



SEVENTH EDITION

# RESEARCH METHODS FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS

MARK SAUNDERS  
PHILIP LEWIS  
ADRIAN THORNHILL



# Research Methods for Business Students







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Seventh edition

Mark Saunders

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**www.pearson.com/uk**

First published under the Pitman Publishing imprint in 1997

Second edition 2000

Third edition 2003

Fourth edition 2007

Fifth edition 2009

Sixth edition 2012

**Seventh edition 2016**

© Pearson Professional Limited 1997

© Pearson Education Limited 2000, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012

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ISBN: 978-1-292-01662-7

**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Saunders, Mark, 1959-

Research methods for business students / Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis, Adrian Thornhill.

— Seventh edition.

pages cm

Revised edition of Research methods for business students, 2012.

ISBN 978-1-292-01662-7

1. Business--Research. 2. Business--Research--Data processing. I. Lewis, Philip, 1945- II. Thornhill, Adrian. III. Title.

HD30.4.S28 2015

650.072--dc23

2015019451

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

19 18 17 16

Typeset in 9.5/12 ITC Slimbach Std by 76

Printed and bound by L.E.G.O. S.p.A., Italy

*The publisher's policy is to use paper manufactured from sustainable forests.*



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## How to use this book

This book is written with a progressive logic, which means that terms and concepts are defined when they are first introduced. One implication of this is that it is sensible for you to start at the beginning and to work your way through the text, various boxes, self-check questions, review and discussion questions, case studies and case study questions. You can do this in a variety of ways depending on your reasons for using this book. However, this approach may not necessarily be suitable for your purposes, and you may wish to read the chapters in a different order or just dip into particular sections of the book. If this is true for you then you will probably need to use the glossary to check that you understand some of the terms and concepts used in the chapters you read. Suggestions for three of the more common ways in which you might wish to use this book follow.

### As part of a research methods course or for self-study for your research project

If you are using this book as part of a research methods course the order in which you read the chapters is likely to be prescribed by your tutors and dependent upon their perceptions of your needs. Conversely, if you are pursuing a course of self-study for your research project, dissertation or consultancy report, the order in which you read the chapters is your own choice. However, whichever of these you are, we would argue that the order in which you read the chapters is dependent upon your recent academic experience.

For many students, such as those taking an undergraduate degree in business or management, the research methods course and associated project, dissertation or consultancy report comes in either the second or the final year of study. In such situations it is probable that you will follow the chapter order quite closely (see Figure P.1). Groups of chapters within which we believe you can switch the order without affecting the logic of the flow too much are shown on the same level in this diagram and are:

- those associated with data collection (Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11);
- those associated with data analysis (Chapters 12 and 13).

Within the book we emphasise the importance of beginning to write early on in the research process as a way of clarifying your thoughts. In Chapter 1 we encourage you to keep a reflective diary, notebook or journal throughout the research process so it is helpful to read this chapter early on. We recommend you also read the sections in Chapter 14 on writing prior to starting to draft your critical review of the literature (Chapter 3).

Alternatively, you may be returning to academic study after a gap of some years, to take a full-time or part-time course such as a Master of Business Administration, a Master of Arts or a Master of Science with a Business and Management focus. Many students in such situations need to refresh their study skills early in their programme, particularly those associated with critical reading of academic literature and academic writing. If you



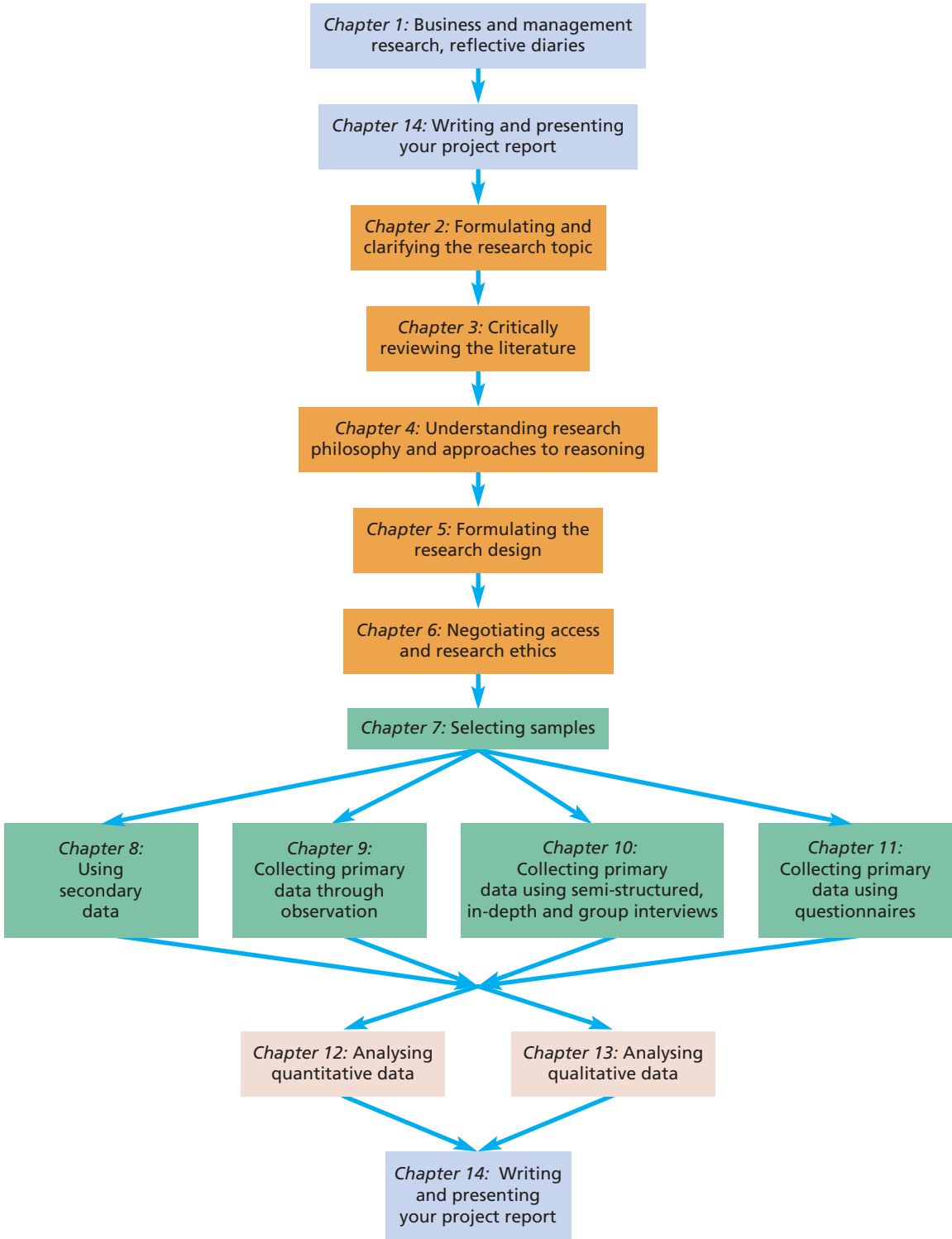


Figure P.1 Using this book in your final year of study

feel the need to do this, you may wish to start with those chapters that support you in developing and refining these skills (Chapters 3 and 14), followed by Chapter 8, which introduces you to the range of secondary data sources available that might be of use for other assignments (Figure P.2). Once again, groups of chapters within which we believe

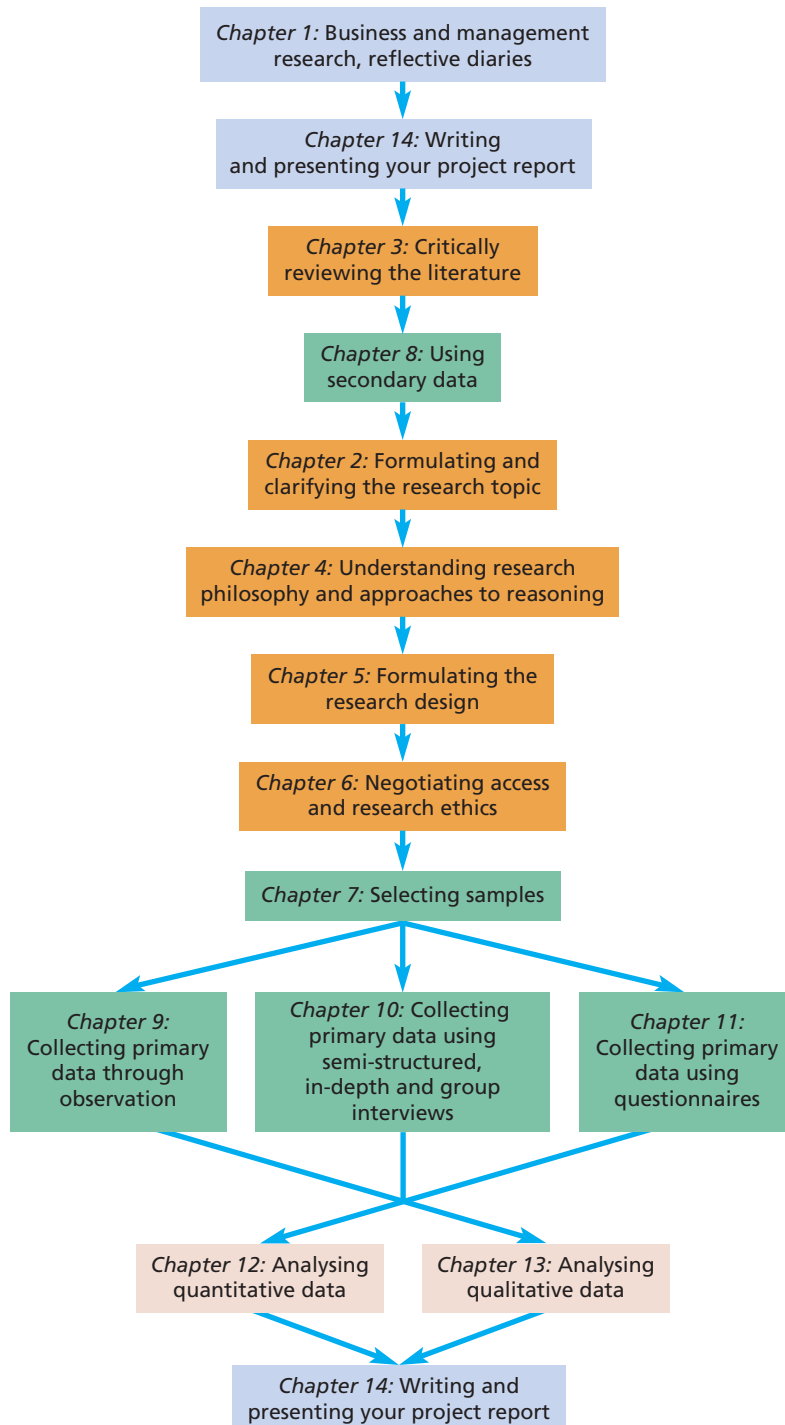


Figure P.2 Using this book as a new returner to academic study

you can switch the order without affecting the logic of the flow too much are shown on the same level in the diagram and are:

- those chapters associated with primary data collection (Chapters 9, 10 and 11);
- those associated with data analysis (Chapters 12 and 13).

In addition, we would recommend that you re-read Chapter 14 prior to starting to write your project report, dissertation or consultancy report, or if you need to undertake a presentation.

Whichever order you choose to read the chapters, we would recommend that you attempt all the self-check questions, review and discussion questions and those questions associated with the case studies. Your answers to the self-check questions can be self-assessed using the answers at the end of each chapter. However, we hope that you will actually attempt each question prior to reading the answer! If you need further information on an idea or a technique, then first look at the references in the further reading section.

At the end of each chapter, the section headed ‘Progressing your research project’ lists a number of tasks. Such tasks might involve you in just planning a research project or, alternatively, designing and administering a questionnaire of your own. They all include making an entry in your reflective diary or notebook. When completed, these tasks will provide a useful aide-mémoire for assessed work (including a reflective essay or learning log) and can be used as the basis for the first draft of your project report. It is worth pointing out here that many consultancy reports for organisations do not require you to include a review of the academic literature.

## As a guide through the research process

If you are intending to use this book to guide you through the research process for a research project you are undertaking, such as your dissertation, we recommend that you read the entire book quickly before starting your research. In that way you will have a good overview of the entire process, including the range of techniques available, and will be better able to plan your work.

After you have read the book once, we suggest that you re-read Section 1.5 on keeping a reflective diary or notebook and Sections 14.2–14.6 on writing first. Then work your way through the book again following the chapter order. This time you should attempt the self-check questions, review and discussion questions and those questions associated with each case study to ensure that you have understood the material contained in each chapter prior to applying it to your own research project. Your responses to self-check questions can be assessed using the answers at the end of each chapter.

If you are still unsure as to whether particular techniques, procedures or ideas are relevant, then pay special attention to the ‘focus on student research’, ‘focus on management research’ and ‘focus on research in the news’ boxes. ‘Focus on student research’ boxes are based on actual students’ experiences and illustrate how an issue has been addressed or a technique or procedure used in a student’s research project. ‘Focus on management research’ boxes discuss recent research articles in established refereed academic journals, allowing you to see how research is undertaken successfully. These articles are easily accessible via the main online business and management databases. ‘Focus on research in the news’ boxes provide topical news stories of how particular research techniques, procedures and ideas are used in the business world. You can also look in the ‘further reading’ for other examples of research where these have been used. If you need further

information on an idea, technique or procedure then, again, start with the references in the further reading section.

Material in some of the chapters is likely to prove less relevant to some research topics than others. However, you should beware of choosing techniques because you are happy with them, if they are inappropriate. Completion of the tasks in the section headed 'Progressing your research project' at the end of Chapters 2–13 will enable you to generate all the material that you will need to include in your research project, dissertation or consultancy report. This will also help you to focus on the techniques and ideas that are most appropriate to your research. When you have completed these tasks for Chapter 14 you will have written your research project, dissertation or consultancy report.

## As a reference source

It may be that you wish to use this book now or subsequently as a reference source. If this is the case, an extensive index will point you to the appropriate page or pages. Often you will find a 'checklist' box within these pages. 'Checklist' boxes are designed to provide you with further guidance on the particular topic. You will also find the contents pages and the glossary useful reference sources, the latter defining some 600 research terms. In addition, we have tried to help you to use the book in this way by including cross-references between sections in chapters as appropriate. Do follow these up as necessary. If you need further information on an idea or a technique then begin by consulting the references in the further reading section. Wherever possible we have tried to reference books that are in print and readily available in university libraries and journal articles that are in the major business and management online databases.



## Preface

In writing the seventh edition of *Research Methods for Business Students* we have responded to the many comments we have received regarding previous editions. In particular, this has led us to fully revise Chapter 4 to incorporate a new section on the philosophical underpinnings of management research, a discussion of postmodernism and a new reflexive tool (HARP) to help readers heighten their awareness of research philosophies when progressing their research project; Chapter 9 to include new sections on Internet-mediated observation and observation using videography; Chapter 11 to more fully reflect the use of online survey tools; Chapter 13 including restructuring and including a new section on content analysis; Chapter 14 including a new section on writing a reflective essay or section; and to develop further the Glossary, which now includes some 600 research-related terms. New case studies at the end of each chapter have been developed with colleagues, providing up-to-date scenarios through which to illustrate issues associated with undertaking research. Alongside this we have also taken the opportunity to also update examples and revise the tables of Internet addresses.

As in previous editions, we have taken a predominantly non-software-specific approach in our discussion of methods. By doing this, we have been able to focus on the general principles needed to utilise a range of analysis software and the Internet effectively for research. However, recognising that many students have access to sophisticated data-analysis software and may need help in developing these skills, we continue to provide access to up-to-date ‘teach yourself’ guides to IBM SPSS Statistics™, Excel™, NVivo™ and Internet searching via the book’s website ([www.pearsoned.co.uk/saunders](http://www.pearsoned.co.uk/saunders)). Where appropriate, these guides are provided with data sets. In the preparation of the seventh edition we were fortunate to receive considerable feedback from colleagues in universities throughout the world. We are extremely grateful to all the reviewers who gave their time and shared their ideas.

Inevitably, the body of knowledge of research methods has developed further since 2012, and we have revised all chapters accordingly. Our experiences of teaching and supervising students and working through the methods in classes have suggested alternative approaches and the need to provide alternative material. Consequently, we have taken the opportunity to update and refine existing worked examples, remove those that were becoming dated, and develop new ones where appropriate. However, the basic structure remains much the same as the previous six editions.

Other minor changes and updating have been made throughout. Needless to say, any errors of omission and commission continue to remain our responsibility.

As with previous editions, much of our updating has been guided by comments from students and colleagues, to whom we are most grateful. We should like particularly to thank students from University of Surrey, Prague University of Economics, and on the Research Methods Summer Schools and Doctoral Symposiums for their comments on all of the chapters. Colleagues in both our own and other universities have continued to provide helpful comments and advice. We are particularly grateful to Andrew



Armitage (Anglia Ruskin University), Murray Clark (Sheffield Hallam University), Sandra Corlett (Northumbria University), Graham Dietz (Durham University), Trevor Morrow (University of Ulster), Alexandros Paraskevas (University of West London), Richard Slack (Durham University), Paul Tosey (Surrey University) and Keith Townsend (Griffith University). Colleagues and friends again deserve thanks for their assistance in providing examples of research across the spectrum of business and management, co-authoring chapters, writing case studies and in reviewing parts of this book: Marie Ashwin (Ecole de Management de Normandie), Frank Bezzina (University of Malta), Alexandra Bristow (University of Surrey), Vincent Cassar (University of Malta), Catherine Cassell (University of Leeds), Gail Clarkson (University of Leeds), Rosanna Cole (Roehampton University), David Denyer (Cranfield University), Alan Hirst (Assumption University), Amanda Lee (Coventry University), Bill Lee (University of Sheffield), Jenny Ma (University of Worcester), Sophie Mills (Coventry University), Miriam Muethel (WHU – Otto Beisheim School of Management), Susann Power (University of Surrey), Noelia-Sarah Reynolds (University of Essex), Céline Rojon (Edinburgh University), Catherine Wang (Royal Holloway, University of London).

The contributions of Lynette Bailey, Darren Bolton and Martin Jenkins to Chapters 3 and 8 and of Andrew Guppy to Chapter 12 in early editions of this book are gratefully acknowledged.

We would also like to thank all of the staff at Pearson (both past and present) who supported us through the process of writing the seventh edition. Our thanks go, in particular, to Tom Hill, our present commissioning editor, and David Harrison, our previous commissioning editor for their support and enthusiasm throughout the process. We would also like to express our thanks to Andrew Muller as desk editor and Annette Abel as copy-editor.

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*May 2015*



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# Chapter 1

## Business and management research, reflective diaries and the purpose of this book

### Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should:

- be able to outline the purpose and distinct focus of business and management research;
- be able to place your research project on a basic–applied research continuum according to its purpose and context;
- understand the utility and importance of keeping a reflective diary;
- understand the stages you will need to complete (and revisit) as part of your research process;
- have an overview of this book’s purpose, structure and features;
- be aware of some of the ways you can use this book.

### 1.1 Introduction

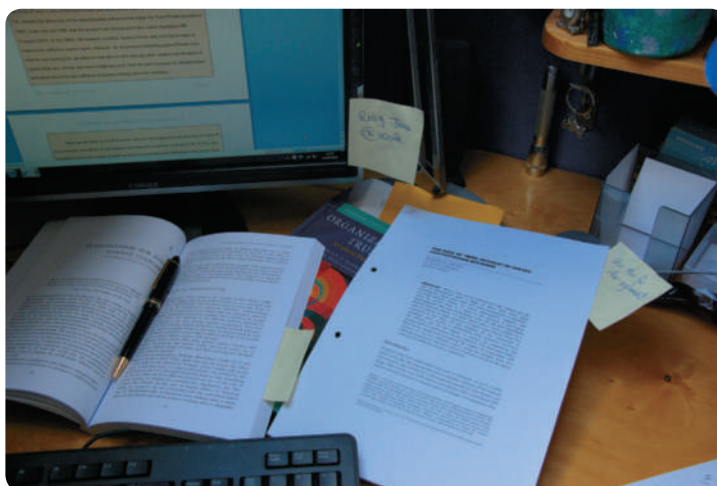
This book is designed to help you to undertake your research project, whether you are an undergraduate or postgraduate student of business and management or a manager. It provides a clear guide on how to undertake research as well as highlighting the realities of undertaking research, including the more common pitfalls. The book is written to provide you with a guide to the research process and with the necessary knowledge and skills to undertake a piece of research from first thoughts about a research topic to writing your project report. As such, you will find it useful as a manual or handbook on how to tackle your research project.

After reading the book you will have been introduced to research philosophies and approaches to reasoning, and explored a range of strategies, techniques and procedures with which you could tackle your research project. Of equal importance, you will know that there is no one best way for undertaking all research. Rather you will be aware of the choices you will have to make and how these will impact upon what you can find out. This means you will be able to make a series of informed choices including your research philosophy, approaches to reasoning, strategies, techniques and procedures that are most suitable to your own research

project and be able to justify them. In reading the book you will have been introduced to the wealth of data that can be obtained via the Internet, techniques for collecting your own data and procedures for analysing different types of data, have had a chance to practise them, and be able to select and justify which to use. When selecting and using these techniques and procedures you will be aware of the contribution that the appropriate use of information technology can make to your research.

The Post-it® note is one of the best-known and most widely used office products in the world. Yet, despite the discovery of the repositionable adhesive that made the Post-it® note possible in 1968, it was not until 1980 that the product was introduced to the market (Post-it 2014). In the 1960s 3M research scientist Spencer Silver was looking for ways to improve the adhesive used in tapes. However, he discovered something quite different from what he was looking for, an adhesive that did not stick strongly when coated onto the back of tapes! What was unclear was how it might be used. Over the next five years he demonstrated and talked about his new adhesive to people working within the company.

Most people working for 3M know the story of what happened next and how the Post-it® note concept came about. A new product development researcher working for 3M, Art Fry, was frustrated by how the scraps of paper he used as bookmarks kept falling out of his church choir hymn book. He realised that Silver's adhesive would mean his bookmarks would not fall out. Soon afterwards the Post-it® note concept was developed and market research undertaken. This was extremely difficult as the product was revolutionary and was, in effect, designed to replace pieces of torn scrap paper! However, despite some



Post-it® notes in use  
Source: © Mark Saunders 2015

initial scepticism within the company, Post-it® notes were launched in 1980. One year after their launch, they were named 3M's outstanding new product.

While your research project will be within the business and management discipline rather than natural science (such as developing a new adhesive), our introductory example still offers a number of insights into the nature of research and in particular the business and management research you will be undertaking. In particular, it highlights that when undertaking research we should be open to finding the unexpected and how sometimes the applicability of our research findings may not be immediately obvious. It also emphasises the importance of discussing your ideas with other people.