



SELECTING AND PLANNING GOOD RESEARCH PROJECTS

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OBJECTIVE

After follow this session you will be able to:

- ✓ **Generate new ideas for research.**
- ✓ **Identify a good research topic using selected criteria.**
- ✓ **Write a proposal for the research project.**
- ✓ **Plan the research project and data collection.**
- ✓ **Gain the access you need to data.**
- ✓ **Conduct research in an ethical manner.**

BACK GROUND

- Having read Chapters 1 and 2, you should now have a clearer idea about the methodologies, approaches and tools that are essential for the design and implementation of a good research topic.
- The question remains, of course, **what is a good research topic?**
- **Generally**, research projects can be designed as part of an academic programme of study, or as a result of a business or organizational need.
- While the former will probably require a stronger element of theoretical underpinning, both will need a sharp, practical focus or application

- **The outputs from research projects** not only have potential benefits for organizations and their management, they can also be a vital element in personal learning and development.
- Clearly, the best approach is to select a research topic that interests you, and one that is likely to maintain your interest.
- The research process can be a long and arduous one, so you need to be committed to your subject.
- Winkler and McCuen (1985) **suggest** that you also need to select a subject area that has sufficient scope to generate several research projects.
- So, for example, investigating how a particular commodity is produced at source and shipped to a retail outlet may not prove particularly illuminating

- If you **find you have difficulty finding a research subject**, then talk to colleagues at work to see what sort of issues concern them. Discuss the matter with your academic supervisor or line manager. Other useful sources are professional journals and magazines that often contain articles on issues that are currently engaging the minds of business, commerce, public sector and voluntary organizations.
- You **might also browse through the business or management** sections of your local bookshop to see what kinds of titles are being published
- It also suggests how you can plan a schedule for conducting your research and how you should carry out the project, not only efficiently, but ethically.

SELECTING A RESEARCH TOPIC

- **When to select a research topic**
- Some researchers have a very clear idea and focus at an early stage. Indeed, they may have embarked on a programme of study precisely because they want to tackle a specific end project.
- For others, and probably the majority, a research topic emerges only towards the end of the study programme, or as a result of an emerging problem in the workplace.
- **Sources of research topics**
- There are, essentially, two ways of identifying a research topic. One is through the literature – books and academic and professional journals – which may raise interesting themes and topics that can be related to your own organization.
- Line managers, supervisors or project teams may all require assistance, and this can often be a fruitful source of research focus. In effect, the researcher then acts as a kind of internal consultant to a project team.

- **What is a good research topic?**

- **A good topic**, then, is one that gives you free rein to maximize this self-development. Jankowicz (1991) argues that such personal development might include:
 - Improving personal time management.
 - Gaining access to respondents.
 - Interviewing respondents.
 - Speaking to an audience.
 - Persuading people to cooperate.
 - Dealing with uncertainty about data

Academic requirements

- You **must ensure that the research subject is capable of meeting academic requirements** if you are undertaking a programme of study. As Raimond (1993) suggests, be sure that your topic is capable of being linked to the appropriate academic theory.
- One solution is to look at the academic journals (many of which are now online), which tend to be more topical.

Access

- You will need access to relevant information, material and data. If you select an issue where these are lacking, you have little chance of completing the project.
- Remember that some issues in organizations, communities or networks are sensitive or confidential, for example, some financial data, redundancy plans, attitudes within a community, etc. Indeed, Flick (1998) warns that a research project is an intrusion into the life of an institution and is inherently unsettling for it.

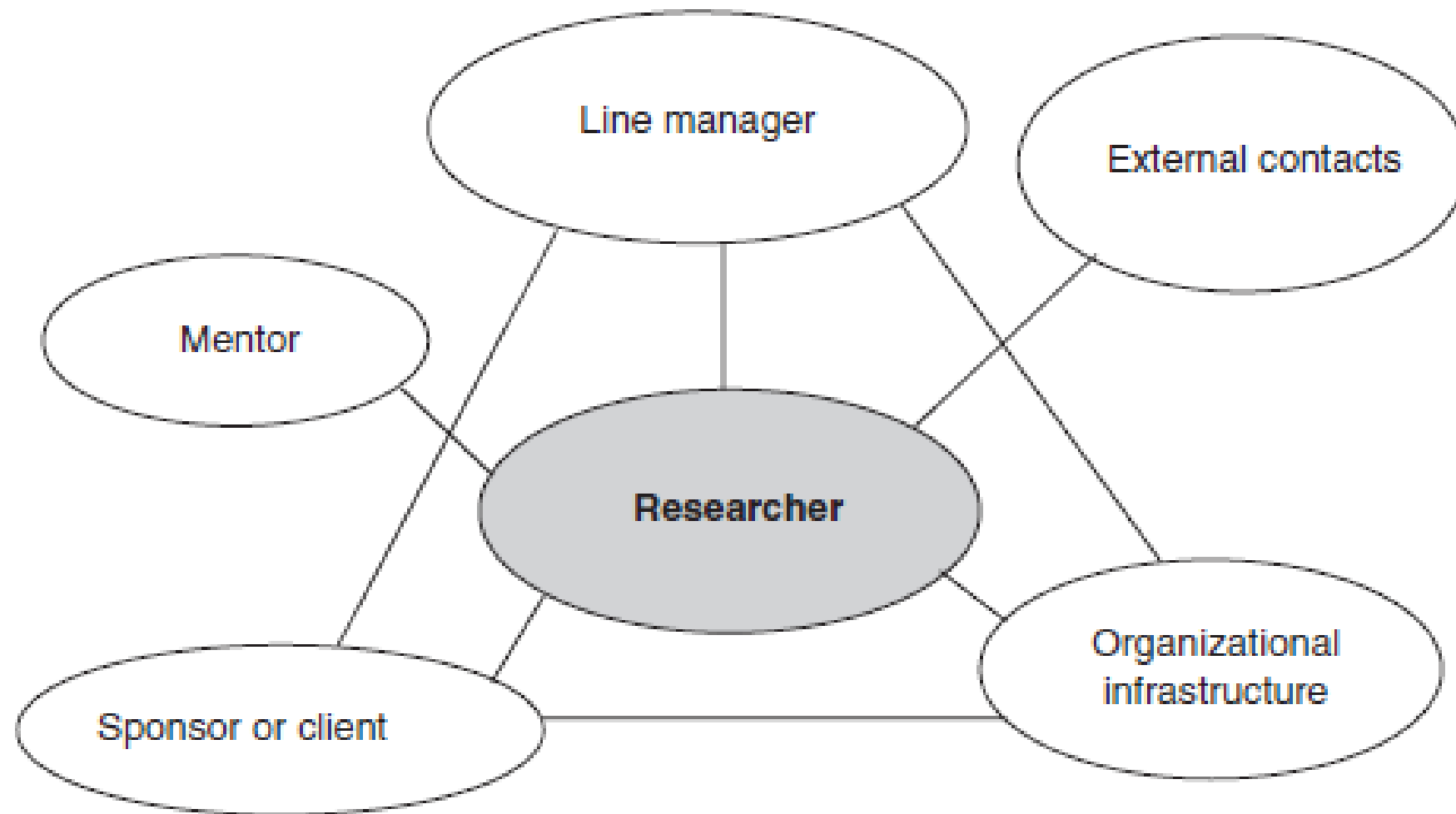


FIGURE 3.1 ORGANIZATIONAL SPONSORSHIP AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

• **Sponsorship and networking**

- It helps if you have a sponsor or client who can give you either financial backing, or at least moral or practical support. The latter might involve 'opening doors' in the organization and facilitating your access to people with information.
- To provide you with assistance. Note that not all elements of this network are necessarily connected. They all perform different roles, so you need to understand or negotiate what each can offer you

• **Activity 3.1**

- Make a list of the support networks available to you. Are they readily accessible?
- Are they sufficient?

- **Time available**

- Be sure that the research can be completed within the time available. There is always a tendency to underestimate the time needed for a project. Further **difficulties may arise if the topic chosen** is dependent upon the implementation of another project within the organization. If this project becomes delayed (which is often the case), or abandoned, then your research project may quickly reach an impasse.
- **The best approach** is to draw up a research plan before starting the project, with clear indications of dependencies and potential bottlenecks.

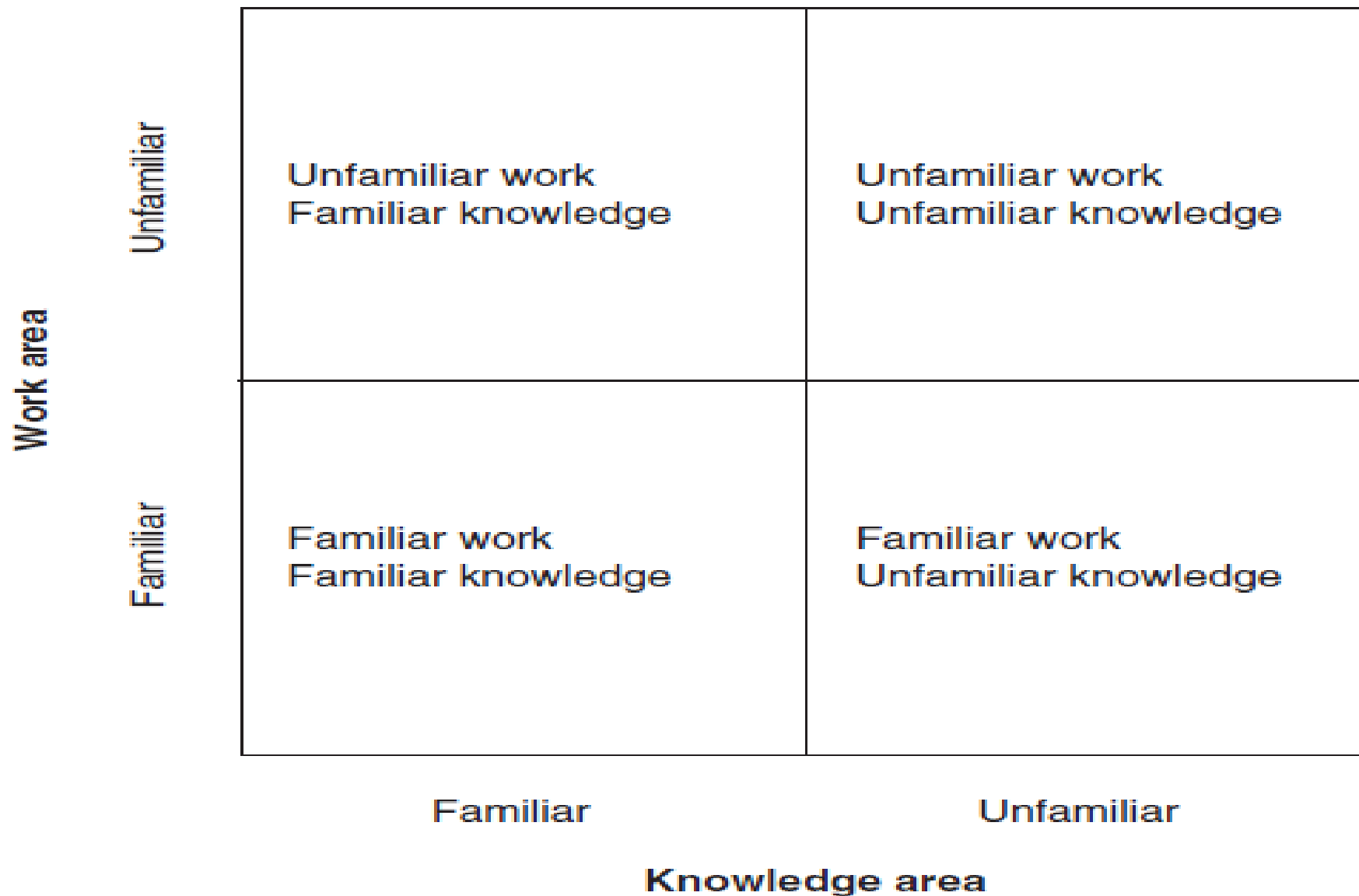


FIGURE 3.2 JOHARI WINDOW SHOWING CHOICES BETWEEN FAMILIAR AND UNFAMILIAR WORK EXPERIENCE AND PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

Capabilities and experience

- This may seem obvious, but selecting an issue that is within your capabilities is essential. Your skills will, hopefully, develop during the course of the research process; but, say, choosing a topic that requires robust statistical skills when you are comfortable with **only basic mathematics may be a recipe for disaster**. Experience may be a different matter.
- From fig 3.2 you can choose projects that are congruent with both your work area and experience (the safe approach)

• **Activity 3.2**

- Take the project that you intend to do, or one or more projects that you are considering. Locate the position of the project(s) within the Johari window.
- How risky is the project, and are the risks worth taking? How 'stretching' is the project and is such development a personal objective?

Value of the project

- Projects that **have value to the organization** (say, in terms of identifying cost savings, new marketing opportunities, IT strategies, etc.) will have a much greater chance of success than those that merely re-plough old ground.
- Innovative, provoking and original projects have a better chance of sponsorship and support from within the organization (at the appropriate level), of opening new networks.

Examining your own strengths and weaknesses

- You will benefit from choosing a topic that you enjoy and for which you have probably received good marks for previous assignments and other course assessments, or positive feedback from a work-based project.
- Why not make a list of your strengths and weaknesses. Get a friend or colleague to critique the list (prepare yourself for a shock!), then amend it as necessary.

Looking at past projects

- This is often a useful way of generating new ideas. A glance towards the end of some projects may reveal a section entitled '**Suggestions for future research**' that there may also be a bibliography which could prove a useful starting point for your own research – although take care that the references are not too dated.

TABLE 3.1 TECHNIQUES FOR GENERATING AND REFINING RESEARCH IDEAS

Rational thinking	Creative thinking
Examining your own strengths and weaknesses	Brainstorming
Looking at past projects	Exploring personal preferences using past projects
Searching the literature	Relevance trees
Discussion	Keeping a notebook
	SWOT analysis

Source: Adapted from Saunders et al., 2000

- **Searching the literature**

- The literature includes articles in the academic journals, reports, books and websites. Becoming aware through the literature of the significance of some issues, or new angles on old ones, can be a stimulus to undertake research in how these ideas can affect your own organization.

Exploring personal preferences using past projects

- Here, you simply take a look at the subjects you have chosen for previous modules, programmes or work projects, and identify the kinds of topic areas you have selected. This may be a guide to what you are generally interested in.

- **Discussion**

- Ideas might be generated by talking to fellow students, work colleagues, line managers, university tutors, practitioners and professional networks

- **Brainstorming**

- This is a well-known problem-solving technique for generating and refining ideas.

Relevance trees

- This is similar to mind mapping, where you start with a broad concept from high you generate more specific topics. From each of these branches, new sub branches can be generated
- **Activity 3.3.**
- Begin the process of generating ideas for your project. Note down fresh ideas as they occur. This may be when reading the literature, talking to people at work, or talking to people undertaking a similar programme of study. At some point, you may chose to carry out a SWOT analysis on each subject to see which of them has the most potential.

TOPICS TO AVOID

- It is often only possible in retrospect to recognize the topic you should not even have attempted! However, here are a few hints that may help you to avoid the research disaster. The topics to avoid are those that are:
- **Too big**. For example, 'Human resource management – innovative international perspectives'. Some very large projects can be worthy and valuable to an organization, but you need to ask yourself whether you have the time experience and resources to complete them. Winkler and McCuen (1985) also warn that the big topic is **also the most difficult to write about: it is difficult knowing where** to begin, and omissions and oversights are more crudely exposed
- **Traced to a single source**. This may not be a particular problem in pure business research when a single solution is needed to a problem.
- **Too trivial**. This may seem rather subjective, but you should use your common sense to evaluate the kinds of projects that are worth doing and those that are not

- **Lacking in resource materials.** Look out for warning signs – very few references to the topic in the main textbooks, practitioner journals or other refereed journals or websites.
- **Too technical.** Some projects are more concerned with solving highly technical problems rather than organizational research
- **Dependent on the completion of another project.** Even if you are 'guaranteed' that projects you hope to use as data sources will be completed in time for your use, you are strongly advised not to make your own project dependent on them.
- **Unethical.** Avoid taking on projects that can damage other people physically, emotionally or intellectually.

PLANNING THE PROJECT

- It may seem obvious that all research projects should be carefully planned, but it is surprising how many researchers rush forward into data collection without a plan of campaign. Disaster is the inevitable result. Planning also helps with time management, one of the greatest problems when work and research commitments compete. Using Gchart for example.

LOCATING THE LITERATURE

- This is not simply a sequential process of first finding the literature that you need and then reviewing it. According to Hart (2001), the keys to conducting a successful search of the literature are: planning, understanding the ways in which information is organized and made available, maintaining records, and extracting information from useful sources, including the main arguments, theories, concepts and definitions.

TABLE 3.2 AN OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE SOURCES

Sources where research and information is published	Sources and organizations providing publications	Tools for searching published works and data
Textbooks	Academic libraries	Library catalogues
Articles	Public libraries	Subject indexes
Theses	National libraries	Subject abstracts
Government publications	Specialist libraries	Bibliographies
Legal and professional publications	Museums	Encyclopaedias
Trade literature	Archives	Guides to the literature
Conference papers	Special collections	Internet directories
Monographs	Political parties	Internet search engines
Statistics	Commercial organizations	
	Trusts	
	Internet	

Source: Adapted from Hart, 2001

Journal articles

There are, essentially, two types of journal article: academic articles written in peer-reviewed journals, and articles published in professional journals (that are not usually peer-reviewed). The articles you need can be accessed through using either an indexing or abstracting tool.

Title and subtitle – are they relevant?

- Preface – does it cover your subject area or at least an element of it, and is it at the right level?
- Contents list – does it offer material on your topic?
- Publisher – is the organization respected for publishing quality texts in your field?
- Bibliography – is there one, and do the references look familiar, at the appropriate level and ‘on topic’?

Using citations and reviews

- A citation index records the references made in other works to an author or source. By examining the scale to which an author has been cited, you can quickly see who the acknowledged authorities are in a particular field. Citation indexes also provide reviews of books.

REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

- The critical review of the literature provides the foundations of your research. Not only does it inform and refine your research objectives (for example, are they topical, worthy of research, original?), it provides a benchmark against which you can compare and contrast your results.

The critical review

- A review can involve a narrative or description of an article or other piece of work. A *critical* review, however, is much more than this and it is important to

TABLE 3.3 SKILLS FOR CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE LITERATURE

Skill	Actions	Description
Analysis	Select, differentiate, break up	Dissecting data into their constituent parts in order to determine the relationship between them
Synthesis	Integrate, combine, formulate, reorganize	Rearranging the elements derived from analysis to identify relationships
Comprehension	Understand, distinguish, explain	Interpreting and distinguishing between different types of data, theory and argument to describe the substance of an idea
Knowledge	Define, classify, describe, name	Describing the principles, uses and function of rules, methods and events

Source: Adapted from Hart, 1998

Hart (1998) argues that a reading of the literature should pose questions such as:

- What is the purpose of the study?
- What is the focus of the study?
- What types of data were collected?
- How were the data managed?
- What analytical approach is used?
- How is validity addressed?
- How are ethical issues handled?

- In terms of structure, Creswell (1994) suggests that a literature review should comprise five components:
- An Introduction, informing the reader about how the review is to be organized and structured.
- **Review of Topic 1**, addressing the literature on the independent variable or variables (the influences on the dependent variable or subject, upon which the research is focused). Note: we will explore descriptions of dependent and independent variables in more detail in Chapter 4.
- **Review of Topic 2**, the literature on the dependent variable. If there are multiple dependent variables, devote a sub-section to each one, or focus on a single important dependent variable.
- **Review of Topic 3**, the literature that relates the independent variable to the dependent variable. Creswell warns that this section should be relatively short and should focus on studies that are extremely close in topic to the proposed study. If nothing specific has been written on the topic, then review studies that address it at a general level.

• **WRITING THE PROJECT PROPOSAL**

There are, essentially, two types of proposal:

- An **organizational** proposal, written to gain funding for a project or at least to elicit support and commitment from a project sponsor.
- An **academic** proposal, a plan for conducting research as part of an academic programme of study.
- There are **two main types of organizational proposal**, comprising those that are written:
 - In response to a request for proposals or ‘invitations to bid’ from, say, government agencies or companies.
 - For submission to an internal organization or department, often in response to a request for help with a problem or a need to improve a product or service.

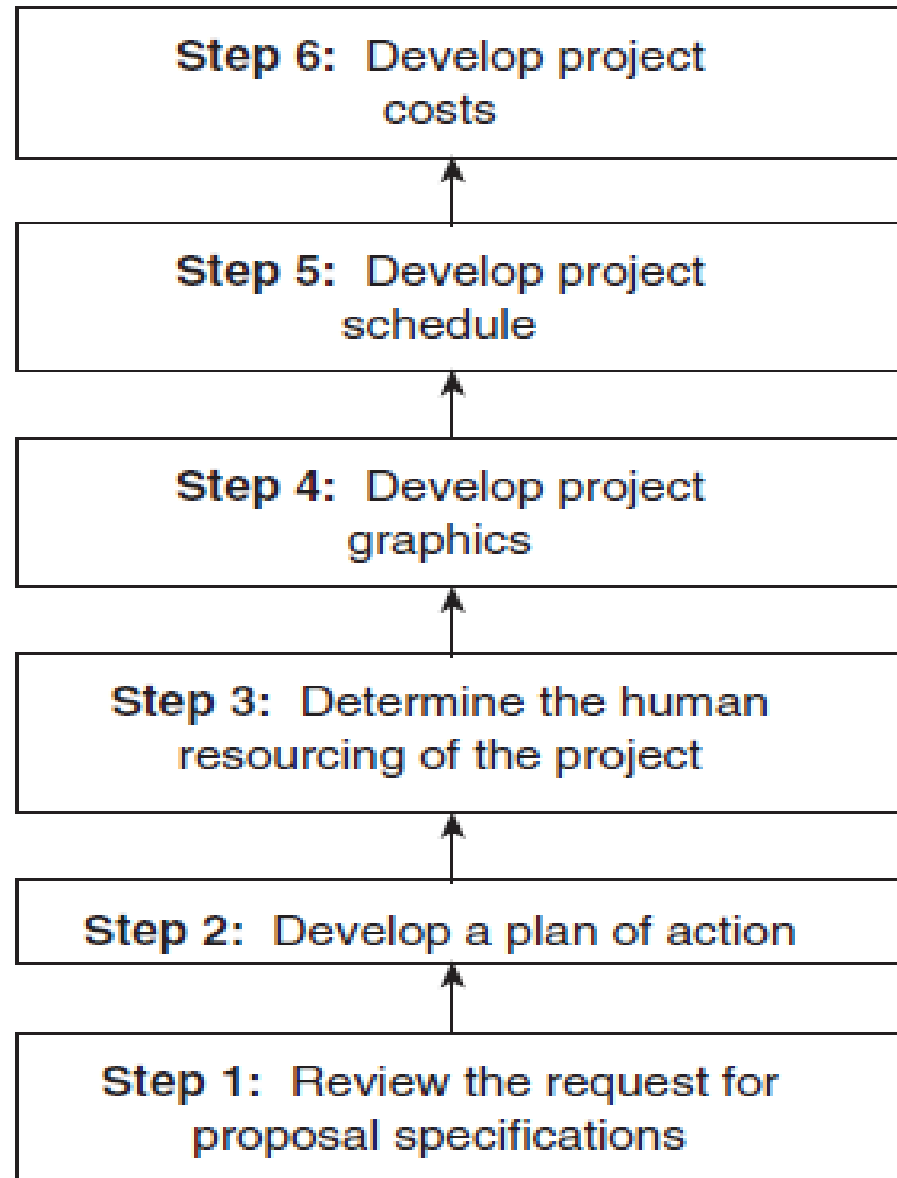


FIGURE 3.5 PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT FLOWCHART (ADAPTED FROM WHITE, 1997)

• THE ETHICS OF RESEARCH

- We will deal with a wide range of ethical issues that are particular to specific research methods in later chapters. Here, we will examine some of the ethical considerations of more general significance.
- Ethics is a philosophical term derived from the Greek word *ethos*, which means character or custom. The ethics of research concern the appropriateness of the researcher's behaviour in relation to the subjects of the research or those who are affected by it

TABLE 3.5 TYPICAL STRUCTURE FOR AN ACADEMIC PROPOSAL

Section	Contents
Working title	Describes the breadth and depth of the topic and gives an indication of the methodology to be used (e.g. case study, evaluation, etc.)
Introduction (abstract)	A summary of the research topic, describing the core problems or issues, the gaps in the research and how the research will address them
Aims	General statements on intent and direction of the research
Objectives	Clear and measurable statements of intended outcomes
Justification	Rationale for the research with reference to gaps in current knowledge, and potential application of results
Review of the literature	Describes the history of the topic and key literature sources; illustrates major issues and refines focus to indicate research questions (qualitative research) or hypothesis (quantitative research)
Methodology	Justifies methodological approach, including data collection and analytical techniques; use of quantitative or qualitative methods; choice of research approach and paradigm; anticipation of ethical issues; how the data will be analysed


Work schedule	A timetable for completing the research, indicating tasks and timescales
References	Bibliography of works cited in the proposal
Related material	For example, letters of support for the research, agreement to collaborate from interested institutions

Source: Adapted from Hart, 1998

TABLE 3.6 A CHECKLIST OF ETHICAL ISSUES

Ethical Issue	Description
Privacy	The right not to participate. The right to be contacted at reasonable times and to withdraw at any time
Promises and reciprocity	What do participants gain from cooperating with the research? If promises are made (such as a copy of the final report) keep them
Risk assessment	In what ways will the research put people under psychological stress, legal liabilities, ostracism by peers or others. Will there be political repercussions? How will you plan to deal with these risks?
Confidentiality	What constitutes the kinds of reasonable promises of confidentiality that can be honoured in practice? Do not make promises that cannot be kept
Informed consent	What kind of formal consent is necessary and how will it be obtained?
Data access and ownership	Who will have access to the data and who owns it? Make sure that this is specified in any research contract
Researcher mental health	How will the researcher be affected by conducting the research? What will they see or hear that may require debriefing or counselling?
Advice	Who will the researcher use as a confidant(e) or counsellor on issues of ethics during the research?

Source: Adapted from Patton, 1990

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- Examine Case Study 3.1 and consider the following questions:
 - Is the research conducted by a researcher or a consultant? Does it make any difference to the ethical issues involved?
 - Have sufficient steps been taken to safeguard ethical principles? Are there any additional steps that you would take?
 - Should the research be abandoned before the qualitative stage? Suggested answers are provided at the end of the chapter.

SUMMARY

- **A good research topic must have** the potential for demonstrating theoretical credibility, allow access to the relevant data, provide a symmetry of potential outcomes, and be congruent with your own interests, capabilities and career aspirations.
- To **generate ideas for a research topic** you could look at examples of projects completed by others, or ideas could emerge from your reading of the literature or by a brainstorming process.
- **Before starting the project, produce a plan to show** when and how you intend to conduct your research including data collection, analysis and the writing up process.
- **An important step in any research project is the literature review.** This may assist in the formulation of research questions or topics (deductive approach) or illustrate and illuminate research findings (inductive approach).
- **Before starting many projects you may be required to write a project proposal.** Make sure that, if there is a request for proposals, your bid matches the specifications accurately. Get your proposal evaluated by others before submission.
- **Ensure that ethical principles are catered** for in the research, including the privacy of respondents and their anonymity (if this has been guaranteed).

- **Summary of web links**

- <http://www.adeptsience.co.uk>
- <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code.html>
- <http://arl.cni.org/scomm/edir/index.html>
- <http://www.bera.ac.uk/guidelines.html>
- <http://www.bhinet.co.uk/>
- <http://www.bl.uk/services/bibliographic.html>
- <http://bubl.ac.uk/journals/>
- <http://link.bubl.ac.uk/libraryopacs/>
- <http://www.catchword.com/>
- <http://www.corec.org.uk/>
- <http://www.endnote.com/support/en4tutorial.asp>
- <http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat/>
- <http://www.imc.co.uk/index3.html>
- <http://www.ingenta.com>
- <http://www.ion.ucl.ac.uk/library/rm.htm>
- <http://www.isinet.com/>
- <http://lcweb.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/nucmc.html>