

What is a Business Case Study?

A business case study is a detailed analysis of a real (or sometimes hypothetical) business situation. It presents a story (narrative) “involving a decision, an opportunity, a problem or an issue faced by a person or persons in an organization.”¹ A business case is a pedagogical tool for experiential learning, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world business situations. Therefore, studying and discussing business case studies enhance students’ analytical and decision-making skills.

Business cases are used in higher education business school courses by instructors who teach undergraduate, graduate, and executive education students. Cases can also be used by large organizations or companies for internal training purposes.

However, business cases have value and application to more than just business schools. Business issues cross a variety of other fields of study such as engineering, medicine, public policy, and environmental studies. For example, a business case about climate change could be appropriate for nearly all fields of study. Or, a case study about the best way to bring a health innovation to market would be appropriate for not only business schools, but also schools of medicine, public health, public policy, bioengineering, and more.

Business cases typically have the following characteristics:

- *Realistic Scenario* – Cases present a complex, real-world business situation.
- *Protagonist* – The protagonist is the person in the organization responsible for developing a recommendation to solve the problems. Students should be able to put themselves in the shoes of the protagonist and develop solutions based on the protagonist’s perspective.
- *Dilemma/Decision Points* – What are the specific problems the organization must solve? A case must clearly identify the dilemma(s), as well as the urgency and tension surrounding them. And, there is never one “right answer” to case dilemmas.
- *Rich Data* – Cases include information such as financial data, company history, organizational structures, market conditions, competitive information, customer profiles, and industry information, to name a few.
- *Complexity* – Cases require students to apply knowledge from various sources, and deal with incomplete and ambiguous data.

¹ Leenders, Michiel R., Louise A. Mauffette-Leenders and James A. Erskine. *Writing Cases*, 4th ed., Richard Ivey School of Business, 2001, p. 3.