Solving Business Problems Together
Case: A master's degree programme in Finland

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive, single, intrinsic case study seeks to answer the following questions: Why should business practitioners and educators work together in solving business problems? How are the business problems of companies handled in a master's degree programme in Finland? The case study is based on multiple sources of documents collected and developed during the ten years of the programme. It demonstrates that solving authentic business problems in a learning community of business practitioners, i.e. students, as well as educators, i.e. teachers and thesis advisors, leads to solutions that satisfy practitioners, educators, and the business community. This case is an example of how solving business problems together contributes to the better performance of businesses and a better society in Finland.

Keywords: case study research (CSR), collaborative business problem solving, community of business practitioners and educators, master's programme.

1. INTRODUCTION

In September 2016, Finland was ranked second after Japan on the OECD's top ten highest-performing graduates list [1] [2]. What is the secret of Finland, where tuition in higher education is free? Mr. Sowter, director of the QS World University Rankings, argues that 'the success of a country such as Finland in the quality of its graduates could owe as much to its school system as its universities' [1] [3]. This paper presents a master's degree programme of a Finnish University.

The aim of this paper is to answer the following questions: *Why should business practitioners and educators work together in solving business problems? How are the business problems of companies handled in a master's degree programme in Finland?*

The research phenomenon is known as 'collaborative business problem solving'. The methodology is a descriptive case study, which demonstrates this phenomenon in the ten-year-old Master's Degree Programme in International Business Management [4] of Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki, Finland [5]. The case is based on multiple on-line sources and written documents of the IBMA.

The context of the case is a community where business practitioners (students) and educators (teachers and thesis tutors) work together on authentic business problems of companies in which students are employed. The master's thesis in this programme is a work development project [6] that is based on the collaboration of business practitioners and educators.

Participants are from the business world and academia in Finland.

This paper has four parts (excluding the acknowledgements and references). After the introduction, the design of the descriptive case study is presented with arguments about methodology and the type of case study followed in this paper. Next, to support the argumentation, multiple sources of documents are introduced. The following part describes the case in detail. In the final part the conclusions and the two research questions are examined, followed by an evaluation of the case study and its possible implications for businesses, educators, and researchers.

2. DESIGNING THE CASE

The case study research (CSR) methodology is selected because it shows a real example of the 'collaborative business problem solving' phenomenon. This descriptive case has '*why*' and '*how*' questions, which concur with Yin's [7, p. 8] view that the case study researcher seeks to understand the *why* and the *how* of a real, current business phenomenon. Myers [8, pp. 74-77], however, criticizes Yin's definition of CSR as being at the same time 'too broad' and 'too narrow'. He writes that Yin's definition of CSR 'is not entirely appropriate for all qualitative researchers in business' [8, p. 76]. Myers argues that 'The purpose of the case study research is to use empirical evidence from real people in real organizations to make an original contribution to knowledge' [8, p. 73].

The next phase in CSR design is deciding on the philosophical standpoint, type of the case study, and on research approach. CSR can be implemented from different philosophical perspectives, such as positivist, interpretive, and critical because 'case study research is philosophically neutral' [8, p. 77]. Yin [7, pp. 46-60] defined four types of case study design: (1) single-holistic, (2) single-embedded, (3) multiple-holistic, and (4) multiple-embedded. Alternatively, Stake [9] categorizes case study types as (1) intrinsic – to better understand a specific case, (2) instrumental – to provide generalization, and (3) multiple or collective – to jointly research the phenomenon. The research approaches in CSR can be exploratory, explanatory, or descriptive. This paper presents a single-embedded, interpretive, intrinsic, and descriptive case study, because the goal is to show and better understand through this example why and how people work together in solving actual business problems.

Case study research uses evidence from rich, multiple sources to demonstrate the complexity and reality of real-life current situations. In this case study the data sources are written documents, on-line sources, surveys of participants (students and

educators), profiles of students and educators, examples the of businesses involved, examples of authentic business problems to be solved as research questions of theses, the IBMA 2014 curriculum, an example of an Applied Research and Development course's contents, the overall thesis process, thesis assessment forms, and criteria.

3. THE CASE

The case will be described with the help of figure 1, which shows the main phases of 'collaborative problem solving' in this master's programme.
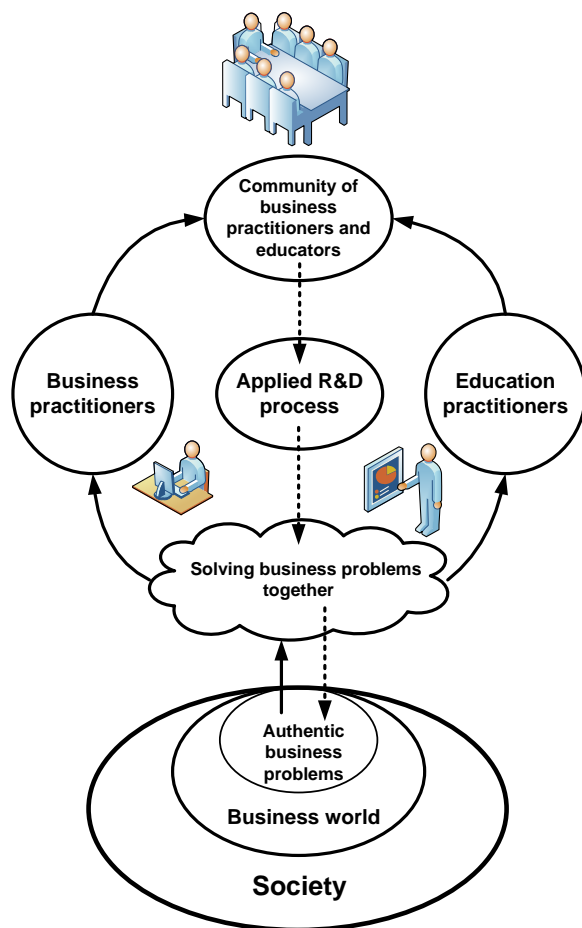

Figure 1. Solving business problems together
(source: created by the author)

The students, as business practitioners, join the IBMA from the business world. The students employed by companies such as Accenture Ltd, Airbus, Bank of Finland, Capgemini Finland Ltd, Danone Finland, Deloitte & Touch Ltd, Fair Trade Foundation, Fortum, Hewlett-Packard, Sodexho, Nordea Bank Finland Plc, Sampo Bank Plc, The Walt Disney Company Finland, Waco Logistics Finland, etc.

The students bring authentic business problems to be solved in the master's theses. These business problems are very diverse. In the academic year 2015-2016, the following themes emerged: branding, social media, customers, employees and HRM, and international business [10].

Branding related business problems include the following: How is the Disney Princess brand managed in the Nordic countries? How do social media activities support employer brands? How can fan/advocacy stories affect brand experience, brand trust, and brand loyalty among innovators? What kinds of storytelling methods work versus traditional product facts? What kinds of stories influence brand experience, brand trust, and brand loyalty?

Social media related business problems include the following: How do competitors in the field of business law use social media channels? How should digital marketing of Company X be done? How can one provide practical knowledge for the case company and create a digital B2B marketing plan?

Customer related business problems include the following: How can one use customer feedback to bring optimum practices to a company? How can one design the customer feedback process to maximize positive customer experience? How satisfied are customers with the updated web site? What are the most valued characteristics of experiential shopping? How can such characteristics be applied in a brewery department?

Employee related and HRM business-related problems include the following: How can Company Y develop its internal leadership talents and what are the critical elements of a successful development program? How can one develop and measure the necessary competencies and skills? How does the business model of communicating change impact the commitment of employees? How can one improve change-related communications in the future? How do employees feel about the future of the organization and about their own position? Why do people get interested in, join and remain in an organization?

International business management problems include the following: What are the current waste management practices in Russia? What type of recycling would be feasible to run from the perspective of available utilization methods regarding legal regulations? What are the critical success factors for offshore software projects? How does the case company best manage strategic accounts and improve strategic account performance?

From 2007 to 2011, 107 master's students were involved in research concerning IBMA [11]. Their profile shows that the average age is 34 years and the average work experience is eight years. Gender distribution shows that there are more women (64%) than men. However, male students' representation has increased continuously, from 30% in 2007 to 45% in 2011.

These master's students have middle managerial positions such as the following: Credit Manager, Export Director, Finance Manager, HR Partner, Key Account Manager, Project Manager, Program Manager, Risk Analyst, Senior Product Manager, Service Manager, Sales & Marketing Director, Sales & Marketing Manager, Sales Operations Analyst for the Nordic Region, Treasury Analyst, Quality & Performance Manager, etc.

Every autumn a new IBMA group starts their studies. The cultural diversity profiles of students during the ten years of the programme indicate that the proportion of foreign students is around 40%. Students are from different cultural backgrounds: Afghan, American, British, Chinese, Colombian, Finnish, French, Georgian, Hungarian, Indian, Iranian, Nigerian, Romanian, Russian, Swedish, etc. For example, from 2007 to 2011 there were students from 16 different cultures [11]. Nevertheless, in each group Finns are in the majority (around 60%).

The Webropol IBMA Educator's Profile [12] shows that the average age is 55 years, the gender distribution is about equal, and the average business experience is over 20 years, from different sectors such as banking, consulting, logistics, supply-chain management, export-import, direct marketing, customer service, research, HR, publishing, mass media and communication, entrepreneurship, etc. IBMA educators worked for companies such as ABB, Accenture, Asahi Television Japan, Fazer, Getzner Textil AG Austria, Hilti Corporation Liechtenstein, Hobby Hall, ICL, Nokia, Stockmann, Zumtobel Group Germany, and several Finnish companies.

The cultural background of educators is also diverse, and includes American, Austrian, Finnish, German, Hungarian, Irish, Portugal, and Swiss. Their language skills are very strong: English, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Japanese, Russian, Spanish, and Swedish. They speak on average three or more languages each; most have a Ph.D.

IBMA educators have positive feelings when working with these master's students. They commented that it has been a pleasure to work with them for the following reasons: they have challenging and interesting business projects as their thesis topics, they have practical experience, they are motivated and eager to learn, they have an 'adult-like attitude' towards learning, and they seem to be very intelligent and talented. Educators think that the students are engaged and motivated, but they of course realize that adult students also must manage their work, family life, hobbies, and their studies at the same time, which is challenging [12].

The next phase is the IBMA programme itself [4] and its curriculum [13], where business and education practitioners form a community (see figure 1) to work together in solving the authentic business problems defined in the thesis. It needs to be mentioned that the role of participants in this process is different, as the students are integrated into the business context and educators play the role of tutors, coaches or advisors.

The courses of the IBMA curriculum [14] support this process because they equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge, e.g. communication, project management, forecasting and analysis, strategic management, leadership, and research skills. For example, the Applied R&D course [15] is indicated in figure 1 because it is directly connected to the master's thesis. The main goal of this course is to facilitate the implementation of the applied R&D project/s selected by students as their thesis topic. This course provides meaningful input to the methodological section of the master's thesis. The course introduces research philosophies, qualitative research methods and the two most frequently selected and applied research approaches by business students, i.e. action research (AR) and case study research (CSR). AR aims to change and improve existing managerial practices and/or promote change in

one part of the organization. CSR explains or describes the complex and current events in authentic business settings. [14].

Solving business problems together (see figure 1) happens in the thesis process [16]. Participants in this process are the business partners, i.e. business organizations, the head of the master programme, thesis advisors, and students. The process has four phases: planning, implementing, assessing, and developing.

In the *planning* phase students discuss the development needs of their organisation, i.e. the authentic business problems that need to be solved. Then they present their development ideas and write their R&D plan as a thesis plan. When this plan is approved, an advisor is assigned and the next phase starts.

In the *implementation* phase the business and education practitioners work together, meeting several times to give and receive feedback about the applied research process. When the thesis has been written, the assessment phase begins.

The *Assessment* phase has several steps. The thesis is checked for plagiarism with URKUND software. Then the advisor and an outside educator assess the thesis based on the following criteria: topic and objectives, conceptual framework based on the literature review, research method, outcomes, reporting, and management of the thesis project [17]. The final grade is given with consideration of the work place assessment [17]. Here employers assess the learning of the student during the development project. They also indicate how the organization has benefitted from the thesis, what was implemented in practice, and what the possible long-term impact and value are for the organization.

The last phase in the thesis process is the *development* phase, when the thesis process itself and any businesses involved are developed by implementing and utilizing the suggested business problem solutions.

In brief, this part of the paper describes how business problems are solved in this master's programme in Finland. Figure 1 above illustrates the process and the contexts of the collaborative problem solving phenomenon. In presenting the case, multiple sources, both printed and on-line, were utilized to support the argumentation. Next, the conclusions and implications of this case study are presented.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this last part of the paper I first answer the two research questions, after which I briefly discuss the quality of this qualitative descriptive case study. Lastly, I indicate a few implications for businesses, and educational practitioners, and researchers.

The first question that this paper addresses is *'Why should business practitioners and educators work together in solving business problems?'* The brief answer to this question is that solving real business problems in a community of business and education practitioners in IBMA – where practical skills and experience are combined with research and theoretical knowledge – leads to useful and valuable results. This can be demonstrated by the positive feedback of organizations on the students' work development projects as theses [6]. Another positive impact is that by sharing and collaborating all members

of the community learn; students learn about research methodologies, processes, and theories, and educators learn about current, actual business problems and practices.

The second question this paper seeks to answer is *'How are the business problems of companies solved in a master's degree programme in Finland?'* The process of collaborative business problem solving in the IBMA programme is outlined in Figure 1 and presented in the previous part of the paper. Students bring authentic business problems to be solved from their employers. During their master's studies, they work on possible solutions to these problems, together with their teachers and thesis advisors. Because the master's thesis is a work development project it makes practical contributions to employers and creates new knowledge and skills for students and educators.

The case presented in this paper is a descriptive, intrinsic, single-embedded case study. Myers [8, pp. 82-85] argues that the *quality* of a case study in general can be assessed based on six criteria: (1) The case study must be considered 'interesting'. (2) The case study must display sufficient evidence. (3) The case study should be in some way 'complete'. (4) The case study must consider alternative perspectives. (5) The case study should be written in an engaging manner. (6) The case study should somehow contribute to knowledge [8, p. 83]. Based on Myers' six criteria it can be concluded that this paper: (1) is 'interesting' mainly to business practitioners, educators and researchers, (2) is based on multiple on-line and written sources as evidence, (3) is 'complete', as it uses all relevant data sources available to the master's programme at this time, (4) does not really consider alternative perspectives, (5) is written in a clear, simple way by clarifying the process and steps (cf. Figure 1) for the readers, and (6) hopefully contributes to knowledge and to a better understanding of the 'collaborative business problem solving' phenomenon.

It is very problematic to assess the construct validity and the internal validity in this descriptive case study. I agree with Myers [8, pp. 82-85], arguing that interpretive, intrinsic case studies probably need other criteria than construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability, as has been suggested by Yin [18]. That is the reason I assessed the quality of this case using the six general criteria of Myers.

The case study's quality depends on its objectivity and generalisability as well. Because I am closely involved in the development and implementation of this master's programme it was hard for me to take the role of an objective, neutral researcher. As much as possible I tried to look at this case from an outsider's point of view. However, I should acknowledge that there could be researcher bias in this case. The education institution of the IBMA programme has other master's programmes in English as well. Because we developed together some parts of our curricula, e.g. the master's thesis process, core courses, and thesis assessment criteria, it could be concluded that this case can be partially generalized.

Using multiple sources in CSR is both an advantage and disadvantage at the same time. It is beneficial because it shows the complexity of the situation but the abundance of data and documents could cause difficulties when trying to focus on essentials and trying to clearly present the case. Gray [19, pp. 273-274] has the same view and writes that the large volumes of data could make case study report writing difficult. He suggests that the case study report should have a clear 'chain of evidence'

referring to the documents when arguing and making conclusions. This will increase case study reliability. However, it requires that the researcher consistently follow this practice and conducts the CSR in a very disciplined, rigorous way. When describing the case I kept these principles in mind. Figure 1 helped me to focus on the essentials and it strongly supported the logic involved in presenting the case.

This case has implications for business, education, and research. The *business implications* are significant because they demonstrate *why* business problems could be best solved by bringing together business practitioners with their practical skills and educators with their research and theoretical knowledge. It demonstrates *how* this is done in one master's degree programme in Finland. The case calls for more collaboration of businesses and academia. The benefits of this collaboration are obvious, as the case provided evidence of how real business problems are solved with real people in real organizations. The impact on society was not analysed in this case, but one can assume that if businesses benefit from this process then the impact on society must be positive as well.

Implications for *education* can be that education cannot be isolated from any current and authentic problems of society and the business world. Universities of sciences and universities of applied sciences can create value for businesses and society in general if they support their students with both practical skills, e.g. project management, research, communication, language, and leadership, as well as with theoretical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge needs to be integrated into work life. This case study showed that all practitioners of the learning community learn by sharing and combining their practical skills and experiences with theoretical knowledge. In addition, it demonstrated that both educators and students learn from each other by being involved and engaged in solving real business problems.

As further *research*, how business problem solving takes place could be examined in the following contexts: (1) other master's programmes of the same institution, (2) other universities in Finland, (3) other master's programmes in different countries. Other areas of research could be to study the real impact of this specific case on business organizations after several years, to study the impact of the problems solved in this way on society, or on specific sectors of it. It would be interesting to find out how business practitioners apply the knowledge gained in this master's programme to their everyday business practices.

This case study contributes to general knowledge by demonstrating with multiple pieces of evidence and documents the strengths and benefits of 'collaborative business problem solving'. This case might help to understand the secret as to why Finnish graduates rank second in the world, per the current *Education at a Glance 2016* report of the OECD [20].

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