

6

Working with Historical and Contemporary Data Sources

Keith Gori, Rodrigo Perz-Vega, Kevin O’Gorman

In this chapter ...

Qualitative research is sometimes, unjustly, viewed as less valuable, less useful or even less robust than its quantitative counterpart. However, rather than being a lesser form of research method, qualitative methods often allow research into areas in which quantitative methods would be unsuitable, or are able to add extra depth to a mixed methods project. A number of approaches are explored here, starting with two distinct collection approaches - one older and one much more contemporary – and continuing with a number of social science approaches in the next chapter. Collecting your data is only half the challenge however, for you then need to utilise it in order to answer your research questions; analytical methods suited to qualitative data are detailed in Chapter 8.

Historical research in business and management

The Business History discipline emerged as a sub-field of Economic History but today occupies its own position and is increasingly being applied in other sub-fields of business and management, in what has been termed the ‘historic turn’ (Bucheli & Wadhvani, 2014). Following the first half of the twentieth century in which detailed, narrative accounts of business development dominated the field, it has grown into a much broader, analytically

driven discipline in which the focus and methodological approach of research is the subject of much debate (Amatori & Jones, 2003). The following three sections of this chapter introduce some of the core methodological approaches used in the historical research of business as an introduction to the field: documentary archival material and oral histories are the two most likely to inform an undergraduate business history project and are dealt with in more detail but attention is also given to lesser used non-traditional techniques; often these techniques are best utilised in conjunction with one or more other to add depth to the research. Firstly, let us briefly consider the merit of using a historical approach to explore business and management, starting with a succinct attempt at defining the role of the business historian.

Business historians study the historical evolution of business systems, entrepreneurs, and firms, as well as their interaction with their political, economic, and social environment. They address issues of central concern to researchers in management studies and business administration, as well as economics, sociology, and other social sciences, and to historians. They employ a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, but all share a belief in the importance of understanding change over time. (Jones & Zeitlin, 2007).

The most important part of this definition comes in the final sentence, the notion of understanding change over time. Business history is often reduced to, or seen as merely, a longitudinal account of business and management subject areas; the study of a company, industry, business function or management practice in a historical context through a narrative chronicling of the details involved in change over time but not the underlying importance of the change or the processes involved. However, good business history is much more than this. It is through its analytical strength, supported by methodological rigour, and the insight and understanding of change over time that business history provides strength and utility to wider business and management research. Indeed it should emphasize temporally contextualized explanations of business and management phenomena through emphasis of the significance and meaning of evidence from the past. In this manner, business history offers the prospect of new perspectives on the nature of business and management which challenge settled assumptions from across their sub-fields (Amatori & Jones, 2003; Bucheli & Wadhvani, 2014; Jones & Zeitlin, 2007).

Archival sources

■ What is an archive?

According to the Oxford Dictionary, an archive can be defined either as a collection of historical things or the physical place they are stored.

A collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people.

The place where historical documents or records are kept.

There is much debate within historical scholarship about exactly what constitutes an archive, but here both the above definitions are relevant. Though the definition of the archive can apply widely, it is important to understand that archives (in the institutional sense) come in a number of forms. The table below briefly summarises some of the key types, their features and gives examples. Each of these archives may contain similar types of material: official records and documents, correspondence, diaries, information from news sources, photographs, pictures and many more.

The type of archive and materials useful as source data is very much dependent on the nature of the project being undertaken. For example, a project looking at marketing changes would be more interested in the final marketing and advertising material produced and any documentation pertaining to the decision behind changes such as marketing committee minutes, agendas etc. A project more focussed on the impact of those at the top of a large company may be more interested in the correspondence and diaries of senior figures.

Table 6.1: Archive types, with examples

Archive type and description	Examples
<i>Government/state archives.</i> Largely hold material relating to administrative affairs of state. Often they hold information relating to private companies and listings of business/corporate archives (see below).	The National Archives, The National Archives of Scotland, National Archives and Record Administration (USA).
<i>Business/ corporate archives.</i> Hold information detailing the running of a business/corporation.	Most large companies maintain an archive. To check for UK company archives search the National Register of Archive database (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/default.asp).

<i>Special collections.</i> Usually organised thematically in that they hold material from a wide range of sources but relating to a similar subject, e.g. a particularly industry, social movement, political party etc. Often these archives are located within, or attached to, a university archive.	Scottish Business Archive (University of Glasgow).
<i>University archives.</i> Hold the administrative information of the university, can be very useful for collecting biographical material relating to former students. They also often have affiliated special collections (above).	Heriot-Watt University Archive, Harvard Business School Archive.
<i>Religious archives.</i> Hold material relating to a major faith, denomination or physical place of worship.	Scottish Catholic Archives, St. Paul's Cathedral Archives, Vatican Secret Archives (this also constitutes a state archive).

■ The value of archival research

The table below gives a brief analysis of some of the major strengths and difficulties of using archives. It should not be considered exhaustive, and the importance of the varying factors detailed is altered by a number of project-specific factors such as the type of archive used, the material underpinning the research and both the theoretical and contextual elements of the study.

Table 6.2: The major strengths and difficulties of using archives.

Strengths	Difficulties
Detailed description of events: evidence from a variety of sources, often vast quantities.	Time consuming: large amounts of material which require equal attention during collection and analysis
Primary values: the value that the creation of records had to the creator can give information for analysis to the researcher. Secondary values: the 'other' information in records, however consequential, can also provide useful insights for analysis.	Interpreting sources from the past requires sensitivity: we cannot think like people did X-hundred years ago; the significance of semantic terms changes over time (and may have been disputed at the time, e.g. the term 'liberty' considered in the American Revolution compared to twenty-first century USA).
Allows chronology to be established (though this should not be deemed the basis on which analysis is made). Just because something happened after something else does not mean it happened because of it...	Archives carry bias and should be questioned. They are imbued with the social and political decisions made to maintain certain things ahead of others. Why does the collection exist? Why do certain types of documents appear and not others?