

**Consortial benchmarking:
A method of academic-practitioner collaborative research
and its application in a b2b environment**

Competitive paper for the special track on the methodological research approach

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper and literature addressed: Development of a new method for academic-practitioner collaboration, addressing the literature on collaborative research

Research method: Model elaboration and test with an in-depth case study

Research findings: In consortial benchmarking, practitioners and academic researchers form a consortium and together benchmark best-practices firms. Consortial benchmarking includes practitioners as co-researchers, thus facilitating research relevant for both academics and practitioners. Rigorous research informs the entire process since consortial benchmarking collects evidence from multiple sources and uses different comparison techniques. We develop the method and illustrate it in a business-to-business environment with a case that identifies the nature of innovative suppliers

Main contribution: Consortial benchmarking combines rigor and relevance and can thus boost the stagnating field of academic-practitioner collaborative research.

Keywords: Benchmarking; Consortial Benchmarking; Case Study; Collaborative Research; Relevance

INTRODUCTION

The much lamented separation of management research and management practice has stimulated a multitude of debates on rigor and relevance in management during the last 50 years (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Tushman, O'Reilly, Fenollosa, Kleinbaum & McGrath, 2007). Authors have warned that a rift between research and practice is "likely to result in irrelevant theory and in untheorized and invalid practice" (Anderson, Herriot & Hodgkinson, 2001, p. 391). Several top-tier journals have addressed the question of how to overcome the "double hurdle" (Pettigrew, 1997; 2001) of rigor and relevance in management research (Academy of Management Journal, 2007 and 2001; British Journal of Management, 2002). Furthermore, numerous editorials have called for making management research of more interest to practitioners (Bartunek, Rynes & Ireland, 2006) and several presidents of the Academy of Management have insistently postulated breaking up the closed self-referential loops of management research to bring more relevance to research (e.g. Hambrick, 1994; Bartunek, 2003).

The relevance gap has been framed as a knowledge production and knowledge transfer problem (van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). While some authors regard theory and practice as distinct forms of knowledge that are hard to bridge (Kieser & Nicolai, 2005), others argue that producing relevant knowledge depends on how researchers translate theoretical knowledge into the language of practice (Shapiro, Kirkman & Courtney, 2007) or how practitioners are integrated in the research process (Vermeulen, 2007). Even though some promising avenues of joint academic-practitioner production of knowledge have been suggested in literature on collaborative research (see Shani et al., 2008 for an overview), some academics remain skeptic about the contribution of practice-grounded knowledge to scientific progress or doubt that such knowledge is created in a rigorous way. The skepticism of some seems to result in endless discussions on the "ifs" of combining rigor and relevance on a conceptual level or from a philosophy of science perspective, hence hindering work on the necessary "hows" in terms of what methods can be used to produce relevant knowledge for both academics and practitioners in a rigorous way. Ironically, academics publishing on methods they used in academic-practitioner collaborative research projects find themselves being pushed back to "if-discussion" to justify their methodological approach (e.g., Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009).

We propose that consortial benchmarking is a promising and powerful approach to successful academic-practitioner collaboration since it produces rigorous knowledge relevant for both groups. This method is particularly suited in a B2B environment which does not rely on large sample numbers and is therefore more inclined to qualitative research. Consortial benchmarking brings together a group of investigators (the consortium) who are interested in finding an answer to a specific research question. The consortium is composed of practitioners from several firms who finance the project and send delegates on benchmarking visits, ensuring relevance by co-defining the research questions and academics who add theoretical knowledge and ensure methodological rigor. The team visits and benchmarks several best-practices firms and collects data on a research topic. This way, a large research team including practitioners as well as academics visits each best-practices firm. They listen to presentations, conduct topical discussions, talk to managers, visit the firm's installations and review internal documents. After a visit, the consortium jointly analyzes the data, discusses emerging concepts and examines relationships between different concepts and/or variables.

Consortial benchmarking advances traditional multi-case approaches including practitioners not only as key informants but as co-researchers. Furthermore, consortial benchmarking is a

team-based approach focusing on best-practices cases. Thus, discussions between academics and practitioners, or “meta discourses”, are likely to emerge and to flourish.

This paper contributes to management research in four ways:

- (1) it introduces consortial benchmarking, a collective benchmarking approach originally developed by practitioners, which has gained most attention in German-speaking countries; to our knowledge this paper offers the first comprehensive introduction to consortial benchmarking in an English language journal;
- (2) furthermore, we suggest to enhance this approach by explicitly and systematically including academics into the consortium turning consortial benchmarking into a method of joint academic-practitioner knowledge creation ;
- (3) it shows how consortial benchmarking can enhance traditional multi-case study research and narrow the “practitioner-academic divide” (Brennan & Ankers, 2004); and
- (4) it contributes to the discussion of how to conduct rigorous and relevant research in academic-practitioner collaborations.

We use an example from our own experience to illustrate how a consortial benchmarking project works and how it can produce findings that are relevant for both academics and practitioners in a rigorous way. First, we clarify what we understand by rigor and relevance in management research and discuss the benefits of case study research; second, present four steps of conducting a consortial benchmarking project; then we illustrate the application; and finally discuss contributions and conclusions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Defining rigor and relevance in management research

Rigor is characterized as the soundness or exactness “in theoretical and conceptual development, its methodological design and execution, its interpretation of findings, and its use of these findings in extending theory or developing new theory” (Zmud & Ives, 1996, p. xxxvii). Since we understand consortial benchmarking as an innovative multi-case study method operationalizing rigor we use the quality indicators of case study research suggested by Yin (2003, p. 34), namely

- (1) *construct validity*: establishing proper operational measures for the concept being studied;
 - (2) *internal validity*: establishing robust causal relationships;
 - (3) *external validity*: establishing a domain in which the study’s findings can be generalized;
- and
- (4) *reliability*: demonstrating that the operations of the study can be repeated with the same results.

Relevance of management research should not be limited to mere practical usefulness of research, but needs to include theoretical relevance (Daft & Lewin, 2008). If research is of interest only to practitioners, researchers will likely refrain from building collaborations with practitioners and vice versa. In assessing both practical and theoretical relevance, we combine the following aspects of practical usefulness (Shrivastava, 1987) and characteristics of theoretical relevance (Vermeulen, 2007):

- (1) *introduction of a novel construct* (innovativeness);
- (2) *concrete consequences* in terms of findings that matter in management decision making/managerial action or understanding of management-related processes;

- (3) *variables under managers' control*; and
- (4) *identification of trade-offs*, i.e. decisions made for one reason that may have contrary consequences in other domains.

While we postulate that rigorous management research needs to include all four of these quality indicators, we argue that management research can be relevant for both academics and practitioners even if it meets only some of the relevance criteria.

Interaction of rigor and relevance in management research

The rigor/relevance debate has yielded endless either/or discussion on rigor and relevance and has largely neglected bridging activities between these two camps (Gulati, 2007). One argument is that when academics and practitioners are brought together, they separate again like water and oil (Simon, 1967); or that academics and practitioners operate in different closed social systems that cannot be integrated (Kieser & Leiner, 2009). Recently some authors have emphasized that the scholarly quality of research and relevance can be merged in a “pragmatic science” approach high in both rigor and relevance (Anderson, Herriot & Hodgkinson, 2001; Tushman, O’Reilly, Fenollosa, Kleinbaum & McGrath, 2007) by re-aligning stakeholders in the research process (Starkey & Madan, 2001; Hodgkinson, Herriot & Anderson, 2001), thus bridging the rigor-relevance gap in management research (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). To avoid centrifugal forces pushing academics and practitioner “back to their camps” (Anderson, Herriot & Hodgkinson, 2001), the knowledge creation process has to be both rigorous and focused on managerial phenomena rooted in practical contexts.

Following the notion of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge proposed by Gibbons and colleagues (Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartz, Scott and Throw, 1994), collaborative research needs to combine Mode 1 (rigorous discipline-based knowledge production) with Mode 2 (production of knowledge for application) to form a what Huff (2000) calls the Mode 1.5 knowledge creation process. Mode 1.5 is not a compromise between rigor and relevance, rather “a difficult but desirable position ‘above’ these modes of production” (Huff, 2000, p. 292). Mode 1.5 approaches to knowledge creation minimize the weaknesses of Mode 1 and Mode 2 strategies while utilizing their respective strengths and “incorporate a role for faultfinders as well as facilitators” (Hodgkinson, Herriott & Anderson, 2001, p. 45).

We suggest that consortial benchmarking is a promising approach to bridge the rigor and relevance gaps in management research, and thus to stimulate Mode 1.5 knowledge creation.

Potentials and criticisms of case studies in management research

Case study is regarded as a powerful research methodology in the field of management (e. g. Stake, 2006; Larsson, 1993; Wilson & Vlosky, 1997; Weick, 2007; Zott & Huy, 2007; Halinen & Tornroos, 2005) which allows investigating the “hows” and “whys” of a phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2003; Woodside & Wilson, 2003). Thus, cases are primarily used to build new theories (Eisenhardt, 1989) or to refine existing theories (Siggelkow, 2007).

Since case study research does not focus on abstract constructs or concepts, but on real-world aspects or questions, we view case study methodology as a means to produce knowledge relevant for both theory and practice. More than 40 years ago Glaser and Strauss (1967) pointed out that the intimate connection with empirical reality makes it possible to develop relevant, valid and testable theory. Moreover, Eisenhardt & Graebner (2007) just recently noted papers building theory from cases are often viewed as the most interesting pieces of research by the academic community.

However, “traditional” case study approaches see practitioners as more or less passive informants or subjects under study like “mountain gorillas” (Vermeulen, 2007) instead of co-researchers. Hence, researchers are not able to fully utilize the benefits of academic-practitioner collaborations such as “framing research questions in a way that will be meaningful to practitioners, gaining access to sites for field research, designing data collection instruments and methods appropriate for today’s workforce, and interpreting results accurately within the business context” (Amabile, Patterson, Mueller, Wojcik, Odomirok, Marsh & Kramer, 2001, p. 418).

Though case study methodology provides apparent benefits for practical management research, single case approaches in particular are frequently criticized for lacking rigor in terms of having low validity (Yin, 2003; Schofield, 2006), and having limited generalizability (Leonard-Barton, 1990; Lincoln, Guba, 2006). Poorly executed case studies that apply only one evidence source can result in a narrow or heavily biased theory (Yin, 2003; Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt, 1991). Analogously, with case studies rooted in a single theoretical paradigm and single method, there is a danger of overlooking real phenomena (Trim & Lee, 2004; Jick, 1979). Ultimately, such research may have not only low validity but also limited relevance.

Consortial benchmarking can improve both rigor and relevance in management research. We propose that it advances “traditional” multi-case research by adding at least five important aspects which can lead to innovative findings.

CONCEPT: BEST-PRACTICE BENCHMARKING IN AN ACADEMIC-INDUSTRY CONSORTIUM

The four phases of a consortial benchmarking study: concept and illustrative example

Consortial benchmarking is multi-phase collaborative benchmarking and can be characterized as a form of collective multi-case study work. Thus, in contrast to traditional individual forms of benchmarking (e.g. Camp, 1989), several firms conduct the benchmarking exercise simultaneously, resulting in a cross-industry benchmarking study (Fahrni, Völker, Bodmer, 2002). To date, consortial benchmarking has received attention almost exclusively in German-speaking countries (Schweikert, 2000; Fahrni, Völker, Bodmer, 2002; Felde 2004; Puschmann, Alt, 2005).

Inspired by the process benchmarking work of the American Productivity & Quality Center (Schweikert 2000; Brueck, Riddle, Paralez, 2003), consortial benchmarking should be distinguished from the consortium survey (Morris, LoVerde, 1993). In a consortium survey, the objects and subjects of analysis are identical; that is, the firms belonging to the consortium analyze their own organizations and compare the results with each other. In consortial benchmarking projects, the consortium members visit third parties, i.e. best-practice firms not belonging to the research consortium.

The procedure for a consortial benchmarking study is divided into four distinct phases: the *preparation* of the project and consortium formation; a *kick-off workshop*; *benchmarking visits* to best-practice firms; and a *lessons learned meeting*.

- 1) *Preparation*. Since the research question is typically scoped within the context of existing theory (Eisenhardt, Graebner, 2007), a reference framework is generated by the researcher organizing the consortial benchmarking study. Following the postulate of applied science, the research framework reflects theoretical as well as practical

perspectives, so as to derive models and rules that help solve practical problems (Kubicek, 1975).

Additionally, the organizers identify members of the sponsoring consortium and assure their participation. Practitioners are motivated to take part in the consortium only when the research topic is of interest to them. The latter point forces academic researchers to address relevant issues right away if they want to organize such a project.

Reflecting the growing importance of including suppliers in new product development (Ragatz, Handfield, Petersen, 2002), we conducted a research project on innovative suppliers and will use this to illustrate how to apply consortial benchmarking. The consortium consisted of seven industrial firms. The selection of the consortium members followed a content-driven logic: we only contacted firms with similar profiles and anticipated interest in the project topic. To ensure common interest, in that case we did not invite service firms.

- 2) *Kick-off workshop*. The aim of the initial workshop is to incorporate consortium members' input into the research framework for analysis and to select the best-practices firms to visit.

The researchers discuss the proposed reference framework with the practitioners and, if necessary, enhance or modify it. Following the selection of an appropriate topic, this is a second "relevance check" of the framework chosen by the academic researchers. Typically, six to eight consortium firms are selected, which is a size allowing for a team approach. The research team then operationalizes the framework and translates it into a questionnaire to structure the benchmarking visits. During the kick-off workshop a collective agenda-setting process for the research project takes place which includes all members of the research team.

In our case, the consortium was formed and a two-day kick-off workshop took place attended by two academics and two delegates from each consortium firm, totaling about 20 participants. Further, this workshop introduced three keynote speakers and ended with ample time for intensive discussion of the research agenda.

The result was an amplified research framework and a detailed 13-page questionnaire. The topics were characteristics of innovative suppliers and how to identify them, as well as internal organizational issues within innovative firms. For illustration purposes, we focus only on the first part, that is, the identification and characteristics of innovative suppliers. It is the particular feature of the consortial benchmarking method that academics can propose the general theme, such as how to get innovations from suppliers, while the refinement and the relevant research sub-questions can be added by the practitioners.

Figure 1 summarizes the initial framework used as a guideline for the visits. Participants followed the idea put forward in literature (Croom, 2001; Schiele, 2006) that in order to understand the nature of suppliers which are supportive of a buyer's innovativeness, it is a) necessary to analyze operational criteria, i.e. the characteristics of the supplier and b) the characteristics of the buyer-supplier relationship.

The consortium also agreed on the firms to visit by voting on a list of 42 firms for which we had prepared short "outside-in" dossiers. This method is comparable to similar selection mechanisms for the identification of best-practices cases used in literature (Petersen, Handfield, Ragatz, 2005).

3) *Benchmarking visits.* The core element of consortial benchmarking is visits to the selected best-practices firms. The number of visits is not specified in advance. Following the idea of theoretical sampling, selection and analysis of cases continues until the team achieves theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Locke, 2005). The visiting phase concludes when the team can no longer draw further new or contrasting results from the collected data. From our experience of five consortial benchmarking projects, one can achieve theoretical saturation after six to eight visits.

Each visit took one and a half days and included several presentations by the best-practices firm, visits to their facilities, topical discussion rounds and analyses of additional data. Immediately after each visit, the members of the benchmarking team met to summarize the findings and compare them against the framework and data from other benchmark firms. Since not all best-practices firms agreed to participate, the final selection of firms we visited did not fully match the original list established during the kick-off meeting.

4) *Lessons learned meeting.* After completing the visits, the consortium collates and discusses the results of the individual benchmarks and produces a final report with a conclusion on generalizable best practices.

In our case, after more than a year of study, we produced a report on lessons learned from the individual benchmarking visits. We organized a final one-day meeting to discuss the results and conclude discussions on issues that had remained open during the visits. In the end, participating firms got a comprehensive set of results, covering the detailed reports of each best-practice visit and a comprehensive summary, comparison and conclusion document, including examples of applicable tools collected during the visits. From the academic perspective it was already possible to publish the results to one of our research questions in a top-20 ISI-listed journal (Sampleman, 2010).

Insert figure 1 about here

Results of the illustrative case: the commonly overlooked importance of being a preferred customer

To conclude, we would like to illustrate a particular aspect of the process of the consortial benchmarking project which we call a “meta-discourse”- the often fruitful discussions between academics and practitioners in the consortium and the best-practices firms. Such a meta-discourse is typical for a consortial benchmarking project, but can only happen if practitioners are engaged as genuine co-researchers.

The six firm visits yielded a series of insights. Both academics and practitioners agreed that the most interesting was the relevance of being a “preferred customer”. Literature (Croom, 2001; Schiele, 2006) argued that in order for a supplier to contribute to its customers’ innovation process, the supplier needed to be technically competent, offer high quality products and have a record of innovativeness (the operational criteria). At the same time, trust and cultural fit characterizes the relationship between buyer and seller (relational criteria).

However, discussions during the visits indicated that operational and relational criteria alone could not fully account for this phenomenon. Often discussants wondered why technically good suppliers who never showed any negative behavior and were otherwise considered to be trustworthy did not perform as expected in collaborative research projects or did not even agree to participate in such ventures.

During the third visit, in a typical setting for initiating a meta-discourse with the academic and non-academic consortial members and members of the best-practices firm, the group was again discussing the issue of innovative suppliers. The purchasing and research and development directors of the best-practices firm were describing their innovative suppliers and their characteristics. Often, however, they could not clearly specify what distinguished those firms except in terms such as “they prefer to work with us rather than with other buyers” or “they seem to like us”. At this point in the discussion, someone suggested that the best-practices firm at hand seemed to be a “preferred customer” of these innovative suppliers.

This was a new idea for the members of the consortium which was, when checked in the literature, not yet accounted for in theories of buyer-seller relationships. While salespersons dedicate considerable time to becoming a “preferred supplier” of their important customers and buyers spend considerable time establishing lists of such preferred suppliers, rarely has the other way round been discussed. Becoming an attractive buyer is a new way of looking at buyer-supplier relations, highly relevant in the attempt to understand how to get innovation from suppliers. Suppliers have to choose how to allocate their scarce resources on customers’ projects. Risky endeavors can only be initiated with selected customers - the preferred customers of that supplier. Thus, there seems to be a causal relationship between awarding preferred-customer status to a buyer and the willingness of the supplier to collaborate in innovative processes.

Once the notion of being a preferred customer emerged during the visit, it was intensively discussed in the consortium, and many consortium members brought up examples from their own experience with their core suppliers, thus supporting this particular finding. Indeed, it may be worth amending the initial framework of an operative and a relational dimension to include a strategic dimension. According to the preferred-customer phenomenon, the innovative contribution of suppliers does not directly depend on operational and relational characteristics alone, but is mediated by a strategic dimension, operationalized by the preferred customer construct.

The relevance of this finding became apparent during the remaining visits to firms. After becoming aware of the preferred customer concept, we actively asked firms to reflect on the idea of being a preferred customer of their important suppliers. The firms supported the finding and added further aspects. With one of the best-practice firms the objective was to purchase between 10% and 30% of turnover from a core supplier. This ensured treatment as a preferred customer from this supplier’s point of view, without creating too much dependency.

From a methodological point of view, we concluded that the discovery of the preferred customer concept owes much to consortial benchmarking. The idea of purposefully trying to become a preferred customer of suppliers is the opposite of the classic assumption that sellers must take all the responsibility for becoming well-positioned with buyers. This idea identifies a significant hole, a white spot that has received only limited attention in the literature (Christiansen, Maltz, 2002; Ellegaard, Johansen, Drejer, 2003; Essig, Amann, 2009).

The scarcity of research on the issue may also be due to the conceptual difficulties of capturing this strategic phenomenon. From a market-based view, suppliers generally play a limited role because their unlimited availability is assumed (Ramsay, 2001). Researchers rooted

in the classic, resource-based view would also have difficulties with the preferred customer concept, since their theory focuses on the internal setting of a firm and has next to nothing to say about inter-firm relationships such as the supply environment (Foss, 1999; Mathews, 2002). Here again the consortial benchmarking method has its virtues: due to the multitude of researchers with different backgrounds, the method reduces the danger of analyzing a phenomenon through a single conceptual lens. It would have been more difficult for any single researcher deeply embedded in a particular traditional theory to come up with the preferred customer concept. The meta-discourse during the consortial benchmarking project, however, was open to such unusual ideas. Unlike single, theory-focused confirmatory research, consortial benchmarking is open to “primitive principles” acquired “by renewed contact with the earth of common sense” (Schwab, 1960, p. 12).

Having illustrated the application of the consortial benchmarking method of collaborative research, the next section will compare it to “traditional” methods and check in how far the method has elements of in-built rigor.

COMPARING CONSORTIAL BENCHMARKING WITH MULTI-CASE RESEARCH AS WELL AS ANALYZING CONSORTIAL BENCHMARKING’S CONTRIBUTION TO RIGOROUS AND RELEVANT RESEARCH

Comparison with multi-case research

Consortial benchmarking can be seen as an innovative multi-case study approach in management research which extends “traditional” multi-case study concepts by adding different facets. We use the term “traditional” to distinguish multi-case approaches discussed in research textbooks (e.g. Yin, 2003) from consortial benchmarking.

Consortial benchmarking simultaneously includes at least five additional aspects not necessarily accounted for or neglected in multi-case research. It (1) includes the practitioner as co-researcher; (2) is team-based; (3) uses different sources of evidence; (4) focuses on best practices and (5) stimulates meta-discourses which are likely to produce knowledge relevant for both academics and practitioners

(1) *Practitioner as co-researcher.* While “traditional” multi-case research primarily refers to practitioners as passive informants, consortial benchmarking includes them throughout the research process; that is, they are involved in framing/discussing the research questions, collecting data, and discussing the findings. Thus, consortial benchmarking facilitates a participative form of research which Van den Ven & Johnson (2006) call “engaged scholarship”. “Instead of viewing organizations and clients as data collection sites and funding sources, an engaged scholar views them as a learning workplace (idea factory) where practitioners and scholars co-produce knowledge on important questions and issues by testing alternative ideas and different views of a common problem” (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 7). Detecting the phenomenon of being a preferred customer illustrates how relevant knowledge is coproduced between academics and practitioners.

(2) *Team-based.* Bringing together different perspectives, experiences and competencies broadens the analytic capability of the research team. Thus, the research process is likely to be more rigorous (Vermeulen, 2007).

(3) *Different sources of evidence.* Since consortial benchmarking is a collaborative venture, triangulation (e.g. Patton, 2002) can be viewed as a constitutive feature of this approach. Thus, consortial benchmarking includes by its very nature analyst triangulation and, because the research team is heterogeneous, perspective triangulation. Furthermore, in

addition to discussions and presentations, the research team observes processes within the firm or collects archival data before and while visiting, which allows for method and data triangulation.

- (4) *Focus on best practices.* One problem of case study research is the difficulty researchers have in assessing the quality of their cases. This can result in what has been termed “industry tourism”, i. e. the researcher ending up analyzing a perfectly normal situation whose description does not contribute with any new findings. In consortial benchmarking industry tourism is difficult to occur, because the firm delegates in the consortium can readily identify if an observed phenomenon is industry standard or an innovative best-practice.
- (5) *Meta-discourse.* Including practitioners throughout the research process allows stimulating dialectic discussions between academics and practitioners: the meta-discourses. They are institutionalized in consortial benchmarking, among others because the consortium meets directly after each visit and jointly compiles the findings. Such meta-discourses contribute to reconciling practical and academic research requirements in management and facilitating the production of knowledge relevant for both academics and practitioners. Furthermore, they help to resolve the traditional problem in management research of theory exclusively talking to theory (Siggelkow, 2007) (see figure 4).

Insert figure 2 about here

Even though some aspects of rigor and relevance in consortial benchmarking have already become apparent, we provide here a comprehensive discussion of the rigor and relevance criteria brought up in section 2 to further illustrate the potential of this collaborative research approach.

Consortial benchmarking's contributions to rigorous research

Consortial benchmarking encompasses a wealth of tactics to improve construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability of multi-case study research (Yin, 2003).

- (1) *Construct validity.* By using multiple sources of evidence, consortial benchmarking enhances construct validity. In our benchmarking study, before each visit we produced an outside-in report based on secondary data. Then, we added the firm presentations and other documents the best-practices firm provided. Finally, directly after each visit the consortium met and summarized the findings in a report all researchers agreed on. In particular, the collective lessons-learned sessions were very helpful because they shielded the project from researcher's biases which can easily emerge when researchers do not have the chance to discuss their findings. In our illustrative example, the entire group agreed that something like preferred-customer status was the key to understanding the phenomenon of suppliers supporting their customers in innovation processes.
- (2) *Internal validity.* Comparing different practices in the visited firms as well as addressing potential rival explanations in dialectic discussion processes between academics and practitioners reduces spurious effects, and thus improves the internal logic and consistency of the research (Punch, 2005).
- (3) *External validity.* Using comparison/replication logic in consortial benchmarking contributes to the development of robust constructs/theories that have a considerable

chance of being generalized. Since the participating researchers all have a somewhat different background, there is an inherent impetus to produce generalizable results. In fact, the preferred customer construct has already been applied in other firms, suggesting that a certain level of generalizability was assured.

- (4) *Reliability*. Including academic researchers in the consortium means that they track findings and produce comprehensive documentation which enables replication. This is one reason the purchaser's association BME insisted on an academic presence during such benchmarking exercises. The experience with "practitioner only" benchmarking tours was that often there was no one who would produce knowledge output accessible to third parties, thus effectively preventing replication – and preventing knowledge proliferation.

Consortial benchmarking's contribution to research relevant for both practitioners and academics

Based on Shrivastava (1987) and Vermeulen (2007), we suggested four criteria to assess the relevance of a research project and its findings: innovativeness, concrete consequences, variables under managers' control and identification of trade-offs.

- (1) *Innovativeness*. The interpretation of the data collected by researchers with different backgrounds increases the chance for innovative findings. The focus on best-practice cases further increases the likelihood to identify novelties. The discovery of the preferred customer perspective, for instance, effectively reverses the traditional perspective on buyer-supplier relations, which is arguably an innovative view.
- (2) *Concrete consequences*. Delegates have to justify their participation in the project within their own firm, and thus are more interested in identifying knowledge which they can directly employ. Therefore, one of the benefits of consortial benchmarking is that it creates a set of change agents in the firms which participate in the consortium (Schweikert, 2000). Our findings ask managers to carefully analyse their strategic suppliers, identify their status with them and take consequent actions, up to the replacement of suppliers if there is no chance of becoming a preferred customer.
- (3) *Variables under managers' control*. The main challenge arising from the idea of becoming a preferred customer of strategic suppliers is how to operationalize this finding. Further research is needed in this respect. However, the case described in this article already provides a first option: one of the firms visited showed how a dependency situation can be overcome by replacing first-tier with second-tier suppliers.
- (4) *Identification of trade-offs*. This feature is not inherent to the consortial benchmarking method and requires a conscious effort. In our illustrative case, however, one very important potential trade-off became apparent: sometimes it may be advisable for the buyer *not* to try to partner with the world-market leader if there is no realistic chance to become one of its preferred customers. The common assumption that the best supplier is the best for every firm may have to be challenged.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS OF CONSORTIAL BENCHMARKING

This paper offers the first comprehensive introduction to the collaborative research approach of consortial benchmarking in an English language journal. Moreover, we demonstrate the method's suitability to promote scholar-practitioner collaboration.

Consortial benchmarking adds to management research in four different domains: First, consortial benchmarking emphasizes that relevant research is a collective achievement instead of

a solitary exercise of a single researcher (van de Ven, 2007). By including practitioners as co-researcher consortial benchmarking creates a space for joint academic-practitioner knowledge creation, thus contributing to solve the knowledge production problem in management research. Furthermore, since academics and practitioners physically come together to discuss emerging findings and their implications consortial benchmarking also creates a space for knowledge translation, hence addressing the knowledge transfer problem in management research (van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

Second, consortial benchmarking goes beyond the “big picture research” of solely identifying and describing a best practice. It utilizes different tactics to improve the validity and reliability of the research process and findings, thus contributing to rigorous management research. Using multiple sources of evidence, consortial benchmarking allows analysis of managerial phenomena from different theoretical and empirical perspectives and development of an operational set of measures (Yin, 2003). Using replication logic, cross-case analysis and addressing anomalies in the data, consortial benchmarking also enhances the internal validity of the emerged theory. Replications and comparisons allow us to build theories that have the potential for further generalization. Hence, the theory that emerges is more robust and not limited to the firms participating in the consortial benchmarking process, but can be interesting for a multitude of companies.

Third, we demonstrate that consortial benchmarking contains at least five aspects not or not fully accounted for in “traditional” multi-case research. (a) While “traditional” multi-case research typically refers to practitioners as passive informants in terms of interview partners or subjects under observation, consortial benchmarking includes them as co-researchers. (b) Consortial benchmarking is a team-based research approach. While some research projects use academic teams to collect (Bourgeois & Eisenhardt, 1988) and/or analyze case data (Zott & Huy, 2007), consortial benchmarking builds a collaborative team of academics, practitioners and sometimes consultants that typically stay together during the span of the research project. (c) Even though several authors suggest using triangulation in data collection and data analyses, we are not aware of any approach that combines data triangulation, analyst triangulation, perspective triangulation and methodological triangulation. If at all, multi-case studies refer to only one or two different sources of evidence (Reay, Golden-Biddle & Germann, 2006; Gersick, 1988). However, consortial benchmarking by its very nature allows combining all four different types of triangulation in one research project. (d) Consortial benchmarking aims at understanding “why” companies are best in class and “how” they work differently from the firms of the consortium, thus sampling naturally refers to best practices. Finally, (e) since academics and practitioners are working together closely and intensively throughout the research project, meta-discourses are stimulated between the groups. “Traditional” multi-case research relies either on teams exclusively composed of academics or includes only practitioners for discussing the consequences of the research (Tushman, O’ Reilly, Fenollosa, Kleinbaum & McGrath, 2007).

Fourth, consortial benchmarking might also provide an avenue to moderate skeptic views on collaborative research, such as Kieser and Leiner’s (2009) system theory perspective of academics and practice as two separated self-referential social systems that cannot work together, but only irritate each other. “Irritating” each other may, however, be a source of progress in collaborative research, provided it is eventually channeled into a common output, which is why the concluding lessons learned workshop is an important element of a consortial benchmarking project.

Limitations

We would like to note some important limitations of conducting a consortial benchmarking project.

First, consortial benchmarking is a complex, time-consuming and expensive research approach which includes meetings, visits, rounds of data analysis, and discussions tying up academics' and practitioners' resources for quite a long period. Hence, consortial benchmarking consumes far more resources than "traditional" multi-case research, already regarded as requiring "extensive resources and time beyond the means of a single student or independent research investigator" (Yin, 2003, p. 47). Thus, consortial benchmarking is only suited for highly-prioritized research projects which both academics and practitioners alike find beneficial. Consortial benchmarking cannot be and should not be a substitute for other forms of research in management such as basic research or literature-based theorizing, but complements research methods and approaches available in management.

Second, sometimes a practical problem can occur: In case the best-practices firms are in competition with any of the firms joining the research consortium, they may not want to be visited.

Third, given the staggering volume of rich data from multiple evidence sources, the research team may be tempted "to build theory which tries to capture everything. The result can be a theory which is rich in detail, but lacks the simplicity of overall perspective" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 547). Complex theories frequently fail to translate the comprehensive findings into a manageable number of hypotheses that can be tested in a quantitative research setting.

Fourth, since consortial benchmarking is a team-based research approach, team phenomena can occur, such as free-rider behavior in the sense that not all members of the consortium contribute to the process of knowledge creation. On the other hand, being a consortium each member is subject to peer pressure to some extent. On the other hand, too much group cohesion (Evans & Jarvis, 1980) or groupthink (Janis, 1982) can influence the research process and bias findings. Groupthink can result in an over-simplified framing of problems or phenomena, and/or a far-too-quick formation of group opinions (Esser, 1998).

Fifth, conducting a consortial benchmarking project may require a special type of researcher, has recently been termed a "bi-competent facilitator" (Kieser & Leiner, 2009, p. 528), that is, one person who is familiar with both the academic and practicing worlds.

Future management research on consortial benchmarking should take these limitations into consideration and work on methods and instruments to reduce potential issues of this research approach. However, even more important – since the consortial benchmarking method is still in its infancy – we would like to encourage researchers to try out this approach next time they plan collaborative research. This will provide the chance to learn more about the topic at hand, the potential uses of consortial benchmarking and contribute to the refinement of this research approach. Eventually, this method may contribute to ensuring that management science preserves its character as an applied science.

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FIGURES

Figure 1:

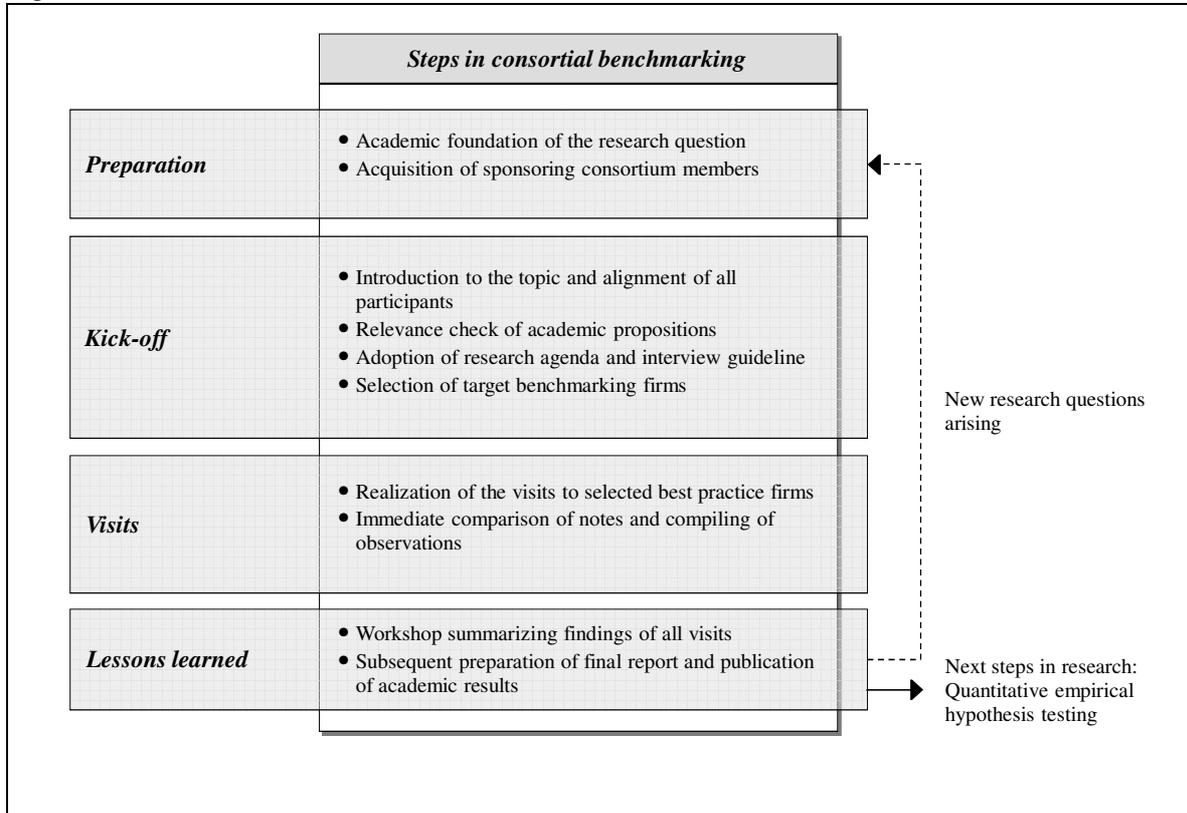


Fig. 1: Four steps of a consortial benchmarking project. Source: authors' elaboration

Figure 2:

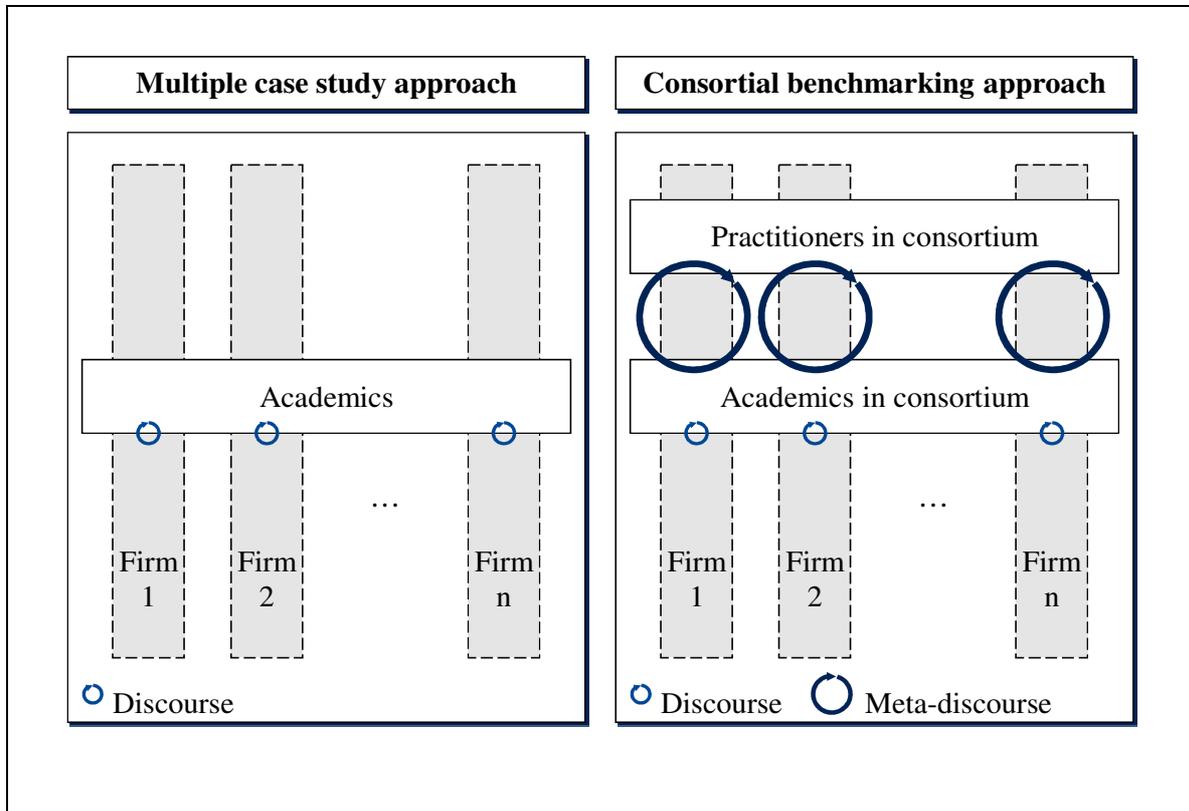


Fig. 2: Comparison of traditional multi-case study research and consortial benchmarking. Source: authors' elaboration