

100 Years of Case Method

Case Method *for* Digital Natives

Teaching and Research

Editor
Ajoy Kumar Dey

B L O O M S B U R Y

**CASE METHOD FOR DIGITAL NATIVES
TEACHING AND RESEARCH**

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CASE CONFERENCE

Enhancing Academic Value and Engagement of a Case Conference

Veenu Sharma¹

***Abstract:** Discussing cases to cover some portions of a syllabus of a management course is a widely accepted pedagogy that still retains its relevance even after a century of its first use. If properly used by trained faculty, the case-based method is known to produce effective learning outcomes by simulating a chunk of the business environment in a class that facilitates students to apply their concepts to make decisions while facing the complexities and dynamics of an almost real environment. The case method also allows assimilating theory by connecting it to practice. To remain relevant in the ever-changing business ecosystem, fresh cases need to be written and used in class. Cases on emerging technologies; societal, economic, and behavioural issues; managing crises, shifting landscape of governance and ethics; and sustainable and responsible leadership, empowering women, and rise in entrepreneurship need a push. Participating in a case conference to present newer ideas for crafting cases is a proven route to refine the idea and turn it into a case. Lately, there has been an upsurge in case conferences. This brings us to a simple question, 'Can a case conference create a stronger bond with its stakeholders by enhancing its academic value and increasing the engagement?' To implement this, we need to understand who the stakeholders of a case conference are, what is perceived as academic value for them and how the stakeholders can be engaged.*

***Keywords:** Case Conference, Case Method, Engagement, Value Creation*

Introduction

The case-based method creates a conducive ambiance for developing and honing critical thinking, analytical, problem-solving and decision-making skills by applying the concepts learnt in the class and connecting theories with practice. Almost every good B School tries to attract management faculty and students through either a journal or case conference or both. Lately, there has been an upsurge in case conferences. This brings us to a simple question, 'Why should one attend an academic case conference?' A case conference is a formal event in academicians' and novice case writers' lives that aims at sharing their work and getting feedback on the same, thus helping them learn

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effective case writing, teaching with cases and conducting research with cases. Conferences are so self-evident that there is little to no research that addresses what takes place in conferences, why people should attend them in the first place and essentially what value the conference delivers. The top-of-the-mind answer could be that the case enthusiasts and authors attend a case conference to get constructive feedback on the case presented so that it can be improved and taken further for publication with a shorter turnaround time in good case research journals. Conferences also offer an opportunity to establish and expand the network. However, is that all? This article will help the reader understand how the academic value of a case conference can be enhanced by giving structured inputs through the contribution of a keynote speaker, theme base sessions, feedback from peers and experts, publishing opportunities offered and workshops conducted by the experts. With predefined objectives of creating an impact on stakeholders, a case conference should be organised with some innovative ideas that can engage the participants in their journey of knowledge sharing. Selecting BIMTECH International Conference on Management Cases (ICMC) as the context, this article will present a few unique strategies to enhance academic value and increase engagement of a case conference.

ICMC

Starting from 2011, ICMC is held every year during either the last week of November or the first week of December. The dates are announced one year in advance so that participants coming from abroad get sufficient time to plan. Till 2019 the conference was held in a face-to-face mode and usually attracted 100-odd participants from 8 to 12 countries other than India. In 2020 the conference was held online for the first time. Almost 50% of the delegates come from abroad. Both teaching and research cases are accepted but only after reviewing the 500-word proposals. At the proposal stage, about 25% to 30% of proposals face rejection. Full-text cases are accepted till 30 June, which are then admitted to double-blind peer review. On the first day of the conference, two books with ISBNs containing about 65 full-text and peer-reviewed cases are handed over to delegates. For young faculty or researchers, consisting of about 15% of the total number of delegates, getting a printed version of their cases in a book serves as a strong motivation.

The one-and-a-half-day event hosts 60 to 65 cases presented in theme-based sessions. Each session of 90 minutes accommodates up to five cases with a maximum of 15 minutes of presentation and Q&A sessions of three to five minutes per case. Every year, two eminent researchers/case authors are invited as keynote speakers who also deliver one workshop each just after the conference gets over.

Since the formation of a virtual community of professors and young faculty interested in writing and teaching with cases, the flow of cases for the conference became predictable and robust expanding the geographical reach.

Since 2019, immediately after the conference, ICMC has been hosting two high-level, content-rich workshops discussing either the case methodology or topics for the case-focused qualitative research.

Initiatives to Enhance Academic Value

A young scholar or a faculty comes to a case conference with expectations to present a case and get quality feedback to improve, thereby gaining knowledge, finding an opportunity to publish in a ranked journal, get mentored and increase network. An accomplished case author attends a conference to share knowledge, publish in associated research journals, chair a track, offer a workshop and get connected. Later, depending on the expertise, senior authors may be invited to be examiners of theses, deliver online lectures or modules in FDP, guest edit an issue of our journal, contribute chapters to books brought out by BIMTECH on topical issues, help in creating support material for budding case authors and deliver webinars of behalf of ICMC.

Learning in Action

A specialised case conference in a particular domain brings together a large number of scholars with expertise in that domain, which helps the participants benefit from cross-fertilisation of ideas. By attending such a conference, one can identify the skill gap and firm-up the need to write cases. Attending a case conference is like ‘sharpening the axe’, as a conference will provide you new ideas and approaches. The conference organisers should provide spaces for discussions with influencers. Having a panel of experts debating a contemporary issue followed by an open question-and-answer session, helps others to pick the threads of individual interest. Successful conferences focus on the needs of the different sets of attendees and try to meet them. Thus, apart from providing feedback, discussing ideas, connecting with people, and getting answers to their questions, conferences are providing opportunities to learn new research methods in the form of a workshop, gaming, simulation exercise and more. Alongside the conference, organisers are planning activities that provide platforms to attendees for the ideation, structuring, writing and publishing. Case conferences collect like-minded people across the globe to share insightful information that could be taught in class by learning, sharing and creating ideas.

Publication: Feeling of Power

Following the maxim of ‘publish or perish’ in academics, all management faculty are under pressure of publishing in ranked journals. A published case or an article that got accepted after passing through the rigour of ‘peer review’ boosts the confidence of a researcher. For a young researcher, even a case published in a book with an ISBN is counted as a research output. A case accepted in any case repository is a great morale booster and adds to the intellectual property. When a faculty uses a published case written by her, the value in the eyes of the students jumps manifold. Also, the learning outcomes are better achieved. Attendees of a conference can easily write a case that may cross the quality barrier of case repositories such as Case Centre or Ivy.

In the proceeding of a conference, listing only the abstract is of no value to the participants, especially the young researchers and practitioners. The conference organisers must take up the challenge for publishing full-text cases as books bearing ISBNs brought out by reputed publishers. The books should be distributed on the first day of the conference so that discussion can be held after familiarising with the context. For presentation, teaching cases should be separated from case study research. The latter should be grouped by theme. All presentations must be done with the support of experts. Every expert must give positive and negative feedback and must rank each presentation on some predefined criteria. For a research case, the experts should opine on the proper linkage to the theory and formulation of the main research questions, check data collection and analysis processes, and help in improving the discussion and conclusion sections. In some cases, experts should suggest how to proceed for theorising and theory-building stages. Thus, a case conference creating academic value should work on creating new experiences every year—the horizon should be beyond case presentations. In the virtual format of conferences, there are many opportunities for the experienced case authors to mentor young faculties. The ‘meet and talk’ can be the new normal for organising a case conference.

Forum for Collective Wisdom

Case conference organisers should focus on the need of the participants to get rich and constructive feedback on the case presented. ICMC has achieved this with the innovative format of Forum for Collective Wisdom (FCW). This applies to only case study research that have been rated high by the reviewers. Cases are grouped as per the theme, and a maximum of five cases are assigned to two experts to be discussed in two hours. A couple of weeks before the presentation, each member of the five groups has to review all the five cases to be presented in that group. PowerPoint presentations

are not permitted in FCW. The discussion starts with one group presenting a summary of the case in a maximum of three minutes, sharing the research questions selected, theoretical background, methods and findings. It is followed by two minutes of questions from other groups primarily seeking clarifications. Then the discussions start with a focus on improving the case to make it publishable. Such innovations can enthuse the attendees to leave their labs, libraries and archives and to learn from talking with leading thinkers in the subject area.

Increasing Engagement through Academic Value

Engagement involves all stakeholders taking meaningful actions in a case conference, again and again. Active and engaged participants are the foundation of every successful conference. A steady stream of authors and case enthusiasts regularly participating in a conference spread positive word of mouth and encourage others to try the experience. Unless both the parties engaged in a professional relationship perceive short- or long-term gains, the engagement cannot last long.

Unless there is continuous experimentation looking for innovative ways to engage, the relationship or the bonding will be weak. It will become stale. If possible, try to think of presenting something different each time a participant attends. The change may be small, but it should have freshness.

The stakeholders of an annual management conference that is being organised consistently for the past 11 years at the same institute are the management of the institute, the members and volunteers in the organising committee, faculty, participants who present their cases, keynote speakers, academic partners (if any), publications who are aligned with the conference and publish case researches as the outcome of the conference, the professors who share their experiences and guide others in the role of chairs of different tracks, and reviewers of cases.

To map the values created for each stakeholder, we may restrict ourselves to the institute, other academic partners, case authors, keynote speakers, resource persons of workshops and other invited attendees. We may list the values sought by each category of the stakeholders and attempt to create higher value for each of these categories.

For a case, author engagement starts from the time free webinars are conducted on different aspects of the case method directed to develop a comprehensive understanding of a case. Authors are pleased to get back their 500-word proposal with comprehensive review comments within a quick turnaround time. The approach of 'review and improve' and not 'review and reject' serves as a motivator. This may help the authors to take the case forward for publication.

Publishing the books containing full-text cases and distributing them on the first day of the conference is liked by many as the discussions are enriched with contextual information of each case.

Networking and collaborating are the primary goals of each attendee. As an organiser, one can create spaces where ‘birds of a feather flock together’. Sessions like ‘Picnic at Conference’ can be one such session where organisers provide mats and snack baskets for different groups of four–six people of similar interest to share their ideas at the informal platform and they network, exchange cards, exchange ideas and more. Networking is an easy thing for an extrovert attendee but a difficult task for an introvert. Thus, an organiser should create an informal and friendly environment where participants share laughs and anecdotes and leave as friends rather than contacts. A pre-conference session can be arranged for first-timers, and building a relationship before they meet at the registration desk may give ease to early career researchers too.

The carefully selected eminent keynote speakers are requested to select topics of academic value, providing some knowledge about the domain and outlining the scope of pursuing research.

The track chairs are encouraged to provide written feedback on each of the cases that are presented, rate them as per predefined parameters and help the authors to make the case good for publishing. This keeps them engaged with the proceedings.

Awards for best cases in the teaching and research categories and young scholars are sponsored by prominent organisations, which lends credibility to the selection process, which is transparent and driven by the blind review process.

Offering the options of trips to nearby historical monuments, biodiversity parks, social outreach sites of the institute and of course shopping adds value.

Different innovative formats for case presentations may generate the required values for expert case authors (like our FCW) and for those who are at the bottom of the experience ladder (20-minute presentation with the support of PPT). For those who attend the conference with only an idea for writing a case and are looking for help in crystallising their thoughts, a different kind of presentation in a shorter format may be designed. A poster session or a five-minute presentation will suffice. Such sessions can be branded as ‘Dragon’s Den—Five Minutes to Escape’ or ‘Hell Camp’. The objective is to grill the presenter in such a way that she gets clues to improve the case. If the time falls short, the person can be assigned to some senior case authors for further mentoring. Attendees who wish to share their experiences (if the conference provides such a space) of a completely different kind of interaction may be of help.

Resource persons for workshops will get interested if they are asked to share research ideas from their domain of expertise and they get an attentive and intelligent audience interested in those topics. Post-conference workshops can be used for such participants.

Similarly, we should create innovative value packages for academic partners, keynote speakers, and other major and important groups of stakeholders to engage them.

Measuring Impacts

Earlier, the best way to measure the success of the conference was very simple. Preliminary indicators could be the number of participants, hailing from the number of countries and quality ranking of the institutes, along revenue generated, which helps in measuring the impact. But it's important to note that the impact holds different meanings to all stakeholders. For the planner, it's the number of attendees; for financial leaders, it's the profitability; for the marketer, it's the number of academic partners and leads generated. A participant measures the impact of the conference by looking at the conference objectives and seeing whether the same is achieved fully or partially. The overall satisfaction of a participant includes venue, tracks, accommodations, quality of support, food, length of the session, time control, audio-visual aids, promotion on social media, live streaming and prompt action on presented information. Active and engaged participants are the foundation of every successful conference. Thus, the impact of the conference is measured by keeping all aspects of each stakeholder. Conducting a successful academic case conference is one of the most important events for any B-school that influences brand building.

At the next level, a progressive increase in the number of good cases as rated by anonymous reviewers is also a good indicator. The percentage of rejection of abstracts and even full cases is a rough yardstick for the quality of the conference. The number of cases/research papers that get published in ranked research journals is the ultimate measure. In our opinion, this the single most important factor that builds the brand of the conference.

Along similar lines, other innovative measures should be designed and communicated to the target audience of management faculty in easy and direct language.

Conclusion

Keeping conferences engaging and fresh is a challenging task. No matter what participants are looking forward to, organisers have to look for innovative options for keeping attendees' spark high and giving them a reason to join every year. Organisers should understand that 'Engagement

starts much before the event'. Conferences with a sharp focus on outcomes catch attention and become popular.

About the Author

Dr. Veenu Sharma is an Assistant Professor of Retail and Marketing at BIRLA Institute of Management Technology, Greater Noida with more than 15 years of industry and academic experience. Her primary area of researches includes Understanding the retail environment along with consumer behaviour. She is also on the editorial team of the South Asian Journal of Business and Management Cases and a regular reviewer of reputed international journals. She has received the Erasmus+ CESTour grant in 2021 and is one of the team members working on the international project of Erasmus+ Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education on Sustainability Tourism, a European Union-funded project.

100 Years of Case Method

Case Method for Digital Natives

Teaching and Research

As the year 2021 marks hundred years of Case Method, this book is dedicated to its various dimensions in teaching and research. The Case Method has been used extensively around the world to inculcate, analytical skills, decision making and critical thinking among management students. Similarly, research using this methodology has provided the academia with various theories and models that have been widely used in research and practice. Given its immense contribution in academia and research, 36 case experts and enthusiasts from 11 countries, have contributed to this book through 24 articles distributed in seven sections. These articles highlight how the said method has evolved and how it will be critical in developing the 21st Century Skills in teaching and research.

