



Case Studies for Babson College

What Is a Case?

A case is a description of a management situation. Most cases range in length from two to twenty-five pages of text and exhibits. Field cases are largely based on data provided by the host organization, while library cases are researched from public sources. As noted on the first page of every Babson case, cases are written “as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.” Generally, they leave questions open rather than suggest a single “right” answer.

How Are Cases Used?

Cases are used as a basis for class discussion in a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and executive programs. They offer students a window into complex, realistic management situations with the emphasis on decision-making.

Many cases developed by Babson are distributed through the Harvard Business School Press, the European Case Clearing House (ECCH), and other publishers. Some are ultimately included as components of textbooks.

How Are Cases Developed?

Cases are developed in response to the need to discuss particular issues in a class. Often an organization may suggest a particularly interesting situation or a faculty member may approach an organization for research.

Who Writes the Cases?

Faculty, research assistants, and occasionally students may be involved in case-writing. Research assistants and students work under the close supervision of members of the faculty. The staff at Babson College Case Publishing often coordinates these efforts and helps as needed at various stages along the way.

Who Pays the Expenses?

Case development is funded in a number of different ways. Some are funded directly by Babson College, while others are supported by host organizations or through grants. Still others

are developed as “custom cases” to fill the specific curricular needs of an executive education client or association.

What Is Expected of the Host Organization?

Babson faculty members expect to have the host organization be open and frank about the situation being researched. Researchers are comfortable signing non-disclosure agreements since all information is confidential until such time as it is formally approved by the host organization.

An initial discussion between the faculty supervisor and the host organization establishes the preliminary scope of the case. This understanding may be confirmed in a written summary or outline. An agreement to continue with the project signifies the organization's willingness to provide information relevant to the situation and important to the decision-makers involved. Such information is crucial to the development of an effective teaching vehicle.

The initial agreement also affirms the organization's general willingness to approve for Babson's use a case of the nature and scope discussed. If there is any doubt about the likelihood of approval, it is usually better to call a halt to the venture rather than to risk the development of an unapproved case and the consequent loss of substantial time and money.

How Much Effort Does the Host Firm or Organization Invest?

It usually takes two to four days on-site to gather the data for a field case. During that time, the case-writer talks about the situation with all appropriate members of the organization and, on occasion, with informed outside sources such as an advertising agency or a trade association. Some cases will, of course, take more or less of the organization's time, but every effort is made not to overly burden the host organization.

The case-writer's job is facilitated by the use of company memos and reports, and industry studies or articles. Information of this nature usually improves the case substantially because the data are already presented in a clear, concise form. In most instances, the case-writer will need access to cost, investment, and profit data generally considered proprietary. The confidential nature of such material, however, is maintained.

How Is Confidentiality Maintained?

Before a field case can be used, a responsible executive of the host organization must formally approve it, in writing. Prior to approval, the case and the information upon which it is based are treated with the utmost care and confidentiality. The faculty and members of Babson's staff take extremely seriously the School's reputation for this care and confidentiality and the need to maintain trust and cooperation.

Sometimes a firm is hesitant to release specific data to the public. In most such instances, numbers can be disguised so that they are still realistic and useful for discussion and pedagogy but no threat to the firm.

In some situations, the organization desires to disguise itself. This, too, is possible in many instances. However, a firm that is unique because of size, market position, or situation cannot be disguised without destroying the integrity of the situation. The case becomes so artificial that the student's ability to play the role of manager is restricted. Thus, it is better to define the nature of material to be disguised at the beginning of the case-writing process.

The company often also may lose some benefits of case development when the case is disguised.

What Are the Benefits to the Host Organization?

There are four major benefits for the host firm or organization. Most important and most elusive is making a substantial contribution to management education. Educational institutions throughout the world depend on up-to-date, realistic cases for effective management development and education. All organizations and companies benefit from progress in administrative education and practice.

Second, the organization develops a relationship with Babson College, its faculty, and its student body.

Third is the use of case material for in-house training programs. Material on an organization's own situation is sometimes more useful in its management-development programs than other less focused material.

Finally, some firms have gained added perspective by seeing a case written by an outsider that explicitly describes their own situations. Obviously, there are many instances where this does not happen. On the other hand, an unbiased review is often of more than passing value.

With an eye to these benefits and to others less tangible, many organizations have collaborated with Babson College in the development of cases. These organizations have generally found the collaboration worthwhile involving little or no direct cost while affording absolute control of sensitive material and resulting in a positive contribution to management education.