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| **Topic 2: Conducting a Literature Review** |

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| **Introduction** |

It is really impossible to do a research without engaging in literature review related to your intended area of study. You may end up not achieving anything useful in your research study.

A review of the literature will enable you to know the current state of your intended research area. This will prevent you from duplicating what had been done and aiding you to go on to another area of your intended research study. In this way your research findings can contribute to the literature.

The literature review can provide you with useful ideas about developing the appropriate research topic, research questions and the research objectives, and hypotheses especially for deductive approach and the research model. All these ideas and guides eventually enable you to come out with the appropriate research design to enable you to go about collecting your data and analysing the data before you can be in a position to write up your research report.

Literature review is an imperative step in the research process and it must be done *critically* and with great expectations. This is because the success of your research study depended on it.

According to Jankowicz (2000:169) “knowledge does not exist in a vacuum and your work only has value in relation to other people’s. Your work and your findings will be significant only to the extent that they’re the same as or different from, other people’s work and findings.”

* 1. **The Purpose of Critical Review**

It will form the foundation on which the research is built. ***Its main purpose is to help you to develop a good understanding and insight into relevant previous research and the trends that have emerged***.

There are two ways by which the literature is used:

1. Deductive approach - it is the process by which we arrive at a reasoned conclusion by

logically generalizing from a known fact. E.g. we know that all high performers are

highly proficient in their jobs. If John is a high performer, we then conclude that he is

highly proficient in doing his job. In the same way reviewing the literature can help the

researcher to identify theories or conceptual framework.

2. Inductive approach - it is a process where we observe certain phenomena and on this basis

arrive at conclusion. In other words, in induction we logically establish a general proposition based on observed facts. E.g. we see that the production processes are the prime features of factories or manufacturing plants. We therefore conclude that factories exist for production purposes. In the same way, we can review the literature and from the data acquired from the literature review, can start to develop theories from them.

Both of these ways could be used in a research.

However if you have a predetermined knowledge of the subject area, then it is an advantage because you do not have to review all of the literature before collecting the data. Then the analysis of the acquired data can help you to come out with new findings and theories that have not been thought of before.

Benefits of literature review:

1. It helps you to distinguish whether inductive or deductive approach to be used.
2. It helps to refine further research questions and objectives.
3. It can highlight research possibilities that have been overlooked.
4. It can lead to discover explicit recommendations for further research.
5. It helps to avoid repeating work already done.
6. It can sample current opinions in newspapers, professional and trade journals to gain insights into the aspects of the research questions and objectives.
7. It leads to discover and provide an insight into research approaches, strategies and techniques that may be appropriate to the research questions and objectives.
8. It provides the direction and scope of your research study/project.
   1. **The content of the critical review**

Critical means to make judgement by providing a detailed and justified analysis of and commentary on the merits and faults of the key literature within the chosen area.

To make critical judgement, Dees (200) suggested that you should have:

* Refer to work by recognised experts in your chosen area.
* Consider and discuss work that supports and work that opposes your ideas.
* Make reasoned judgements regarding the value of others’ work to your research.
* Support your arguments with valid evidence in a logical manner.
* Distinguish clearly between fact and opinion.

It is necessary to discuss the work that has already been done in your area of research and to reference that work. It involves drawing out the key points and trends and presents them in a logical way. The background knowledge of the research questions and objectives and established boundaries of the research area need to be reported. Any area of contradiction or problem with the literature it must be justified.

Therefore, the writing of the critical review should have:

1. The key academic theories within the research area.
2. To show that your knowledge of your chosen area is up to date.
3. To show how your research relates to previous published research.
4. To assess the strengths and weaknesses of previous work, including omissions or bias and take these into account in your arguments.
5. To justify your arguments by referencing previous research.
6. Through clear referencing, to enable those reading your project report to find the original work you cite.

**The Structure of the Critical Review**

The literature review is basically a description and critical analysis of what other authors have written. You also need to focus on the research questions and objectives. How far has the literature gone in answering your research questions? The precise structure of the critical review is usually your choice. It can be a single chapter, a series of chapters or throughout the project report as you tackle various issues.

The common mistake with critical literature reviews is that they become uncritical listings of previous research, often being little more than annotated bibliographies.

Generally a critical review has the following steps:

1. Start at a more general level before narrowing down to your specific research question(s)

and objectives.

2. Provide a brief overview of key ideas.

3. Summarise, compare and contrast the work of the key writers;

4. Narrow down to highlight the work most relevant to your research;

5. Provide a detailed account of the finding of this work;

6. Highlight those issues where your research will provide fresh insights;

7. Lead the reader into subsequent sections of your project report, which explore these

issues.

Whatever way is used to structure the literature review, it is imperative that you have read, understood and evaluated the items you have located and able to link together the different ideas you find in the literature to form a coherent and cohesive argument. It must relate to the research questions and objectives.

A check list for evaluating the literature review

1. Does your review start at a more general level before narrowing down?
2. Does the literature covered relate clearly to your research question and objectives?
3. Have you covered the key theories of recognised experts in the area?
4. Have you covered the key literature or at least a representative sample?
5. Are those issues highlighted where your research will provide fresh insights?
6. Is the literature you have included up to date?
7. Have you been objective in your discussion and assessment of other people’s work?
8. Have you included references that are counter to your own opinion?
9. Have you distinguished clearly between facts and opinions?
10. Have you made reasoned judgements about the value of others work to your own?
11. Have you justified clearly your own ideas?
12. Is your argument coherent and cohesive - do the ideas link together?
13. Does your review lead the reader into subsequent sections of your project report?

An example of a critical review of the literature

Traditional measures of service quality (e.g. Parasuraman et al.); focus on measurement of the gap between service users’ perceptions and expectations across a series of dimensions that characterise the service. Notwithstanding shortcomings of conceptualising service quality in this manner, recognised in the SERVQUAL, debates (e.g. Carmen, 1990; Cronin and Taylor, 193; Van Dyke et al., 1997), the use of such a disconfirmation approach is widely reported in the literature (e.g. Robinson, 1999).

The number and nature of constructs, which represent the service encounter, are a function of a service relationship in a particular industry or situation. Each of these relationships differs and is, in reality unique. Gummesson (1996) identifies a series of general qualities characterising relationships such as collaboration, dependency, trust, power, longevity, frequency, closeness, content, as well as personal and social properties. In so doing, he emphasises the breadth of properties that may be deemed relevant by the parties involved in a particular service relationship. However, it is unlikely that all of these properties are of similar relevance to every relationship. Consequently it has been argued that a series of generic dimensions against which to measure service quality is inappropriate (Carmen, 1990). In a review of quality, as one of the primary outcome measures of service relationships, Rosen and Supernant (1998) support this view. They conclude that global measures of service quality (such as SERVQUAL) may not provide the details necessary to assess the strengths and weaknesses of a relationship. In particular, they may fail to take account of the uniqueness and the realities of specific relationship and how they are interpreted and expressed by the parties involved.

Research has also highlighted that interdependencies between organisations are established and maintained through the encounters and interactions of individuals within each organisation (de Burca, 1995). The measurement of the quality of such encounters therefore needs to reflect the perspectives of all these individuals. Rosen and Supernant (1998) suggest that traditional measures fail to reflect fully the dyadic nature of service encounters as they general assess the quality construct from only one partner’s point of view. They call for the evaluation of service relationships to accommodate this by including the perspectives of both parties. Although they suggest that this may result in the need to reconcile different views, they also highlight the need for awareness and understanding of the views of all parties involved in a service encounter. We would content that these processes could result in both parties involved in the service questioning the relevance of the norms against which they evaluate the encounters. This, we believe, support our contention that approaches which have the ability to capture a diversity of service users’ and providers’ experiences of such concepts, are likely to be of more value. Furthermore, we have argued that where measures focus only on specific transactions, they may fail to take account of the ongoing nature of service relationships that are based upon repeated encounters (William et al., 1999).

Rosen and Supernant (1998) support Smith’s (1995) arguments when they point to the shortcoming o the global nature of the quality construed as a diagnostic tool for remedial action. This implies that the assessment of the relationship’s quality should lead to action to enhance benefits obtained by both parties from it. Data collected to assess quality should therefore be useful. In this context, usefulness can be viewed from two key perspectives.

**Source**: An article published by Mark & Christine in the Journal of European Industrial Training (Saunders and Williams, 2000:220-221).

Identify:

1. The overall structure of starting at a more general level before narrowing down;
2. The provision of a brief overview of the key ideas.
3. Narrowing down to highlight that work which is most relevant to the research reported in the paper.
4. Providing more detail about the findings of that work which is most relevant.
   1. **Literature Sources**

**Literature sources are classified into 3 categories:**

1. Primary sources: reports, theses, emails, conference reports, company reports, some

government publications (white papers & planning documents) & unpublished manuscript

sources (letters, memos & committee minutes). These are also referred to as the grey

literatures they are difficult to trace/locate.

2. Secondary sources: newspapers, books, journals (periodicals, serials and magazines),

internet and some government publications. They are easier to locate than the primary

sources.

3. Tertiary sources: indexes, abstracts, catalogues, encyclopaedias, dictionaries,

bibliographies & citation indexes.

* 1. **Planning the literature search**

Literature search is time consuming. It is then necessary to plan this search. It can start by:

1. Having clearly defined research question(s) and objectives.

2. Defining the parameters of the research.

From the research questions and objectives you will have a good idea of which subject

matter is going to be relevant. However you need to be clear (Bell, 1999):

* The language of publication (e.g. English)
* The subject area ( e.g. accountancy)
* Business sector (e.g. manufacturing)
* Geographical area (e.g. Asia)
* Publication period (e.g. the last 10 years)
* Literature type (e.g. refereed journals and books)

3. Generating key words and search terms.

Undertake to read key authors and recent review articles in your research area in order to

help you to define your subject matter and to suggest appropriate key words. They may

contain references to other work that is pertinent to your research question(s) and

objective(s).

Key words or search terms are important as they help you to find the relevant literature as

they are the basic terms that describe your research question(s) and objectives. They help

you to search the tertiary literature. Key words include the authors’ surnames can be found

by:

* Discussion with colleagues, project tutor and librarians.
* Initial reading
* Dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopaedias and handbooks.
* Brainstorming
* Relevance trees.

4. Discussing the ideas as widely as possible.

* 1. **Conducting the literature search using a variety of approaches**

These will include:

* Searching using tertiary sources and the Internet.
* Following up references in articles you have read.
* Scanning and browsing secondary literature in your library.

Once obtained, the literature must be evaluated for its relevance to your research questions and objectives. This must include a consideration of each item’s currency. Each item must be read and noted. Bibliographic details, a brief description of the content and appropriate supplementary information should also be recorded.