

GPV Inc.: A Research Methods Case Study

Abstract

This session introduces participants to GPV Inc. This is a case study that has been developed for late graduate students in a research methods and analytics class. Session attendees will imagine that they are students taking the research methods and analytics class. The GPV Inc. case introduces students to people management issues across a variety of realistic situations in a hypothetical organization. Students then select a project from these scenarios to develop a research question, which they then analyze as a semester long research project. This hour-long session will focus on presenting and discussing the GPV Inc. Case study with participants.

Key Words: People analytics, research methods, case study

Introduction

While the need for student knowledge of research and analytics skills are evident in the proliferation of business analytics programs across the world, teaching materials are scarce. Textbooks are either focused solely on business statistics or on research methods, not on both. The availability of innovative supplemental materials is scant.

This case activity, titled GPV Inc., is appropriate for MBA or MS students in a research methods and analytics class. Students in our program have the prerequisite of an undergraduate statistics class. This course is taken by students from inside and outside the business school (e.g., Accounting, Finance, IS, Engineering, Psychology, Construction Management, Sports Management) who may want an element of People Management through Analytics or for whom the course substitutes for the analysis/statistics part of their degree.

Students in Management graduate classes often lack the in-depth knowledge of using management theories to assess whether an organizational issue can be researched and studied in detail. They often err on the side of too much complexity or too little. Students from outside of the Business School who take this course have not been trained in these People Management issues so may lack a strategic view of the organization in their own fields and not have considered what questions to ask and how to ask them.

The purpose of this case activity is to provide a sorely needed semester-long case project for graduate business students in learning research methods, strategic thinking, data collection and analysis, and reporting of results. The case activity addresses learning needs by providing realistic decision making and a hands-on approach.

Theoretical Background

Research shows that students learning research methods and statistics are not only fraught with anxiety (Nilsson & Hauff, 2018) but don't appear to have realistic expectations of their performance, creating a negative cycle of repeated failures (Berenson, Ramnarayanan, & Oppenheim, 2015).

Research shows that a 'hands-on' approach in the study of research methods can help students experience lower anxiety, higher confidence, and increased understanding (Nilsson & Hauff, 2018). A meta-analysis also showed that "experiential learning" approaches, or those in which students are involved actively, such as in an actual consulting project where they apply their knowledge and skills as they learn (Burch, Giambatista, Batchelor et al., 2019). For example, Simons (2020) incorporated a semester-long field study project.

The business case study method incorporates many of the positives of 'hands-on' and experiential learning by creating a "realistic decision environment" and "learning through discovery" (Banning, 2003, p. 558). For example, Tompson and Dass (2000) concluded that the case study method develops students' skills in strategic thinking and analysis and raises the self-efficacy of students in these realistic decision-making activities. The case study method has been applied to learning statistics, building student interest and understanding (Carlson, 1999).

A case study simulates real problems that have a plot, more than a single story, that involves students more deeply than what McNair (1971) refers to as requiring analysis versus simple review of an issue. The business case stimulates student inquiry while they explore a business situation (Richardson, 1993; Roselle, 1996). Cases may range from simple to complex, with Leenders and Erskine (1989) classifying them as varying in difficulty due to the analytical task, conceptual level, and the presentation of the material.

GPV Inc. fits into the Analytical Dimension 3, Conceptual Dimension 2 and Material Presentation Dimension 1 of the Dimension Theory Table (Leenders and Erskine, 1989):

Analytical Dimension 1. The case does not present a decision pressure but provides background information. It allows students to develop the ability to identify key issues or problems and alternatives and present an appropriate action program.

Conceptual Dimension 2. The case presents a concept of medium difficulty or a simple combination of concepts and thus gives the student practice in identifying, understanding and using the concepts.

Material Presentation Dimension 1. A small amount of information is clearly presented with the objective that students will work with information so there is minimum distraction from previously agreed upon educational objectives.

Insert Figure 1 here

Learning Objectives

As part of the requirement of the course, students conduct a research study based on an organizational issue and document it in the form of report. The project is assigned in distinct steps to allow learning and revision in process. Learning objectives for the course are influenced by the needs for research in organizations, based partly on sources such as the Society for Human Resource Management Body of Competency and Knowledge (SHRM BoCK) (SHRM, 2018).

Students learn to:

1. Examine an organizational problem: Analysis of strategic need and implications for different levels of the organization

2. Develop a research question: Defining a problem based on particular variables and outcomes of interest
3. Conduct a literature search: Using library and online (e.g., Google Scholar) research tools; accessing government data
4. Develop hypotheses: Application of variables in the particular scenario to the need and understanding of how to read and interpret academic research
5. Design a research study: Learning concepts of validity and control, including control (or lack thereof) of organizational context, external events and individual differences
6. Collect and analyze data using appropriate methods of analysis: Reliability calculations, descriptive statistics , correlations, linear modeling

Exercise Overview

Students are introduced to a fictitious company GPV Inc. This organization has offices all over the world They are also engaged in a variety of businesses and projects (this was created with the goal of making the organization something a wide range of students can identify with) which emphasizes its employees. Next, the students are told about the new HR Manager who is interested in introducing a data-driven approach to HRM. They are told that they will get the opportunity to work with her team in a project that most resonates with them. The students are then introduced to the rest of the HR manager's team. Each member of the team has a distinct backstory, which ties in with the project they are interested in investigating. Five different projects , covering distinct areas in people management have been created. This ensures that the students have exposure to a range of people management concepts. Care has been taken to present a diverse team in non-stereotypical roles interested in these projects. Having gone through the case and projects, students then pick one project to further work on and develop as their research project for the class.

Session Description

The session will focus on presenting and discussing the GPV Inc. Case. The session leader will introduce the case and characters, talk about the research project topic selection. Session attendees will imagine that they are students attending the course. They will read through the various scenarios in the project and select the project of their choice. The Session Leader will then explain the next steps of the project to them and show an example of each step for those which a student has a deliverable. A final discussion will ensue on the case, the process of project selection and the class in general.

Insert Figure 2 here

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Figure 1. Dimension Theory Table (from Leenders & Erskine, 1989)^a

Case Dimension	Range	Information	Objectives
Analytical Dimension	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decision situation issue or problem, Alternatives considered Decisions made 	Develop ability to appraise decisions and actions
	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decision situation issue or problem 	Develop ability to analyze and identify alternatives , select appropriate alternatives and present action programs
	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decision pressures not clearly presented/ Background information applied 	Develop ability to identify key issues or problems and alternatives and present appropriate action program
Conceptual Dimension	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concept straightforward and simple 	Give the reader the practice in identifying, understanding and using the concepts identified
	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concept of medium difficulty Simple co combination of concepts 	Give the reader practice in identifying, understanding and using the concept involved
	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concept difficulty Cross functional situation or policy situation 	Give the reader practice in identifying and using the concepts involved
Material Presentation Dimension	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small amount of information clearly presented 	to work with information so there is minimum distraction from previously agreed on education objectives
	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Medium amount of information Clearly presented 	To approximate more closely real-life situations and to give the reader some exercise at sorting information
	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large amount of information and/or not clearly presented Crucial information missing 	To force the reader to do their own sorting of material or to specify what additional information is required before a decision may be made.

^aShaded rows are those that categorize the GPV Inc. case.

Figure 2. Session Description

Activity	Who	Time
Introduction to the GPV Inc. Case	Session leader	15 minutes
Reading the GPV Inc. Case	Participants	15 minutes
Selecting a project	Participants	5 minutes
Choosing variables	Participants	5 minutes
Description of student typical methods of data collection and analysis	Session leader	10 minutes
Discussion	Session leader and participants	10 minutes