plan to do. What is expected of your research proposal will depend on the qualification you are undertaking and the requirements of your study centre. You may find that a short document (one or two sides of A4 paper) is expected and the feedback you receive will be 'formative' (that is, not associated with a mark towards your final qualification). Alternatively, your centre may require a more detailed proposal of 2,000–3,000 words for which a mark will be recorded, which will count towards your final qualification.

Whatever the expected length of the research proposal, most students find this a daunting document to produce. But there are good reasons to overcome any natural tendency to put off the moment of writing. Your research project is an independent piece of work. As you undertake it you will benefit from the advice of your tutor as well as others in your study cohort and work organisation. However, the project is your responsibility and so the research proposal means you can:

- put down your initial ideas in writing
- share your ideas with your tutor/study centre
- get feedback about the strengths and possible difficulties of your idea.

Your tutor will provide you with a suggested format (and indicative word limit) for your proposal. Table 1.6 provides an indication of issues you will need to address.

Table 1.6 Research proposal contents

Topic area; aims and objectives	Provide an overview of the problem or issue you plan to address. Explain why this topic was chosen (what was the catalyst or trigger of the project? what is the value of the project?). Explain what you hope to achieve through the research. You should formulate an initial aim or 'big question' and more-specific objectives or questions (see Chapter 2 for help with this).
Literature review plans or progress	This part of the proposal shows how your research is positioned in the existing literature and where your study fits within existing knowledge about the topic. Requirements of study centres vary. Some require you to indicate the main areas for your literature search and key sources of information you are already aware of. Other centres require an initial review of the most important literature sources and an assessment of where your research would contribute to filling a gap in knowledge.
Research design and methods	This section identifies the way in which you are going to investigate the issue or problem as well as your world-view as a researcher. Your proposal should set out what type of data you intend to collect, your sampling strategy, the research methods you plan to use and your proposed approach to data analysis.
Ethical issues	Indicate here what particular ethical issues or problems you will need to address: in particular, obtaining informed consent of any organisations in which you plan to gather data as well access to individual participants. You will also need to explain the approach you will take to issues of confidentiality and anonymity for your research participants.
Suggested timetable	Present a clear and realistic timetable for the completion of your research and the production of your report. Indicate when important tasks will be carried out. Set achievable targets and time-planning contingencies and build in time for continuous review of different stages by you and your tutor.

WORKING WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR

A dissertation or a business research report is something for which you take personal responsibility. You will find it helpful to discuss your ideas and your progress with colleagues at work and with study 'buddies'. However, the key source of advice, guidance and encouragement will be your project tutor or research supervisor. Different study centres make different supervisory arrangements, and it is important to find out about the practices in your university. Figure 1.7 depicts the main areas that your supervisor will be able to discuss with you.

Figure 1.7 Feedback and discussion with your supervisor

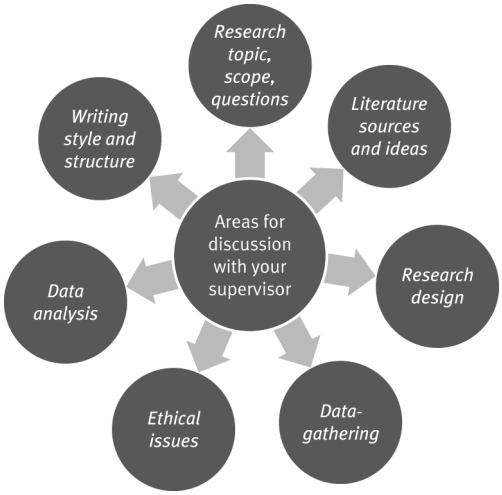


Figure 1.7 shows what a crucial contribution your supervisor can make. Establishing a good working relationship can help you to manage the research process in an effective way. The supervisory relationship is different from other tutorial arrangements as, in most cases, supervisors will work with their students on a one-to-one basis. Different supervisors will have their own backgrounds, experiences and preferred ways of working, just as you will also have your own preferences. If you want to work effectively with your supervisor, consider the list of hints and tips shown in Table 1.7.

Table 1.7 Constructive working with your supervisor

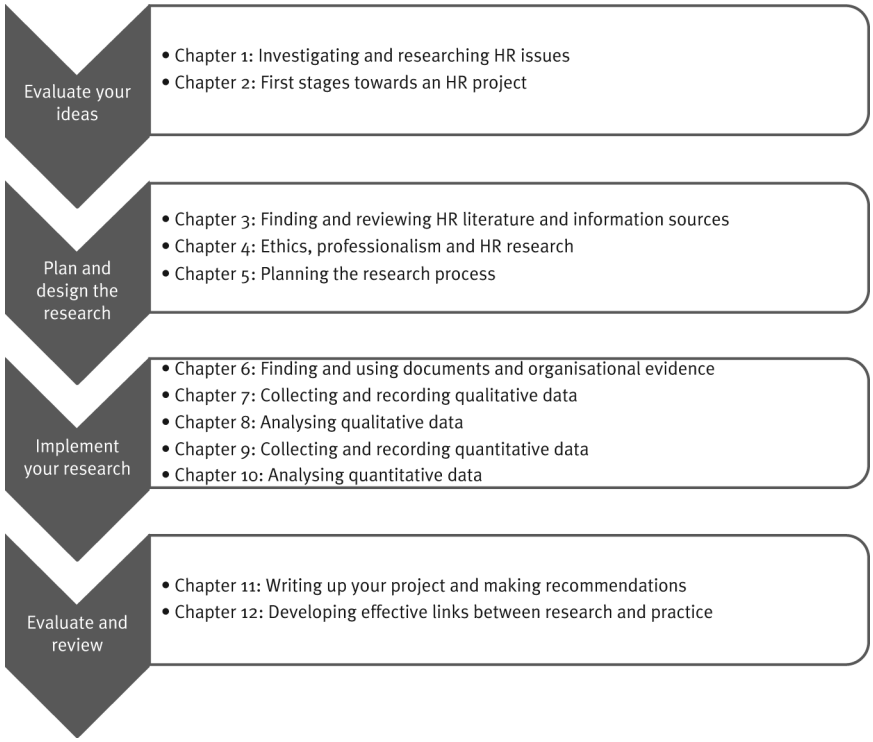
Establish the format, basis and frequency of meetings.	You may agree to meet face-to-face and have a few long meetings or shorter, more frequent meetings. You may prefer to communicate by Skype, telephone, email, and so on, if these media are more appropriate.
Identify times when either of you will not be contactable.	Check out when your supervisor may be away; let them know about your planned absences (holidays, etc). Don't send work to your supervisor just before their planned leave – they won't look at it until they get back.
Identify the key areas you feel you will need support with and discuss these at the beginning of the research process.	Discuss with your supervisor your strengths and skills that are relevant to the research process and the areas that you feel less confident with. Agree an action plan to develop in these areas and seek feedback as appropriate.
Establish project milestones and deadlines by which you will submit draft work for comment.	Your supervisor will be able to advise you about realistic targets. Don't be too ambitious but, once you have established your milestones, make sure you stick to them.

Be honest about your aspirations and priorities for the research project.	Discuss what you hope to achieve with your supervisor. If you are aiming for a distinction, commit to this with your supervisor and discuss what will make this more likely to be achieved. Alternatively, if you will be happy with a 'solid' pass, discuss this. If you are hoping to follow up your dissertation with producing a journal article, you should definitely discuss this in advance with your supervisor.
If you cannot attend a meeting or meet a deadline, make sure you let your tutor know in advance.	Nothing annoys a supervisor more than waiting around for a student who does not arrive or does not submit work at the agreed date. If you anticipate a change in your circumstances, let your supervisor know sooner rather than later.
Don't prevaricate.	Even if you are not fully satisfied with your draft work, try to submit it on time and then learn from the feedback you get.
Don't bluff.	If you do not understand something or have not actually done something, talking about it means you are more likely to get advice on how you can move forward.
Allow time for your supervisor to read your draft work carefully.	Although you will undertake a lot of work at weekends, do not expect your supervisor to do this as well. If they are to read your work carefully, they will need a sensible period of time (they have many other tasks to fulfil in addition to working with you).
Don't ask your supervisor what mark they think your project/ dissertation will achieve.	Even if your supervisor will be one of the markers of your report or dissertation, the assessment process is different and separate from the supervision process.

MANAGING THE RESEARCH PROJECT

A research project is like any other project that you undertake: it has a natural progression, following a series of different stages. To undertake any project successfully you will need to undertake the following steps. Remember that this process will not necessarily follow in such a smooth sequence and you will need to continuously evaluate and monitor progress. However, these stages – which are illustrated in Figure 1.8 and also show the logic of the chapter construction of this book – do act as a reasonable 'road map' and none of them should be left out:

Figure 1.8 Stages in your research project



- **Evaluate your ideas** – at this stage you make a research proposal and refine your thinking at an early stage on the basis of feedback you receive. Issues such as the length of time available, any cost implications and achieving necessary permissions to undertake the research need to be considered at this stage.
- **Plan and design the research –** this is where you will think in detail about key activities and tasks within each of your main milestones. Careful planning about access to data and ethics, literature searching and literature review, and plans relating to data-gathering and analysis is required. Research projects without careful planning and design are less likely to be successful.
- **Implement your research** – this stage will involve processes of data-gathering, review and analysis. This stage will involve you finding and using documentary and organisational evidence, collecting and recording your data and then analysing information to make sense of it.
- **Evaluate and review** – this is an important stage of any project, and with research it is important that you undertake a careful review of your analysis and formulate meaningful conclusions. At the same time it is important to reflect on learning points to enable you to develop your practice as both a researcher and an HR professional as your career develops.

It is likely that most research will be undertaken within a specific organisational context and will be focused on the solution of a particular HR problem or issue. In this sense an action orientation is more likely and the implications of this for the practitioner-researcher are now explored.

WORKING AS A PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER

A practitioner-researcher is someone who is employed in a job and, at the same time, carries out a research project that is of some relevance to their current role as a practitioner. Often the research is undertaken in addition to their normal duties and responsibilities. In the context of this book, this definition embraces three types of people:

- Part-time students undertaking research within their employing organisation: in this case the student may be a 'regular' employee or, alternatively, may be someone who is undertaking some form of consultancy assignment in the organisation. Of course, a practitioner-researcher may also be someone who is undertaking an investigative enquiry within their organisation (or that of a client) for which there is no link with the achievement of a qualification.
- Full-time students who have a part-time job in an organisation in which they undertake their research project.
- Full-time students for whom a work placement forms part of their course and they will be undertaking a research project within the placement organisation.

There are advantages and disadvantages of being a practitioner-researcher. The difficulties that are often encountered relate to:

- **Time:** when the project has to be undertaken in addition to normal workloads, it is difficult to give it the attention it deserves.
- **Preconceptions:** when you are a part of the organisation that you are researching, you may have formed many preconceptions about situations that someone from outside would not be influenced by.
- **Status issues:** often practitioner-researchers are not in senior positions within the organisation. This can make it difficult for their project to be taken seriously. Alternatively, they may have high status within the organisation. This can make it difficult for subjects of the research to express themselves freely.
- **Being critical:** although undertaking a research project involves adopting a critically evaluative approach to both theory and practice, in some organisations taking a critical approach is not encouraged.
- **Being instrumental:** a further danger, from the perspective of the organisation, is that where projects are linked with gaining a qualification, research can become more of a vehicle to achieve the student's purposes than being motivated by the resolution of a problem or issue.

There are also significant advantages to being a practitioner-researcher:

- **Insider opportunities:** if you know the organisation and are a part of it, you have access to a range of knowledge and experience that someone from outside would find difficult to achieve.
- **Practitioner opportunities:** as an experienced practitioner within the organisation it is more likely that actions that you recommend can and will be implemented.
- **Synergy between theory and practice:** as a researcher who engages with theory and also knows the context of the organisation, it is more likely that you will be

able to design and carry out useful studies that contribute to enhancements in both knowledge and practice.

In summary, undertaking research projects in organisational situations provides a number of advantages, but there are also dangers. A key issue for students is avoiding the temptation to merely repeat established organisational 'mantras' and making every effort to ensure that their project leads to new insights. To achieve this, practitioner-researchers must endeavour to:

- explicitly consider the wider context of the problem or issue that is being researched, both within the organisation and with regard to practice and developments outside of the organisation
- critically engage with theories, models and concepts at all stages of the research process
- encourage, where possible, the dissemination of the findings of studies so that they can inform the development of practice and understanding in other organisations and contexts.

Some more ideas about how this can be achieved are shown in Table 1.8.

Table 1.8 Maximising the value of organisational research

- Where possible, negotiate a time-allowance to carry out the research.
- Be prepared to 'sell' the idea of the research within the organisation.
- Try to establish a difference of procedure between activities connected with your research and your normal day-to-day practitioner activities. Be clear to yourself and to others about when you are acting as a researcher and when you are acting as a practitioner.
- Be explicit in your thinking about methods and sources of information. This will allow you to reflect proactively about the strengths and limitations of your research and so improve on it. It will also enable others to make an appropriate assessment of your work.
- Ensure that your research procedures are systematic and can be justified by more than convenience. If you cut corners (and you probably will), you must be explicit about the impact of the shortcuts on your findings and how you have interpreted your information.

SUMMARY

- HR research involves systematically enquiring into HR issues to increase knowledge and underpin effective action.
- Most HR enquiry can be characterised as 'applied research', being concerned with solving problems, considering effects and developing actions and interventions.
- Effective research processes involve: formulating a research topic; evaluating what is already known; obtaining information of good quality; interpreting the information and formulating conclusions.
- Effective HR researchers require a range of skills, including: intellectual and thinking skills; personal effectiveness skills; organisational skills; and

communication skills. Personal qualities such as self-motivation, self-centredness and self-confidence are also required.

- Different research world-views (for example social constructivist and objectivist) can be seen as distinct ways of making sense of the world, but there are overlaps between them.
- Projects undertaken to fulfil the requirements of an academic qualification are expected to make appropriate use of theories, models and concepts as well as primary and secondary data.
- Preparing a research proposal allows you to put down your initial ideas in writing, share them with your tutor and get feedback about the strengths and possible difficulties of your idea.
- Establishing and maintaining a good working relationship with your project supervisor will enable you to benefit from feedback and discussion of your ideas throughout the life-cycle of your project.
- There are advantages and disadvantages to being a practitioner-researcher, but organisational research, properly undertaken, can lead to new insights into HR issues, problems and situations.

REVIEW AND REFLECT

Self-test questions

1 HR research is:

a) gathering data to show the benefits of HR initiatives

b) the systematic enquiry into HR issues to increase knowledge and underpin effective action

c) describing trends in particular employment issues

d) the development of generalised theories about the relationships between different variables

2 Put the following stages of the research process into the most appropriate order:

a) Obtain information of good quality.

b) Interpret the information and form conclusions.

c) Evaluate what is already known.

d) Define a research topic.

3 Which of the following statements best describe HR research?

a) HR research should ignore theory and concentrate on practical issues.

b) HR research should challenge 'taken for granted' assumptions and generate new ways of understanding situations.

c) HR research should not get bogged down in trying to solve complex problems.

d) HR research should focus exclusively on investigating issues at a strategic level.

4 Put the following CIPD requirements for business research projects into the correct order:

a) Diagnose and investigate a live issue of significance to a work organisation.

b) Reflect on implications for professional practice.

c) Collect and analyse data.

d) Derive supportable conclusions.

e) Locate the work within a body of contemporary knowledge.

f) Make practical and actionable recommendations.

5 The literature search for an academic HR project should rely principally on which types of information?

a) newspaper and Internet news coverage

b) professional journals and trade journals

c) textbooks and management factsheets

d) academic journals and professional research reports

6 Which of the following would not normally be included in a research proposal?

a) ethical issues

b) research design and methods

c) conclusions and recommendations

d) suggested timetable

7 Which assumptions about the nature of reality correspond to which research world-views?

a) Reality is 'out there' corresponds with a constructivist world-view.

b) Reality is 'in here' corresponds with an objectivist world-view.

c) Reality is 'in here' but affected by 'out there' corresponds with an interpretivist world-view.

d) Reality is 'in here' corresponds with a constructivist world-view.

REVIEW AND REFLECT

Review questions

Carefully study the information your centre provides about the requirements for your research project or dissertation. Look closely at the assessment criteria that are provided. Study the indicative structure that may be described. Make sure that you can answer all the questions below. If you cannot, make sure you find out the answers from whoever is responsible for projects in your study centre:

1 What is the submission deadline for the final report?

2 What is the indicative word limit?

3 Over what timescale should the project be undertaken?

4 What level of engagement with theories, concepts, frameworks of best practice, and so on, is expected?

5 How important is it to gather primary data?

6 Does the research have to be based in an organisation?

7 Are recommendations for action a requirement for the project?

8 What support is available to students when undertaking their project and how can that support be accessed?

REVIEW AND REFLECT

Questions for reflection

These questions are designed for two purposes.

1 Project planning

Answering these questions should help you to identify actions and priorities that will be important in undertaking your project. The answers you make to these questions may influence:

- which chapters of this book you need to study particularly closely
- which sources of further reading will be relevant to you
- the extent to which you need to get further advice on features of the research process.

2 Demonstrating reflective practice

If you are a member of a professional body like the CIPD, you will need to undertake continuous professional development (CPD). There are many benefits to a process of reflection about your professional development and a commitment to developing your skills and knowledge. Taking this approach to CPD as part of your research process can help you to be more productive and efficient by reflecting on your learning and highlighting gaps in your knowledge and experience. This will enable you to build confidence and credibility, track your learning, see your progress and demonstrate your achievements.

Taking stock

1 What influence might your professional, organisational or personal background have on the way you approach your research? Do you see your role as a researcher as being like a detective, a doctor or an explorer? Will you be working as an outsider or as an insider? What are the implications of your responses to these questions for your choice of topic and the extent to which your research may set out to achieve a descriptive, explanatory or exploratory purpose?

2 How feasible is it for you to undertake research in one organisation? For how long do you expect to be a part of the organisation in which your research may be based? What other options may be open to you?

3 How clear are you about a topic for your project? Who do you need to discuss your ideas with to decide about the feasibility of the project? (Chapter 2 is particularly relevant to these questions.)

4 What resources or expertise and advice are available to you from your project supervisor? How can you make best use of these resources?

Strengths and weaknesses

5 How confident are you about the process of undertaking a literature search to enable you to critically evaluate what is already known about your topic? What are the skills you will need to search and critically review theories, models and concepts within the literature? (Chapter 4 is particularly relevant to these issues.)

6 How aware are you of sources of secondary data that would be relevant to your project? What skills will you need to obtain and analyse the secondary data you have in mind? (Chapter 7 is particularly relevant to these issues.)

7 What options might you consider to obtain primary data? What are the skill implications of the data-generation options that you are considering?

8 What skills and competences have you already developed that you can use in the process of undertaking your project?

Being a practitioner-researcher

9 What are the status or political issues within your organisation that may affect the process of undertaking your project? How might you be able to manage these effectively?

10 What are the timescales for your project that are required by: a) your study centre; b) your organisation? What are the implications of this for the process of doing your project?

11 What opportunities can you identify to sell your project ideas to: a) your manager and colleagues; b) others in the organisation?

Finally

12 Describe how you will feel when you have completed your project. Hold on to that feeling!

EXPLORE FURTHER

It is very important to carefully read any handbooks or guidance notes relating to project work provided by your study centre. Most students skim through these at the beginning of their project process and only read them carefully at the very end of the process, when it is almost too late.

One of the best ways to learn about research methods is to read and critique good-quality peer-reviewed research-based articles. You can tell if a journal is peer-reviewed by glancing at its notes for contributors, which will indicate that potential contributions will go through a 'blind peer review' process.

Useful Reading

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