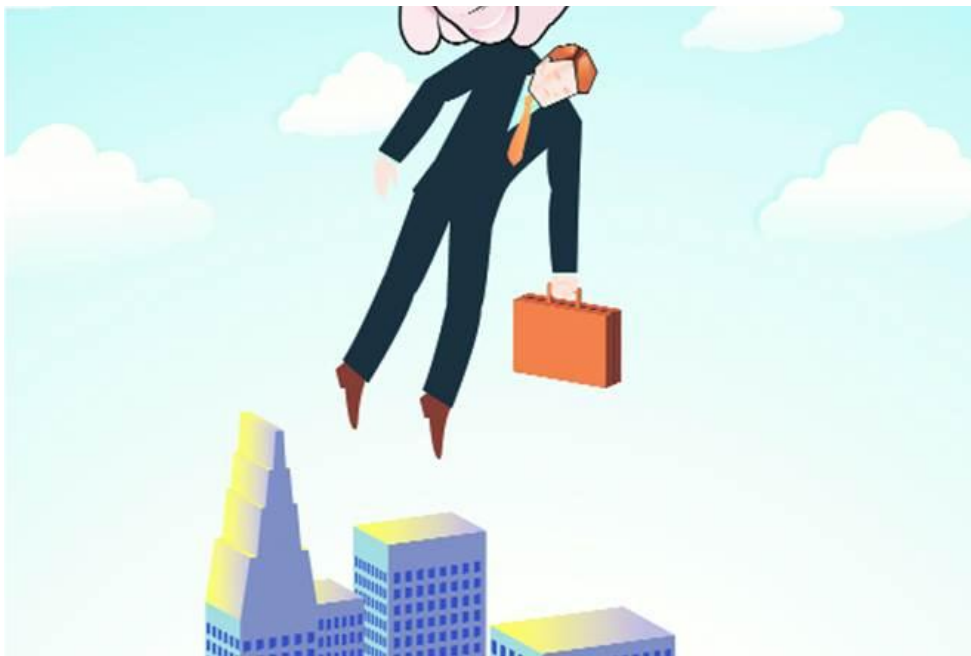


Why corporates need to 'invest' in case studies

Companies are perennially shy of signing off on release forms for case studies to be written and published, for their problems to be discussed in classrooms, or for protagonists to come into classes to give a first-hand account of the case situation to students.

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Jones Mathew

The Master in Business Administration (MBA) degree and its avatar Post Graduate Diploma in Management (PGDM) continue to be highly coveted professional degrees for both fresh

graduates as well as executives with professional technical degrees. These fulfill a certain need as every business requires specialized technical knowledge at the entry and mid-management levels—a business management qualification prepares one well to handle top-level jobs just as much as at an entry or mid-level assignment. Business management education has deliberately designed and made multiple pedagogical tools available at its disposal.

Some of these are questions and answers, storytelling, class discussions, live projects, field assignments, lectures, whiteboards, learning management systems (LMS), flip classes (where students do the pre-reads and conceptual work before coming to a classroom), group exercises, group presentations, as well as print and video case studies. One of the reasons why a management degree continues to be a must-have is the bouquet of teaching and learning techniques that are employed to impart and imbibe knowledge and skills. Everything from technical skills like business analytics to overall management personality development is offered in a business management course.

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Case study methodology

The primary advantage of pedagogical techniques is they help a management student examine and resolve problems from a practical point of view, using a thinking, clinical and/or analytical approach. However, there is a “first among equals” in this basket of techniques that business management teachers employ, and it is the case study.

The case study method involves observing and reconstructing the “case history” of a participant or a group of individuals in a business situation. A well-written case study captures the complexities of a single-case situation. It is often cross-sectional or located in a specific point in time. The body of case study builds up to the problem or dilemma to be resolved at that specific point in time.

Benefits of Case study

Benefits include development of problem solving skills, analytical skills, teamwork, looking at a situation from multiple perspectives, and so on. However, one of the major benefits often underplayed or overlooked by faculty is the opportunity for students to “feel” the situation—the protagonist’s decision dilemma, the variables involved, incomplete information, and the pressure to deliver. As opposed to other pedagogical tools, especially lecture and audio visual tools that help students to “think”, the case study method offers the added advantage of “feeling” and being “emotionally involved”. This is crucial as managers are emotional beings and the ability to “feel” the situation is just as important as being good at number crunching and strategising. To quote Prof Niraj Dawar of Ivey Business School, Canada, “there is a pressing need to put the emotion back into business decisions.” The case study method fulfils this role capably.

The other major benefit of a series of well-selected case studies is it helps students develop the skill of “pattern recognition” (or the ability to “connect the dots”). Over a period of 18-24

months of a regular management course, a student examines anything between 60 to 300 case studies—all “slices of life” experiences. There are multiple benefits that accrue to students from this experience.

The handicap one faces

Medical students, during the 5-8 years of studies, go through numerous examinations of cadavers as well as live patients (cases) in real life, but management students are denied that opportunity to a large extent. This is so because businesses do not trust them with running their companies as the stakes and the cost of failure is high. (Interestingly, they find it tough to trust students with their money, whereas in terms of their lives they would not mind being examined and treated by medical interns rather than doctors!)

Given this handicap, management students must look elsewhere for developing the skills of pattern recognition, problem-solving and developing a “feel” for managing business. In the process of dissecting 60-300 cases, which are in essence “slices of life” and close “simulations” of real-life business situations, students can learn how managers resolved problems and took decisions in real-time across functional areas and industries. When faced with a business dilemma in their working lives, they are able to recollect and draw patterns from the case studies done in the classroom. As Rolf Johansson (2003) states, “the ability to act within professional practice is based on the knowledge of a repertoire of cases.” A cement industry case situation and its resolution done in the classroom might do well to solve problems in the field of telecommunications in corporate life. The student is free to choose the best practices from one industry or functional area and apply them in another. There are a million “aha” moments possible when one has had the experience of numerous case discussions and is then faced with a business problem. The case method is a wonderful tool in this cross-fertilisation and synthesis of knowledge and practices from various sources to solve multi-faceted business issues.

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Why companies are reluctant to collaborate

Case studies are useful tools in the development of management skills. Cases are stories and humans from time immemorial have learnt from stories. Only the setting has moved to a corporate one. Why then do companies not come forward and collaborate with faculty members to create these priceless tools for preparing managers and help them hit the ground running when they join corporate life? It has been an unending challenge for business school faculty members to get companies to share information, discuss decision problems, and expose challenges faced by companies for the benefit of the next generation of students/managers. Companies are perennially shy of signing off on release forms for case studies to be written and published, for their problems to be discussed in classrooms, or for protagonists to come into classes to give a

first-hand account of the case situation to students. The benefits to Indian students would be phenomenal. And yet it is an uphill task to convince corporates to step up and share.

How can companies gain

What are the advantages for companies to collaborate with academics on creating a rich repository of Indian case studies? Some positive spin-offs for corporates could be:

- i.** Bright and talented students could get interested enough in the case company to come on board;
- ii.** Publicity among a wider audience especially for companies which are lesser known;
- iii.** Clear and concise record of important happenings of the company;
- iv.** Rich knowledge base for future managers;
- v.** Useful for internal training of managers;
- vi.** Co-authorship opportunities for key protagonists;
- vii.** Confidential information could be disguised so that sensitive data is not accessible to competitors and yet the story could be told to audience for educational purposes;
- viii.** Build national managerial capital by adding to the pool of managers who have “lived” cases.

The argument for academia-industry collaboration has been put forth by numerous authors. It becomes all the more imperative in a practice-heavy domain such as business management. It is time that businesses come forward and join hands in creating cases for Indian management students, as ours is a unique business culture and economic opportunity unparalleled anywhere.

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