

Best Practice

- Creating a Lean Supply Chain - The Supermarket-Principle and the Milkrun- Concept of the Reiff-Group, Reutlingen



Best practice was written by Prof. Dr. Dieter Kunz, Faculty of Production Management, as a part of Leonardo da Vinci project "Moving towards the case method". The idea of this form is to document the process of writing a case study and a teaching note. The aim is to facilitate other case writers in the future by illustrating the different phases and accompanied successes and pitfalls in the phases of case writing.

1. Selecting the company / Management issue

The chosen company is a fast growing SME and represents a typical family run firm of the local area (Reutlingen, Germany) which can be characterised as a supplying industry of the automotive agricultural building and construction machinery and mechanical engineering industry - all of them acting worldwide and appearing in the media in various form.

Therefore it is a company which is easy for the students to relate to. Another reason was that the Faculty of Production Management of Reutlingen University had already established contacts with the company.

Hints:

- (1) Try to get companies involved with which you have already personal contacts and positive experiences in cooperation.
- (2) If you personally don't have such contacts, use the entire network of the university's faculties

2. Before the company visit

The chairman of the board was contacted during a seminar held by university members in cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce / Reutlingen. Project content, objectives and institutions involved were explained, and interest was built up for the company's participation in the project by pointing out the benefits for the company. After that a meeting in the company followed where the previously mentioned issues were explained more detail. The timetable was introduced and questions of the company were answered.

Prior to the visit of the company a lot of material was collected from Internet, brochures or recent articles about the company, their products, their costumers, and the latest annual account. All this information formed the basis for formulating a questionnaire that should be answered by the company's managers. A draft of this questionnaire was sent in advance to the company and it was assured that confidential information would not be published.

Hints for approaching a company:

- (1) Contact managers of the company
- (2) Reveal your identity, title and institution
- (3) Explain the planned case project and its issues
- (4) Draw up a list of the institutions involved
- (5) List benefits for the company

Hints for preparing the first visit:

- (1) Get familiar with the company (ownership structure, core products, strategies, sales distribution, total turnover etc.)
- (2) Prepare a questionnaire you can use during your first visit.

3. The company visit

The main objective of the company visit was to get an overview of their operations, their customers and their problems in order to develop ideas about the case study. Thus, an impression of the interactions between the supplying company and the final producers was given while looking at their premises (supplier and final producer). The meetings were very efficient for the case writing process, because all the questions were answered in a way that helped to understand the company's activities and future plans to face all the challenges of competition. During the meeting the letter of intent was signed and it was stated that a win-win-situation (for the company and for the university) should be achieved with the case study project.

Hints:

- (1) Be well prepared!
- (2) Use a professional questionnaire focussed on the desired objectives
- (3) Be aware of the fact that a second or even third meeting will be necessary to achieve all information you need.

4. The actual writing process

First draft:

Before starting to write the first draft of the case it is necessary to think about the structure, the objectives, and the main topics to deal with. Then the author can start his writing. In this case the whole text was written in English right from the beginning. While writing the case study it is recommended to think about the teaching notes, because this will influence the structure of the case text and vice versa.

During this first phase of writing a lot of questions may come up and have to be clarified. New ideas will be born and it might be necessary to pick up additional primary or secondary information. After that phase a process of rewriting and a continuous improvement process set in.

Revising the draft:

Once the first draft is completed, it should be read by a person not involved in the case writing process (member of the company and / or member of the university staff) being as critical as necessary to achieve a case text without any misunderstandings. And as time goes by with this reading process the author can gather new motivation for case improvements.

Obtaining company approval:

It is advisable to hand over the rewritten version of the case study and teaching notes to the company's management in order to get the final approval.

Revising the draft after teaching:

This will follow when the case has been used in different institutions for several times and revising is recommendable.

Hints:

- (1) Define teaching objectives of the case
- (2) Define the target group
- (3) Develop the case structure
- (4) Write the first draft
- (5) Rewrite and improve it in a self-critical manner

(6) Analyse the students' reaction to the case study and use it for revising

5. Own comments of the whole writing process

Case writing is a process that requires a lot of communication and analytical thinking. Thus, the Leonardo da Vinci case writing project gives you the chance to sharpen your skills in this respect. Furthermore, it gives you the opportunity to get familiarised with real business problems and help to integrate them into your teaching process. On the other hand, the case writing needs an intensive research and is very time – consuming – a fact that is often underestimated. But in total it's worth the time because you can learn a lot from this process yourself and the students' feedback on the case was very positive and that's a motivating experience, too. The main issue of this case study was to force the students to be creative and innovative - a fact you often won't find looking at young managers who regard their jobs as a routine procedure.

In this case study students have to think about new methods in Operations Management and / or Logistics Management (analytical and / or heuristic methods) solving a problem. They have to adapt the methods that have been developed to solve similar problems in other industries and companies using the knowledge they have achieved working with this case.

Students should be encouraged to use IT-methods (e.g. Excel-sheets) in order to economise the solving process. Teaching notes are therefore to be considered as one possible option to solve the problem.

Thus, the idea of this case study is quite different from usual case studies as it is not only a matter of repeating the solving algorithms of efficient and successful projects in practise, but also research and development of new strategies and new solutions helping the companies in their efforts to follow a continuous improvement process facing the challenges of global competition. In this way a win-win situation can be achieved for both partners: Companies and universities will have a mutual benefit.