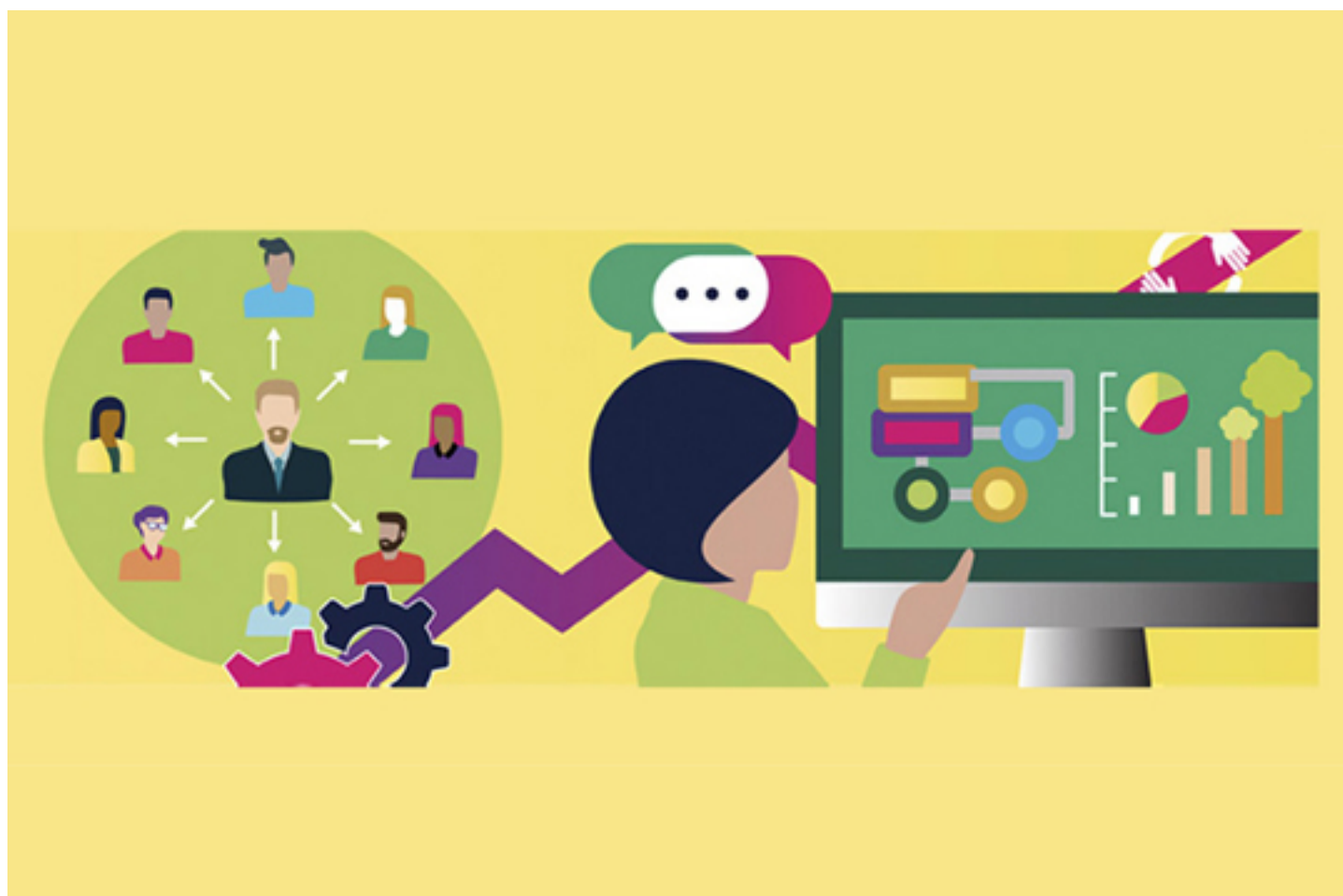


Using data to aid organisational change



This item contains selected online content. It is for use alongside, not as a replacement for the module website, which is the primary study format and contains activities and resources that cannot be replicated in the printed versions.

About this free course

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Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
1 Becoming a practitioner-researcher	6
2 Refining your opportunity for change	9
3 Developing research questions	11
3.1 Finalising research questions for your project	11
3.2 Relating your work problem or change to key function areas	15
4 What is secondary data?	18
4.1 Primary vs. secondary data	18
4.2 Sources of secondary data	19
4.3 Negotiating access	21
5 External secondary data	23
5.1 Sources of external secondary data	23
6 The advantages and limitations of secondary data	27
7 Evaluating internal and external secondary data	30
7.1 Authenticity and credibility of secondary data	30
7.2 Usefulness of your secondary data	31
7.3 How much secondary data will you need for your change management project?	32
Conclusion	35
References	35
Acknowledgements	36

Introduction

Organisations need change in order to respond to new challenges and to survive within a complex and competitive world. However, making that change is not straightforward. This free course will guide you through the process of researching and making a change in your work context.



This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [*B875 MBA project: leaders of change*](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- identify a focus area for organisational change and design research questions to support this change
- collect evidence to underpin the change rationale identified
- evaluate primary and secondary data
- identify access and [stakeholder](#) issues that may enable or inhibit the change.

1 Becoming a practitioner-researcher

When researching an aspect of an organisation – in this case to make change – you can think about your role in relation to this research. In this case, you can call yourself a ‘practitioner-researcher’, due to the fact that you are working within the [organisational context](#) in which you would like to make a change.

Different types of practitioner-researcher can be categorised according to their relationship with the location or context of their project as shown in Figure 1. There is no ‘right’ place to be located in the figure; it is more important to consider the implications of the positioning when planning and conducting an organisational change (Tietze, 2012).

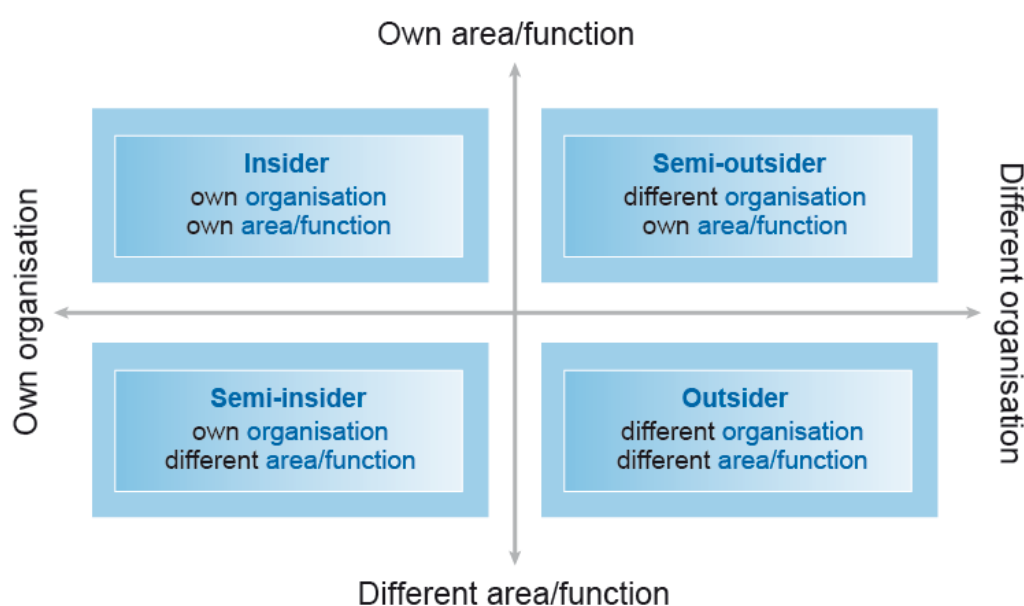


Figure 1 Classifying different types of practitioner-researcher

Starting in the bottom right-hand corner, the practitioner-researcher as ‘outsider’ reflects the position of many academic researchers. Typically, academic researchers must negotiate access to an organisation if they wish to conduct empirical research. At the other end of the spectrum to the academic as an ‘outsider’ is the ‘insider’. Here, individuals undertake research on their own areas of work, with those they work with on a day-to-day basis.

Between these two positions are those of the ‘semi-insider’ and ‘semi-outsider’. A practitioner as a ‘semi-insider’ is still conducting a project in their own organisation, but not with their direct work team or function – for example, a practitioner who works in one department of an organisation but undertakes a project in another department to examine factors impacting organisational aspects.

A practitioner as a ‘semi-outsider’ is one who is investigating their own area of work but in a different organisational context. An example would be, when a person working in a business function conducts a survey of other professionals in different organisations about an issue related to the business practice.

Each different position encompasses different challenges and opportunities at the various stages of the project. Anderson (2009) provides a related perspective which is that of the 'practitioner-researcher' who undertakes their project alongside their day-to-day job. Table 1 shows the advantages and disadvantages of this position.

Table 1 Advantages and disadvantages of the practitioner-researcher role

Advantages	Disadvantages
Opportunities for projects arise from knowing the organisation	Difficult to create time for project
Opportunities for implementing findings can be integrated into your role	Difficult to step back from an insider perspective
Opportunity for realising synergy between theory and practice	Issues around perceived status may impact project progress
	May be difficult to take a critical stance as part of the organisation being investigated
	Project may become purely instrumental in terms of completing a qualification

(Adapted from Anderson, 2009, p. 24)

Activity 1 Exploring issues of practitioner-researcher position

Allow around 30 minutes for this activity

Firstly, think of a change you would like to make – this could be within your organisation, or as a consultant for another organisation. For example, you may be a charity trustee and want to work with the staff to achieve major change within the organisation.

Now, to explore issues of practitioner-researcher position, note your initial thoughts on the challenges of negotiating access and conducting your project in an organisation.

Think of the implications of being a practitioner-researcher and answer the questions below.

- Having considered the different roles, which one do you think is most relevant to your situation? Which requirements do you expect to need to undertake this role?
Make a note of:
 - the obstacles you might encounter
 - what might make it easier to take on this role
 - what the implications are of your position, in terms of planning and conducting your project.

Provide your answer...

Feedback

Even if you are working on a project that is wholly or partly in your own organisation, you cannot just assume that you can gain access to everyone and everything you

need when you need it, or even at all. Normally, a series of negotiations is needed. People will want to know what you are doing, why, and how it might affect them.

No matter what role you decide to take in order to lead a change in an organisation, you must consider the ethics of carrying out an investigation and producing a project. Might there be some adverse effects for some people? Do the benefits to the organisation justify all ill effects that might reasonably be expected to ensue? Those are some of the ethical questions that you must consider before you decide how to explore the change you wish to make.

You may also find the process of refining the research topic daunting and frustrating. In the next activity you will create a mindmap to help you to define your research topic further.

Discussing your project with colleagues and family may help as they may have suggestions that you have not considered. This activity will help you to visualise, structure and refine your research topic for your project.

Moving from a general research topic to a research question is a crucial step. The formulation and selection of research questions often involves a considerable amount of uncertainty and intuition (Campbell *et al.*, 1982). Therefore, through your observations at your chosen organisational context, initial information screening, and general theory and literature search, you should be able to identify something that is currently poorly understood in your management practice. This gap could be of some value to your chosen organisation and could be converted into a defined research question.

Once you have identified your research topic, you can move on to work on developing research questions. This process is discussed in the next section.

3 Developing research questions

Once you have a clear idea about the work problem or change that you wish to address in your project, the next step is to think about the questions you need to formulate in order to deal with your identified problem. Will they be 'what', 'how' or 'why' type questions? An important point to bear in mind is that the wording of a question can be central in defining the scope and direction of the study, including the methodology.

Your research question(s) do not necessarily have to be expressed as question(s); they can be statements of purpose. The research question is so called because it is a problem or issue that needs to be solved or addressed.

Here are some examples of research questions that focus on different function areas within an organisational context. They are expressed as questions, but they can easily be changed to research statements if you prefer to present them in that way.

- How do the personal experiences and stories of career development processes among HR professionals in the UK and in Romania differ?
As a research statement, it becomes: *The differences of HR professionals in the UK and Romania in terms of their personal experiences and stories of career development processes.*
- To what extent do NHS managers engage with age diversity?
As a research statement, it becomes: *An investigation of the extent to which NHS managers engage with age diversity.*
- How does user-generated content affect consumer behaviour?
As a research statement, it becomes: *The influences of user-generated content on consumer behaviour.*
- How do consumers respond to digital marketing and social media campaigns?
As a research statement, it becomes: *The consumers' response to digital marketing and social media campaigns.*
- To what extent do wage increases affect employees' productivity?
As a research statement, it becomes: *An exploration of how wage increases affect employees' productivity.*

These research questions are very different to each other, but they also have common elements. In the next section you will be invited to think about research questions, both those in the examples above and your own, which may still be very tentative.

3.1 Finalising research questions for your project

In developing your research questions, you also need to be concerned with issues of feasibility in terms of access and time. Most importantly you will have to consider the possibility of implementing the change you have identified. You do not need to be over ambitious, but you need to realistically evaluate how difficult it would be to get enough of the information you are planning in the time you have available before beginning the

change. You need to plan a project that is neither too broad nor too narrow in scope and one that can be carried out in the available time.

Activity 3 Designing research questions

Allow around 60 minutes for this activity

Part 1 Things to consider when thinking about your research question

In Video 1, you will hear from four individuals who provide insights on the importance of setting the right research question. They will also talk about the strategies they adopted to come up with specific research questions for their projects, which were part of their MBA projects at The Open University.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1 What to consider when developing research questions for your project



Now watch the video a second time and make notes on how the interviewees talked about the following points.

1. Their main question (work problem or change) they set out to address for their project.
2. How they came up with this specific secondary question (work problem or change). In other words, how did they narrow their project focus down to this particular question (work problem or change)?

Provide your answer...

Part 2 Applying theories or frameworks to discuss your research questions

Read on to see how theories or frameworks are useful in helping you to focus further on your research questions.

Figure 3 depicts how research questions can contain a number of elements. The clear development of one or more research questions will guide the development of your data collection process and the tools or instruments you will use. Your research questions should emerge from a specific need to acquire greater knowledge about a phenomenon or a situation (i.e. your research topic). This need may be a personal one as well as a contextual and organisational need.



Figure 3 Elements relating to a research question

Consider this example of how to develop a research question:

As a consequence of government cuts, your arts organisation has to re-structure and this is causing stress and tension among staff. You are involved in the planning of the change initiative and want to develop an organisational change programme that minimises stress and conflict. In order to do so you need to know more about people's views, at the various organisational levels. What types of question would help you to:

1. understand the context
2. demonstrate to the various research stakeholders (e.g. organisational members and [research participants](#), or supervisor, etc.) what you intend to do?

Perhaps you would like to make some notes of your initial ideas and think about how you could apply this process to develop your own research question. A way round this may be to ask the stakeholders to look for the research topic, but explain that this should be a problem they can identify in their context. Then they proceed to think of research questions which are actually questions in relation to the change they would like to apply to deal with the problem they wish to explore and, if relevant, think of sub-questions.

Figure 4 is an example of a framework that can be used to develop sub-questions out of your main research questions.

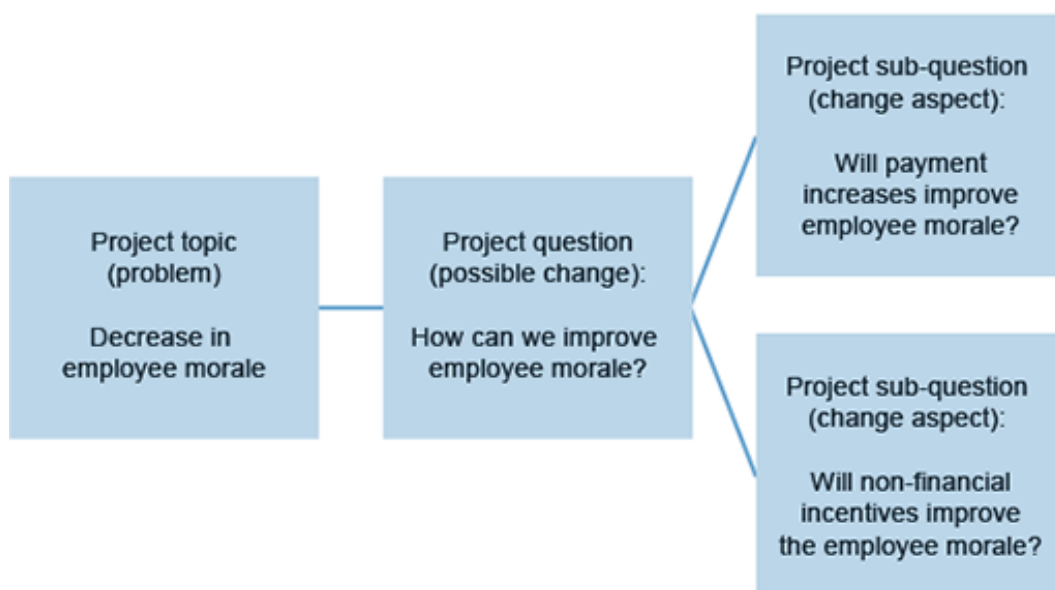
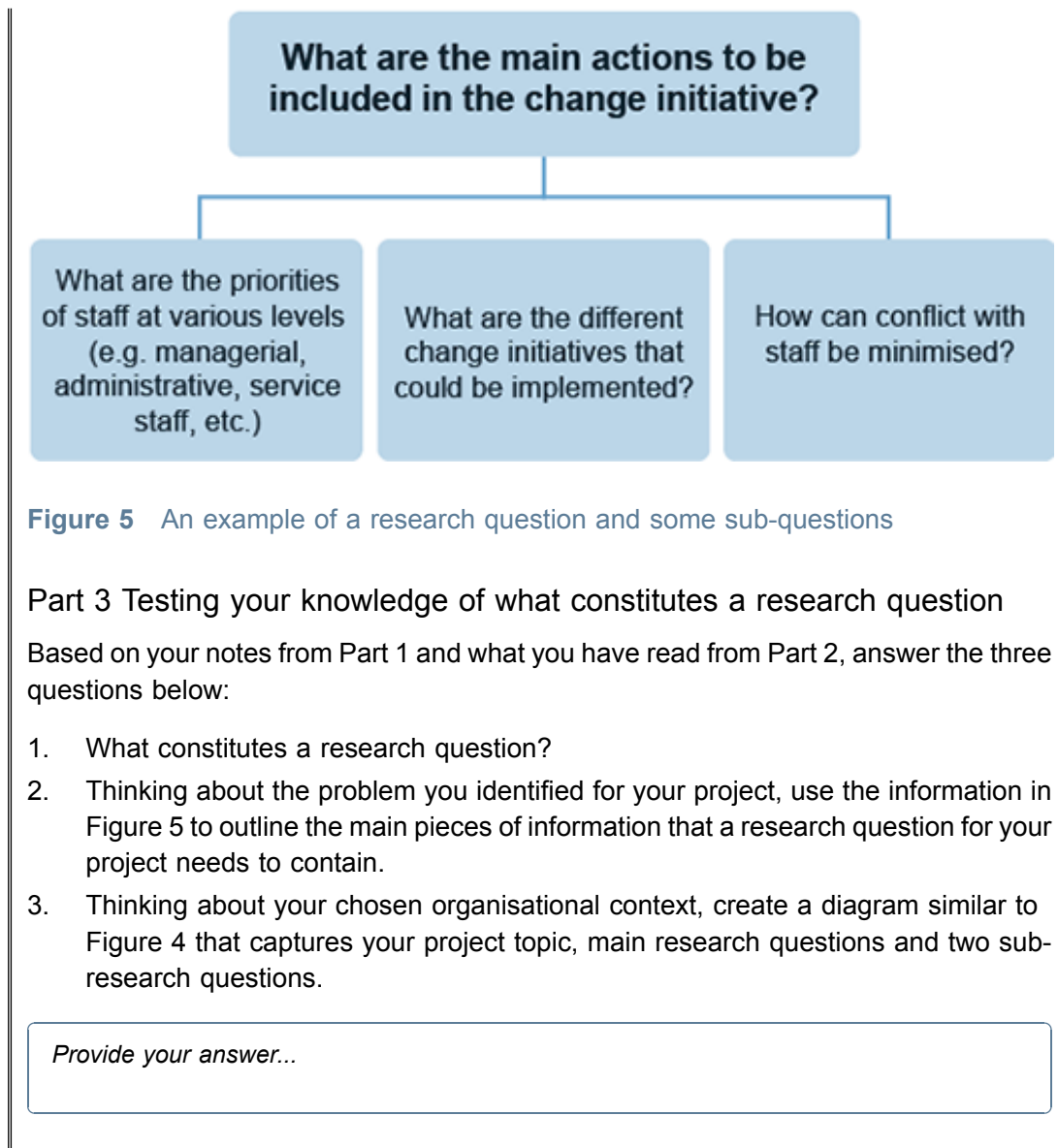


Figure 4 An example of a research question and some sub-questions

Reading around the topic will help you to achieve greater focus, as will discussing your initial questions with colleagues and your supervisor. In the example above, assuming the literature has been searched and several articles on change management and business restructuring have been read, you are likely to have developed clearer ideas about what you want to investigate and how you want to investigate it.

Figure 5 shows what the main research question and the sub-questions or objectives might be.



You do not need too many questions, it is better to keep your project focused – too broad and it is unlikely to work. Keep in mind that you will need time to implement your change, if you decide to do so.

Next, you are going to look at how to link your research question(s) to a specific work problem or change.

3.2 Relating your work problem or change to key function areas

When scanning an organisation for possible work problems or changes, it is important to be alert to the impact of a specific starting point on other related aspects of management. A work problem at a specific functional level could also have cross-functional impact; that is, strategic implications in multiple functions within your organisation of interest.

Based on Cummings and Worley's (2004) four basic sets of organisational issues, six key function areas where change, development or innovation can be desirable are:

1. strategic
2. techno-structural
3. human resources
4. human process
5. marketing
6. finance.

These are illustrated, in modified and updated form, in Figure 6. When you are considering addressing a work problem or change in one of these six areas, you should think about which related issues, improvements, strategic implications, or questions emerge in any of the other five areas.

Look at Figure 6 as an example, illustrating different function areas within an organisation, and presenting questions and issues relating to the individual function area. Now review the main project topic, the questions and sub-questions you produced in Activity 3 and map them to the diagram below, identifying in which of the six areas your initial ideas and questions are.

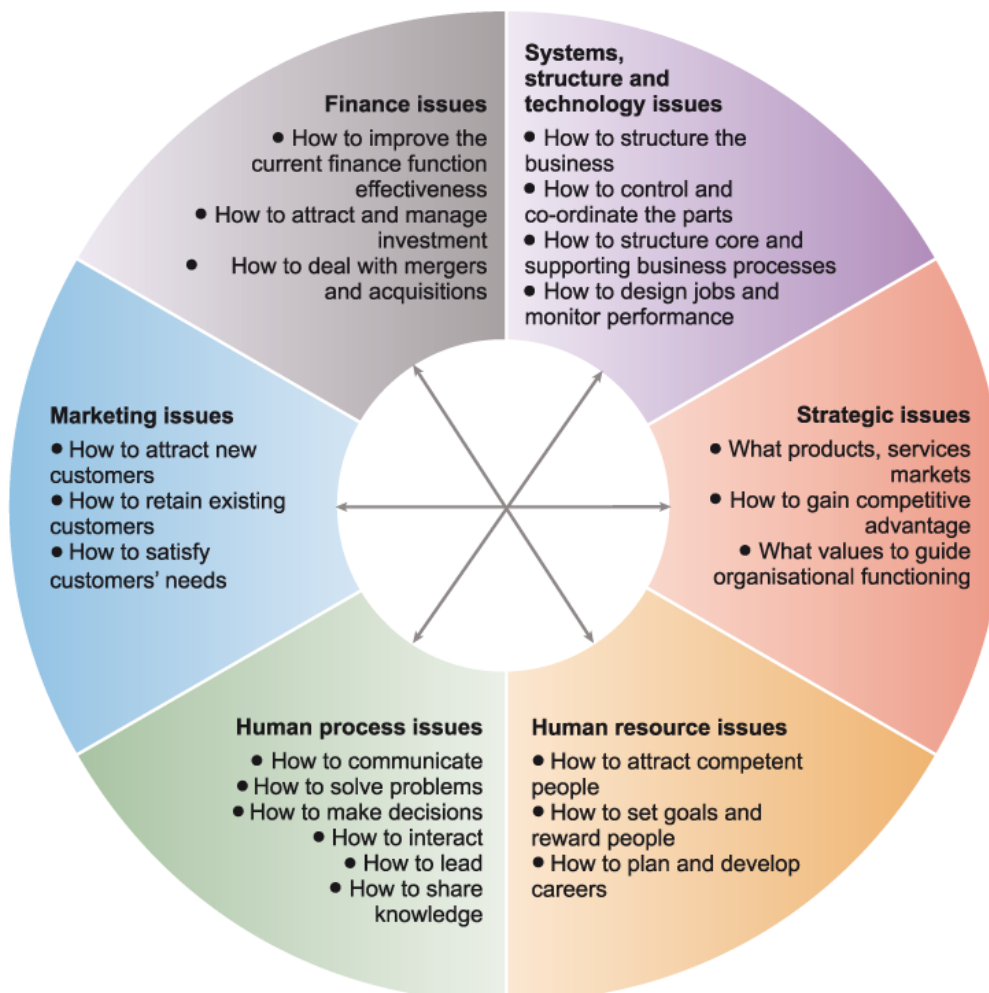


Figure 6 Types of work problem or change (adapted from Cummings and Worley, 2004)

Look at each area under which you have put your sub-questions. Are there any further aspects or changes in relation to each area that you would like to add?

Remember that you should aim to keep the problem and questions manageable, so only add more if you think you have missed important elements or to help you explore the problem or sub-questions you have already identified. You also need to be aware of various possibilities in terms of how narrowly or broadly you may have to define the set of problems or changes you are going to work on.

Activity 4 Developing your work problem or change into a clear statement

Allow about 30 minutes for this activity

Now follow the suggested steps below and develop a clear statement of the work problem or change for your chosen context. This writing exercise is designed to help you develop a specific work problem or change statement.

Go through the three steps suggested below.

Step 1: Describe in two or three sentences the opportunity or change that you have identified.

Provide your answer...

Step 2: Look at every describing word (and question as below) and define each that you feel are necessary. Note that this is an iterative process, and you will need to look at the literature and relevant theory later.

What opportunities are you trying to find out? or *What* changes are you paying attention to?

Who are the target audience that you are interested in and report to?

Where does your project take place?

When are you starting and for how long?

Why is it valuable to study this opportunity or change (think about its strategical implications)?

Provide your answer...

Step 3: Rewrite your statement developed in Step 1, taking into account all the decisions you made in Step 2.

Provide your answer...

4 What is secondary data?

In order for you to better understand the context you have selected for your change project and to help address your chosen issue, you will need to collect information or data. Put simply, if you conduct the research yourself, it is called primary data and if you use data that has been gathered by someone else, this is secondary data.



4.1 Primary vs. secondary data

A **secondary data** source refers to a data source that is already in existence and is being used either for a purpose for which it was not originally intended or by someone other than the researcher who collected the original data (Salkind, 2010).

Secondary data can be raw data or published summaries and you can tailor the data according to your research needs. Examples include large databases of surveys, censuses, and social and economic data that are too expensive or unfeasible for an individual to collect.

Other types of secondary data include organisational records and surveys (e.g. employee surveys), market research data, or transcripts of interviews or focus groups. Whether you are collecting data for your own project or compiling a portfolio of evidence, secondary data serves as a time-efficient and easy to obtain source of information.



Primary data, on the other hand, is information collected by a researcher to address a specific issue or problem. As it has not yet been gathered or it may not be accessible, it is data that is unique, first-hand and from an original data source. The data is collected by a researcher using a variety of techniques, such as interviews, focus groups, surveys and observations.

Let's say, for example, a food manufacturing company was losing market share and wanted to gain a better understanding of customers' perceptions of their snack products in the light of a cultural shift towards healthier foods. The researchers would have the advantage of conducting interviews with customers using tailored questions, designed specifically to elicit the required information to help them address the business issue. However, this method of data collection may be considered quite costly and time consuming compared to using information that is already in the public domain.

Tip

Even if you are planning on collecting primary data, it is a good practice to start your research by looking at information that is already available. This may help you to identify potential areas of interest for your topic that have been under-explored, and therefore strengthen the rationale for your topic selection. Conversely, you may find that there is a shortage of available secondary data for your chosen topic, thereby strengthening your rationale for collecting primary data.

It is worth noting at this point that secondary data can be both qualitative and quantitative in nature. **Qualitative data** is data in the form of descriptive accounts of observation or data which is classified in a way, whereas **quantitative data** is data that can be expressed numerically or classified by some numerical value (Ghosh and Chopra, 2010).

4.2 Sources of secondary data

As you start to collect data, you may instinctively jump into conducting your own original primary research. However, it would be a good idea to spend some time exploring the full range of information that might be readily available. Knowing where and how to collect secondary data will be crucial in gathering information and evidence to address your chosen business issue.

Often there is so much secondary data available to you, it may be difficult sifting through to see whether it is of value to your project. Secondary data can also be helpful when defining and refining your specific work issue and developing your methodological approach to researching your work problem. A good place to start would be to separate secondary data into internal and external sources.

Internal secondary data is data available *within* the organisation for whom the research is being conducted (Malhotra and Birks, 2003). Internal data is produced by an organisation as it goes about its everyday business and, as with all secondary data, it existed prior to and for purposes other than your own project. In contrast, **external secondary data** refers to information that comes from a wide variety of sources outside an organisation.

Internal secondary data

Much of the internal secondary data available is generated as part of the normal operation of the organisation's activities (Lancaster, 2005) and is often accessed and analysed through the company's databases and management information systems. There may well be internal secondary data that stems from previous research and data gathering activities related to your chosen work problem (Lancaster, 2005).

Sources of internal secondary data can range from regular management reporting information, such as revenue, cost and efficiency data, through to emails and documents, such as minutes of meetings. Additionally, you may find that some of the information is available in a ready-to-use format, such as information routinely supplied by the management information system (Malhotra and Birks, 2003). Examples could include policy documents and sales reports.

Your challenge will be to critically select and evaluate the appropriate internal secondary data and organisational evidence to address your chosen research problem.

Activity 5 Identifying the types of internal secondary data

Allow around 30 minutes for this activity

1. In Table 2 below, note down the different types of internal secondary data your organisation produces that you feel might be helpful for the issue or change you are investigating.
2. Do you expect to encounter any issues collecting data? If so, describe them in the table.

Table 2 Sourcing internal secondary data

Type of internal secondary data	Issues or challenges in obtaining the data
<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

Feedback

Below is a list of examples of internal secondary data:

- Organisational data
- Annual report
- Corporate brochures
- Agendas and meeting notes
- Policy documents
- Emails and letters
- Financial statements
- Productivity reports
- Orders and invoices
- Previous company research.

As your practice-based project is intended to benefit your chosen organisation, you would expect there to be few problems with accessing the required internal secondary

data. However, there may be factors such as confidentiality and commercial sensitivity hindering access to certain documents, or even personal or political issues with individuals to overcome.

Where and how you can access documents for research depends to a large degree on the nature of the documents themselves, but also to an extent on your own status within the organisation (Tight, 2019). Additionally, some of the internal secondary data relevant to your work problem may be located in a different part or division of the organisation, which in itself could cause retrieval issues.

4.3 Negotiating access

The importance of negotiating access to your main stakeholders and the importance of 'gatekeepers', i.e. 'influential individuals' (Blaxter *et al.*, 2013: 159), cannot be underestimated. People who stand between you and the sources of information you might need, such as managers, heads of departments, CEOs, for example, must be identified before you begin your change. This will then help you to anticipate potential blocks to progress, and 'change champions' – people who are likely to support your change efforts.

Tip

Remember that you may need permission in order to use certain types of internal secondary data for your project. Once you have identified the internal secondary data you would like to use, ensure you obtain clearance before you start the data collection process.

Activity 6 Negotiating access to internal secondary data

Allow around 30 minutes for this activity

Based on your findings from Activity 5, describe three to four tactics you could deploy to gain access to the internal sources of data you identified.

Provide your answer...

Feedback

One of the most common methods to gain access to restricted or confidential information is to tap into your network and contacts, especially if these individuals are influential in the organisation. You may want to offer something in exchange for their assistance. For example, you may give the person concerned a report into the findings of your research in return for access to information.

Securing anonymity of parties featured in the secondary data or deleting sensitive information can also assist you in getting access. If the gatekeeper in question is sceptical about your motives for requiring the documents, be prepared to spend some time outlining the aims of the project, explaining how the information concerned will help address your chosen work problem. Offering the gatekeeper the opportunity to read and offer feedback on your project report before submitting it may also help persuade them.

4 What is secondary data?

5 External secondary data

For almost any type of research project it will be necessary to collect data from external secondary sources. External data is data that is generated by sources *outside* of your chosen organisation. This type of published information will be immensely helpful to you when you are gathering data and evidence for your project. For example, utilising statistics and reports from external sources may help you to analyse the financial implications and potential economic risks of the organisational changes you wish to implement.



External secondary data can originate from a variety of sources, such as commercial organisations, government agencies and industry associations, and take the form of annual reports, laws and policies and trade publications, for example.

5.1 Sources of external secondary data

In Activities 5 and 6 you were asked to consider the types of internal secondary data that would be useful for your project.

You will now collect information directly related to addressing your business issue. Table 3 contains examples of useful sources of external secondary data.

Table 3 Sources of external secondary data (adapted from Bryman, Bell and Harley, 2019: 298)

Title	Dataset details
Office for National Statistics (ONS)	Collects, analyses and disseminates statistics about the UK's economy, society and population
Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES), UK	Produces UK annual employment statistics and collects data on local units and business structures to update the Inter-Departmental Business Register
Understanding Society, UK	The survey uses interviews and questionnaires and follows the same nationally representative sample of individuals within a household but is based on a much larger panel of 40,000 households
British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey	The survey focuses mainly on people's attitudes, but also collects

	details of their behaviour patterns, household circumstances and work
European Community Studies and Eurobarometer	Cross-national comparison of a wide range of social and political issues, including European integration, life satisfaction, social goals, currency issues, working conditions and travel
Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), UK	The most comprehensive source of earnings information in the UK, broken down by industry, occupation, age group and gender
Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS), UK	Wide range of areas covered, including pay determination, recruitment and training, equal opportunities, workplace change, work attitudes, management organisation and employee representation
Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)	Promotes research into and the education of the public in the economic, social and political sciences and in science and technology, the voluntary sector and social enterprise, public services, and industry and commerce.

Activity 7 Planning, reviewing and reflecting on your search

Allow around 80 minutes for this activity

Part 1 Planning your search

Allow around 30 minutes for this part of the activity

Before you start collecting secondary data, and based on what you have learned and experienced so far about searching for information, write down a short search plan of no more than 200 words in the text box below that will enable you to better identify potential sources of secondary data that are relevant to your chosen work issue or problem. Consider the following:

- Keywords – which ones will you use?
- Sources – which database(s) will you use first to conduct your search?
- Parameters added – based on the options available for the database you have selected, you may decide to add further search or filtering options; for example, limiting the time span of the research, or the type of material searched.
- Outcomes – what are you hoping to find and what might be the minimum progress you are expecting to achieve in this research?

Provide your answer...

Comment

At the centre of your search planning for secondary (and primary) data should be your topic and research questions. What is the main focus of your research? What do you want to explore with your secondary data? It may be more helpful to start with some broad terms and as you progress with your search make your search more specific.

The type of data that you require will determine the databases that you will use. For example, if you are looking for financial data, Business Source Complete can be helpful; whereas, if you are looking for employment statistics, the Business Register and Employment Survey may be more useful.

Depending on your topic you may have to set a particular time frame for the secondary data you may find useful for your study. For example, if you are looking at improving virtual collaboration between employees it may not be helpful to look for information from twenty years ago as this is an area of research that constantly changes and you are more likely to be interested in recent developments.

The outcome of your search will again be related to your topic. Do not expect to find a full list of secondary data in your first attempt. You will most likely find a few useful data. However, reading this secondary data you may be directed to other useful databases or sources of secondary data.

Part 2 Reviewing your search

Allow around 30 minutes for this part of the activity

As a reflective management practitioner, you are expected to critically review a search and demonstrate how its outcomes can enhance the learning process and inform you on what else may be needed to improve the search process.

As you carry out your searches of external databases, consider the following questions:

- What did you learn as you undertook the various searches?
- How did you manage, select and store all the information you came across?
- What attracted you to the sources that you finally selected?
- How would you update the search procedure in order to improve the outcome?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

Searching for secondary data is not an easy process – quite the opposite, in fact. You will most probably come across data that you are not familiar with. With data collected by others, a period of familiarisation is necessary. Reading about the reasons or purpose as to why data has been collected by the other researchers may help you become more familiar with the data and better equip you to decide if you can use it for your project.

Some of the best-known datasets that are employed for secondary analysis, such as the Workplace Employment Relations Survey, are very large in the sense of having very large numbers of respondents. You may therefore experience difficulties in using them for your project.

You can argue that secondary data offers you the opportunity to access data of higher quality and volume than you could collect yourself. However, you must think of the quality of the data that you are going to use in your project.

Even if there are some databases, such as the Population Census, that you believe you can safely assume are of high quality, the quality of secondary data must never been taken for granted, and it does not mean that these data will necessary meet all the needs of a prospective researcher. Always keep in your mind your topic and be critical about the value and importance of the secondary data you collect.

Part 3 Reflecting on your search skills

Allow around 20 minutes for this part of the activity

You will now reflect on how your initial assessment of the confidence in your search skills has changed in the text box below.

- What additional actions have you identified?
- What do you need to do to update your search skills for your project?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

Every researcher's skills and developmental needs can be different. You may decide that you need to revisit your keywords for your secondary data search in order to get more focused results; you may decide that you need to spend more time familiarising yourself with the secondary data that you have collected in order to assess if they can be used in your project; you may conclude that there is not enough secondary data (or appropriate secondary data) in your topic and you should therefore revise your research strategy.

6 The advantages and limitations of secondary data

One of the key characteristics of secondary data is that the researcher did not participate in the collection of the data and that it was collected by someone else, who used it for other purposes. This gives rise to several advantages as well as drawbacks.



- Compared to primary data, secondary data provides a time-efficient and easy to obtain source of information for your project by saving the time and cost required of conducting the research yourself. Being generally quicker to collect than primary data allows more time for analysis.
- By utilising existing databases, you may access data that would otherwise not be possible for you to collect. These databases are particularly helpful if your project question requires you to compare multiple locations or organisations.
- Secondary data drawn from credible sources are sometimes more reliable than those collected by yourself, as large organisations such as the World Bank have greater financial and human resources to conduct large-scale data collection, such as longitudinal analysis, which is useful when making comparisons over time.
- Finally, one of the main advantages of using secondary data is how it can influence and re-shape the business issue you are investigating, as well as steering you towards any primary research you may be required to conduct for your change management project.

However, secondary data also has its disadvantages. The first and biggest problem is that most secondary data is collected by someone else, usually for different purposes, so such data may not be suitable for directly answering your project questions. The lack of familiarity with the data means that you will need time to fully understand it.

For your own project you may have to search quite a few databases before you find appropriate ones. Also, access to secondary data might be difficult, as data collected for commercial purposes is often restricted or you may have to pay to access it – for example, downloading the latest Mintel industry report relevant to your sector may cost in excess of £2,000. Finally, the quality and integrity of data obtained from databases from certain websites may be difficult to ensure.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Cost and time	Lack of familiarity with data
High-quality data	Complexity of the data
Opportunity for longitudinal analysis	No control over data quality
More time for data analysis	Absence of key variables
Influence and reshape your research goals	

Figure 7 The advantages and disadvantages of using secondary data (adapted from Bryman, Bell and Harley, 2019: 296)

Activity 8 Pros and cons of secondary data

Allow around 60 minutes for this activity

One of the main advantages of using secondary data is how it can influence and reshape the business issue you are investigating, as well as steering you towards any primary research.

Often, once you have started to explore a particular work problem, other organisational challenges may come to light that were not considered in your initial scope.

Part 1

1. Identify two sources of secondary data that you feel are useful in researching your chosen work problem.
2. Consider some of the advantages of using your chosen sources and how you might overcome some of the disadvantages.

Provide your answer...

Feedback

Table 3 offers some examples of sources of secondary data that you could use. The topic of your research will be the determining factor for your decision. For example, if you would like to explore how many people you should hire to strengthen a particular work function in your organisation, looking at the Business Register and Employment Survey may help. If you search online for the Business Register and Employment Survey you will see that these data are accessed via the Office for National Statistics and Nomis official labour market statistics website.

You can therefore argue that this source will offer high quality data. Moreover, this source reports data from a survey conducted annually, which means that you can use this data for longitudinal research. Finally, this source reports on a survey conducted with 82,000 people. This means that you can access a huge volume of data, which can be both an advantage and a disadvantage.

Part 2

The next part of this activity builds on your skills as a reflective practitioner. In the text box below, answer the following questions:

1. How can you justify the use of secondary data for your project?
2. How has the activity impacted or re-shaped the work problem you are investigating?

Provide your answer...

7 Evaluating internal and external secondary data

Secondary data can be immensely helpful by giving you access to detailed information that would cost a great deal of time and money if you were to undertake the primary research yourself. However, you will need to take care as there are some important issues to be considered in how the data you've collected is interpreted and used.



As you collect the secondary data that is relevant to your work issue, it is important to bear in mind that you are not just collecting data that backs up your research goals. Be mindful that you should be gathering information that also challenges your thinking and helps you to develop and refine your project questions.

7.1 Authenticity and credibility of secondary data

As a researcher, using secondary sources of information means subjecting the data to your own interpretations and analyses. This is because, as previously discussed, secondary data is not produced with your research purpose in mind and therefore might need to be manipulated or processed before it is considered relevant to the research question.

If your chosen secondary evidence originated from your own organisation, or a large reputable company, there would be very little doubt about its authenticity. However, you may not be aware of who authored it and whether it has been altered. Similarly, you may not be able to verify if all the parties affected by the document had input into compiling it.

According to Scott (1990), once you have selected your secondary data, it is necessary to evaluate it for its authenticity and credibility. Will it stand up to comparisons with other sources of data on the same issue? For example, industry forecasts can come from a variety of sources – are your figures in line with those from another reputable source? If you are using a questionnaire from an earlier study, has the data been edited or copied? If it is a document, you may also want to question the author's background and experience (Anderson, 2013).

7.2 Usefulness of your secondary data

Due to the 'second hand' nature of secondary data, it is always prudent to take a critical approach when selecting evidence to address your chosen work issue. You may want to examine the source of the data, as well as why it was produced. Similarly, the time period or context in which it was produced may have an impact on its usefulness.

Activity 9 Critically evaluating secondary data

Allow around 40 minutes for this activity

As part of the process of enabling an effective and ethical change in your chosen work problem, you may be required to evaluate secondary data for its relevance, objectivity and provenance, so that you can be sure it is of value to the change project.

1. Select two pieces of secondary data relevant to your opportunity, one from an internal source and the other from an external source.
2. Apply the [PROMPT checklist](#) to evaluate your chosen data using the template provided.
3. Reflect on the use of secondary data in your project.

Feedback

PROMPT is a useful tool to evaluate the secondary data you have. Think of questions such as:

- Is the information presented and communicated clearly? If the answer is no, then you will most probably not be able to fully understand this data.
- Is the article biased, or motivated by a particular agenda? This is a critical question, particularly if you are using secondary data produced by an organisation. You would expect that an organisation would like to present a positive image so in publicly available reports emphasis may be mostly based on successes and positive practices, rather than showing the full picture.
- Although some documents don't set out to mislead, it is likely that figures will be reported in such a way as to put a particular 'gloss' on them, given the publishing body's own agenda. Ask yourself if these reports represent what actually happens in an organisation.
- Is it clear where the information has come from? If you do not know the source of the information, then you shouldn't be using it in your project.
- How up-to-date is the material? The answer to this question will affect the relevance of this data for your project. You should therefore make sure that you know when this data was collected and/or written.

Once you have selected your secondary data, it is necessary to evaluate it for its authenticity and credibility, i.e. will it stand up to comparisons with other sources of data on the same issue? You should also consider which of the views expressed represent those of the whole organisation.

Finally, you should consider the meaning and significance of the data as there may be both organisational and national cultural differences in certain terms and expressions.

Looking at these aspects is key to taking a critical approach to any data you gather for your project. It will also help you to reflect on the use of secondary data in your project.

7.3 How much secondary data will you need for your change management project?

By now, you might be wondering how much secondary data you will need to collect for your change management project. Well, the answer very much depends on your project objectives, the size of the organisation and how easy it is for you to access the required data.



It is very difficult to recommend how much and the type of secondary data you will need to collect, but the amount should be significant enough to ensure you can draw some meaningful conclusions and recommendations. For example, a project exploring a performance management improvement issue in a public sector organisation collected the following secondary data from the agency's database and external sources:

- 41 strategy documents within the strategic timeframe
- 20 external documents, such as media reports and news coverage
- 30 documents relating to the annual report from the database.

Although secondary data can offer valuable information, you are encouraged to collect primary data in parallel, if it is appropriate for your chosen work problem. For example, you may conduct interviews, create questionnaires or make observations to fully explore your questions and draw meaningful conclusions.

Additionally, the same question may be explored by different researchers in a very different way and with a varying amount of data, reaching different conclusions. As a researcher you will probably know when you have enough information to answer your question or address your problem.

Activity 10 Using secondary data in your change project

Allow around 40 minutes for this activity

Providing a straightforward answer as to how much secondary data you will need for your change project is not easy, so hearing experiences from others who have used secondary data may be useful.

In Video 2, you will hear from three people reflecting on the role secondary data had in their change management projects, which were part of their MBA projects at The Open University. Watch the video and then answer the questions that follow.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 2 The role of secondary data in your MBA project



1. What types of secondary data did they collect for their project?
2. Was the source of the data internal or external?
3. How was the data used in, or applied to, their change project?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You may have noticed that the sources of secondary data available to you are numerous and varied. You may take a 'wider world view' through collating secondary information on the organisation's competitors and customers. This 'macro-environmental' approach not only provides you with useful data but also provides a context for the improvements to the organisation and therefore evidence for justification of the project.

Internal secondary data is often more readily available than external sources, but it may be confidential or commercially sensitive, so making sure you have clearance for its use is imperative.

The secondary data you collect can be applied in a variety of ways. The obvious use of the data is to provide evidence to inform your change project and guide you in the next steps. Secondary data can also be used to conduct an audit of the organisation's position in the market, for example, thus providing further evidence for change.

Conclusion

You have now studied how to go about researching and making a change in your work context. This course has shown how there are differing types of data, both primary and secondary, and both types are potentially useful in relation to researching and effecting change in a work context. You have also studied how to go about sourcing both types of data, including gaining access to data and critically evaluating it. These are all vital skills for leading and managing change.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [B875 MBA project: leaders of change](#).

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Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Jacqueline Baxter and Sanjay Gandhi. It was first published in April 2021.

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