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From Archives to the Internet

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As shown in the Methods Map (see Chapter 4), qualitative data comes in many forms and – though sometimes unjustly characterised as less valuable or robust than its quantitative counterpart – offers penetrating insights that numbers sometimes simply cannot, and allows research into areas where quantitative methods would be unsuitable. Two broad approaches to the collection of qualitative data are addressed here: historical research and the use of the Internet as a social research tool. Other more common social science data collection approaches are reviewed in the following chapter, and methods for the analysis of qualitative data in Chapter 8.

Historical research in business and management

The Business History discipline emerged as a sub-field of Economic History but today occupies its own position, and is increasingly being applied in other sub-fields of business and management, in what has been termed the ‘historic turn’ (Bucheli and Wadhvani, 2014). Following the first half of the twentieth century in which detailed, narrative accounts of business development dominated the field, it has grown into a much broader, analytically-driven discipline in which the focus and methodological approach of research is the subject of much debate (Amatori and Jones, 2003). The following three sections of this chapter introduce some of the core methodological approaches used in the historical research of business as an introduction to the field. Documentary archival material and oral histories are the two source types most likely to inform an undergraduate business history project and are here dealt with in more detail, but attention is also given to lesser used and non-traditional techniques; often these techniques are best

utilised in conjunction with one or more other approaches to add depth to the research. These are listed in the ‘Techniques’ section of the Methods Map. First, let us briefly consider the merit of using a historical approach to explore business and management, starting with a succinct attempt at defining the role of the business historian.

“Business historians study the historical evolution of business systems, entrepreneurs, and firms, as well as their interaction with their political, economic, and social environment. They address issues of central concern to researchers in management studies and business administration, as well as economics, sociology, and other social sciences, and to historians. They employ a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, but all share a belief in the importance of understanding change over time.” (Jones and Zeitlin, 2007).

The most important part of this definition comes in the final sentence, the notion of *understanding* change over time. Business history is often reduced to, or seen as merely, a longitudinal account of business and management subject areas; the study of a company, industry, business function or management practice in a historical context through a narrative chronicling of the details in change over time but not the underlying importance of the change or the processes involved. Good business history is much more than this. It is through its analytical strength, supported by methodological rigour, and the insight and understanding of change over time that business history provides strength and utility to wider business and management research. Indeed it should emphasize temporally contextualized *explanations* of business and management phenomena through emphasis of the significance and meaning of evidence from the past. In this manner, business history offers the prospect of new perspectives on the nature of business and management, which challenge assumptions from sub-fields (Amatori and Jones, 2003; Bucheli and Wadhvani, 2014; Jones and Zeitlin, 2007). Having decided to use an historical approach in your project, the next thing to consider is the kind of source material you will draw upon. The most commonly used types of historical sources are documentary sources found in archives and oral history sources. These two source types are discussed in some detail below, before a few lesser used source types are introduced.

Exercise 6.1.

Take some time to write some notes on the value of historical research in business and management.

Archival sources

What is an archive?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an archive can be defined either as an historical collection or the environment in which they stored and used, and come in a number of forms. Table 6.1 briefly summarises some of the key types, their features and gives examples. Each of these archives may contain similar types of material: official records and documents, correspondence, diaries, information from news sources, photographs, pictures and many more (Brundage, 2013) .

Table 6.1: Archive types, with examples

Archive type and description	Examples
<i>Government/state archives.</i> Largely hold material relating to administrative affairs of state. Often they hold information relating to private companies and listings of business/corporate archives (see below).	The National Archives, The National Archives of Scotland, National Archives and Record Administration (USA).
<i>Business/ corporate archives.</i> Hold information detailing the running of a business/corporation.	Most large companies maintain an archive. To check for UK company archives search the National Register of Archive database (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/default.asp) .
<i>Special collections.</i> Usually organised thematically in that they hold material from a wide range of sources but relating to a similar subject, e.g. a particularly industry, social movement, political party etc. Often these archives are located within, or attached to, a university archive.	Scottish Business Archive (University of Glasgow).
<i>University archives.</i> Hold the administrative information of the university, can be very useful for collecting biographical material relating to former students. They also often have affiliated special collections (above).	Heriot-Watt University Archive, Harvard Business School Archive.
<i>Religious archives.</i> Hold material relating to a major faith, denomination or physical place of worship.	Scottish Catholic Archives, St. Paul's Cathedral Archives, Vatican Secret Archives (this also constitutes a state archive).

The type of archive and materials useful as source data is very much dependent on the nature of the project being undertaken. For example, a project looking at marketing changes would be more interested in the final marketing and advertising material produced and any documentation pertaining to the decision behind changes, such as marketing committee minutes, agendas etc. A project more focussed on the impact of those at the top of a large company may be more interested in the correspondence and diaries of senior figures.

The value of archival research

The table below gives a brief analysis of some of the major strengths and difficulties of using archives. It should not be considered exhaustive, and the importance of the varying factors detailed is altered by a number of project-specific factors such as the type of archive used, the material underpinning the research and both the theoretical and contextual elements of the study.

Table 6.2: The major strengths and difficulties of using archives.

Strengths	Difficulties
Detailed description of events: evidence from a variety of sources, often vast quantities.	Time consuming: large amounts of material which require equal attention during collection and analysis
Primary values: the value that the creation of records had to the creator can give information for analysis to the researcher. Secondary values: the 'other' information in records, however consequential, can also provide useful insights for analysis.	Interpreting sources from the past requires sensitivity: we cannot think like people did X-hundred years ago; the significance of semantic terms changes over time (and may have been disputed at the time, e.g. the term 'liberty' considered in the American Revolution compared to twenty-first century USA).
Allows chronology to be established (though this should not be deemed the basis on which analysis is made). Be careful of assuming a causal relationship between events, i.e. just because something happened after something else does not mean it happened because of it...	Archives carry bias and should be questioned. They are imbued with the social and political decisions made to maintain certain things ahead of others. Always question archives and their contents: Why does the collection exist? Why do certain sources appear and not others?

It should be noted that some are linked, and an advantage can often throw up a pit-fall and vice versa. The important lesson is that you must always acknowledge the biases that archival research carries. Wherever possible,