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Abstract
Employee participation is one of the important fields in industrial relations. Research on employee participation in Malaysia is usually conducted through large-scale surveys and quasi-experiments and only focuses on the public sector. Therefore, this research instead uses a qualitative case study approach in investigating employee participation practices in private sector companies in Malaysia. This paper discusses aspects of the methodology of case study research and qualitative data collection and the theory and arguments affecting the choice of research and data gathering strategy in this research. Concludes that carrying out qualitative case study research, in the author's experience, is first and foremost a matter of learning by doing.

Introduction

Employee participation in Malaysia is conducted under the umbrella of the Code for Industrial Harmony of 1975. Research into employee participation in Malaysia is scarce and this study was designed to fill a gap in the existing literature. Previous studies in Malaysia in the area of employee participation have relied on large-scale questionnaire surveys, and these may not capture an accurate and complete picture of all the issues involved (Lunjew 1994; Zin 1998; Naceur and Varatharajan 2000). These studies have not fully discussed the various forms of union and non-union employee participation implemented in the Malaysian private sector. In addition, these studies do not elucidate the reasons why different companies developed certain forms of employee participation. This is the main motivation driving me to employ a qualitative case study approach in
this project. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to discuss aspects of case study research, qualitative data collection and the theory and arguments affecting the choice of research and data gathering strategy in this research.

**The methodological issues**

Mertens (1998:2) defines research as 'a process of systematic inquiry that is designed to collect, analyse, interpret and use data to understand, describe, predict, or control, an educational or psychological phenomenon or to empower individuals in such contexts'. Rose (2002), like Mertens, also describes research as a systematic and organized effort to investigate a specific problem that needs a solution. The choice of the most appropriate methods or techniques to use for a particular research strategy depends on several factors. These factors include internal validity, population validity and reliability. The decision over which research design to use involves the various strengths and weaknesses inherent in the use of different approaches as well as the epistemological approach of the research.

In this case, qualitative research within an epistemological framework of constructivism was used. The case study method was chosen for this research in order to elicit in-depth information as well as triangulation of the data collected. Triangulation was achieved by examining the issue of employee participation from the perspectives of employer, employee and union. Further examination from the perspective of the government was also undertaken.

Gill and Johnson (as cited in Rose 2002) explain that the researcher’s evaluation of the
appropriate method and its consequences must take into account the nature and organisational context of the substantive problem to be investigated as well as the available resources and potential ethical dilemmas. In the end, it is the appropriateness of the method of investigation that is the main concern in a particular research problem. For this research problem, qualitative research in the form of a case study was deemed the most appropriate.

This paper begins with an outline of the research design used to conduct this study of employee participation in four cases in Malaysia. The second section discusses the application of qualitative research in the present study, the rationale for selecting a qualitative case study design and the criticism on the qualitative case study method. In the third section, the methods of data collection procedure are outlined.

The use of the qualitative case study approach in the present project

Markey, Gollan, Hodgkinson, Chouragui and Veersma (2001) and Strauss (1998) argue that most research on employee participation are based on survey data, and that there are few case studies on the subject. In relation to these issues, Gollan and Markey (2001:339) conclude:

‘National surveys offer only part of the story, and are strongest in structural areas that result from state or multi state (European Union) legislation, such as works councils and European Works Councils...They also provide evidence on broad variations of participative practice, but they cannot provide qualitative or detailed data on practices at the level of the firm... Consequently, we still require firm-based case studies, especially since, as Poole, Lansbury and Wailes (2001) note, changing organisational structures and processes at this level have been particularly important in explaining recent patterns and diversity in the area of employee participation’.
Markey et al. (2001) anticipate that future research on employee participation should focus on small case studies because it is more observational and qualitative in character and, consequently, will expand the data gathered from quantitative survey research. Indeed, Strauss (1998) stresses that case studies may be helpful in developing research questions and signifying hypotheses. In line with their arguments, Kelly (1999:119) also suggests that ‘the case study method is important to the social sciences because in order to understand the dynamics and complexity of human behaviour, especially in these interesting times, laboratory experiments are improbable, and surveys can allied significant elements’.

LeRoy (2000:294) also discusses the limitations of mail surveys when he conducted research on employee participation in the United States. He completely agrees with Kaufman’s (1999) statement that mail surveys may miss significant qualitative evidence on the structure and operations of employee participation programs. Therefore, using a qualitative approach, such as in-person interviews with key informants, allows the examination of a wider range of issues related to employee participation practices at the company case studies level.

More recently, Kaufman (2003:176) demonstrated that, in large, literature on employee participation research mainly focuses on workplace surveys, independent variable regression analysis and offers less emphasis on case studies about employee participation practices in the non-union private sector and ‘relatively little in terms of actual practice and implementation in real-life companies’.
Zin (1998) also discussed the weaknesses of the survey approach when conducting employee participation research in Malaysia. According to him, the survey method limits face-to-face contact with respondents and the real world. This can lead to errors and inappropriate interpretation of the results. Zin suggests that one way to overcome this problem is to employ an ethnographic or qualitative case study approach to study employee participation in the workplace, particularly in the Malaysian context. From an examination of the relevant literature, it would appear that this would be the first study utilising qualitative case study design to study employee participation in four private companies in Malaysia.

According to Bryman (1989), Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2003), case studies can either be qualitative or quantitative or both at the same time. The strategy adopted in this study can be characterized as a qualitative case study approach. This study’s research design focuses on describing and explaining the nature and process of employee participation in four private companies in Malaysia. Additionally, the rationale for undertaking this project, and a substantial review and critique of literature, provides support for a better understanding of employee participation. The case study approach is appropriate for describing, analysing and understanding formal and informal processes in organizations (Yin 2003; Yusof 2003; Hartley 2004). The study is also based on Eisenhardt’s (1989) argument that case study research is appropriate for theory building from empirical investigation. For more information refer to Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Process of Building theory from the case study research
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting Started</td>
<td>Definition of research question (Possibly) some a priori constructs</td>
<td>Focuses efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Provides better grounding of construct measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting Cases</td>
<td>Neither theory nor hypotheses Specified population Theoretical, not random</td>
<td>Retains theoretical flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Constraints extraneous variations and sharpens external validity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focuses efforts on theoretically useful cases- i.e., those that replicate or extend theory by filling conceptual categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crafting instruments and</td>
<td>Multiple data collection methods Qualitative and quantitative data</td>
<td>Strengthen grounding by triangulation of evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protocols</td>
<td>combined Multiple investigators</td>
<td>Synergistic view of evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fosters divergent perspectives and strengthens grounding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entering the field</td>
<td>Overlap data collection and analysis including field notes Flexibility and opportunities in data collection methods</td>
<td>Speeds up analyses and reveals helpful adjustment of data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Allows investigators to take advantage of emergent themes and unique case features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysing Data</td>
<td>Within- case analysis Cross-case pattern searching using divergent</td>
<td>Gains familiarity with data and preliminary theory generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>techniques</td>
<td>Forces investigators to look beyond initial impressions and see evidence through multiple lenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaping hypotheses</td>
<td>Iterative tabulations of evidence for each construct Replication, not</td>
<td>Sharpens construct definition, validity and measurability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sampling, logic across cases Search evidence for ‘why’ behind relationship</td>
<td>Confirms, extends and sharpen theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Build internal validity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enfolding literature</td>
<td>Comparison with conflicting literature Comparisons with similar literature</td>
<td>Builds internal validity, raises theoretical level, and sharpens construct definitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sharpens generalisability, improves construct definition, and raises theoretical level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reaching closure | Theoretical saturation when possible | Ends process when marginal improvement becomes small

Source: Adapted from Eisenhardt (1989: 533).

According to Yin (2003:5), ‘A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and multiple sources of evidence are used’.

Yin also states that case study design must have five components: the research question(s); or propositions; its unit(s) of analysis; a determination of how the data are linked to the research questions/propositions and criteria to interpret the findings. This study’s research design focused on description, exploration and explanation and, thus, emphasis was placed on the purpose and aims of the study, and not on formulating propositions.

Kelly (1999:119) supports the use of case study as a traditionally important approach in doing research in the field of industrial relations. She defines ‘case study as a thorough and planned investigation of a real world, phenomenon which takes account of the contextual influences, and which draws on theoretical foundations in order to investigate systematically’. She also discusses the general characteristics of case studies, particularly in the field of industrial relations. They are as follows:

a. Case studies focus on defined objects of analysis, such as workplace in a particular industry or interaction within a particular environment, such as
decision-making or bargaining. A case study may focus on almost anything as long as there is a ‘real world’ object of analysis, subject to ‘real world’ opportunities and constraints. In industrial relations there is usually an organisational aspect to case studies - work groups, workplaces, firms;

b. Case studies examine all aspects of the objects of analysis that are relevant to the study, taking full account of the broader issues;

c. They utilise a variety of research tactics or methods in order to gain a thorough understanding of the objects of analysis;

d. They will begin with theoretical foundations which frame the process of inquiry, and will often conclude with insights into theory. (p. 120)

Research process and data collection procedures in four private companies in Malaysia

Another reason small case studies were chosen is because of the limitation on accessibility of data and concerns about confidentiality in most private companies in Malaysia. In October 2002, I returned to Malaysia to make initial contact with manufacturing and service industries to conduct research on employee participation. Application letters were sent to more than two hundred private companies in Malaysia and the response rate was very low. Basically, four companies responded positively, eight declined to participate and the remainder did not reply.

One noteworthy cultural issue, especially for other researchers wishing to study Malaysian companies, is that some companies prefer to produce an approval letter in Malay language rather than in English. This is due to national language policy and its
effect on the practices of many private and government organisations.

While in Malaysia, I also followed up on the letters and made personal contact with those companies that rejected the application letters, but the outcome was not very promising. As a result, only four companies were interested in participating in this research project. Two of the companies were from the manufacturing sector and the other two from the service industry (Figure 1.1). Both sectors have unionised and non-unionised firms. The case study included one unionised and one non unionised firm in each of the two sectors. Here I want to stress that my choice of using four cases as a research strategy, as well as using qualitative research for data collection and analysis, was, certainly at the start of the research, very much influenced by our research tradition and my unfamiliarity with quantitative research methods.
CASE STUDY 1: STEELCO (KLANG, SELANGOR)

CASE STUDY 3: POSCO (KUALA LUMPUR, FEDERAL TERRITORY)

CASE STUDY 2: MEDICARECO (KUALA LUMPUR, FEDERAL TERRITORY)

CASE STUDY 4: AUTOCO KOTA KINABALU, SABAH CASE STUDY 2: MEDICARECO, KOTA KINABALU (Regional Office of Medico and one of their workplaces)

Notes:

Case Study 1: SteelCo (Unionised)

Case Study 2: MedicareCo (Non-Unionised)

Case Study 3: PosCo (Unionised)

Case Study 4: AutoCo (Non-Unionised)

Triangulation techniques using various instruments (interviews, documents, direct
observation) were utilised to authenticate the gathered data. As such, data from more than one instrument are utilised in answering each research question and can also be used to crosscheck the information. Even though some data may overlap, triangulation can also capture a more complete holistic and contextual portrayal of the events or data under study. Patton argues that consistency in overall patterns of data from different sources contributes significantly to the overall credibility of findings.

**Interviews**

The groups from whom data was collected are as follows: management, non-managerial employees (blue and white collar employees), union representatives, an employer representative, national union officers and a government representative. These groups are directly involved in developing, implementing and also practicing direct and indirect employee participation schemes in the workplace and at national level.

The most important data collection method was the individual interview. In-depth interviewing is a data collection method relied on quite extensively by qualitative researchers. Interviews are a useful way of acquiring large amounts of data. When there is more than one respondent, the interview process allows for a wide variety of information, on a potentially large number of topics, and triangulation of the data. It also allows for immediate follow-up questions. The researcher used separate interview schedules for individual research participants.

Issues relating to the use of face to face interviews include the possibility that the interviewee might not properly understand the interviewer’s question, or that the
interviewer might not always correctly comprehend the respondents' answers (Marshall and Rossman 1989). These issues were taken into consideration while conducting the interviews. First, the interview guidelines were written in English. In the four companies studied, most CEOs and managers had a good command of spoken and written English. In the event of a respondent not speaking English (particularly non-managerial employees and union delegates), the interview was conducted in Malay. Most people in Malaysia communicate in the Malay language, being the national language as well as the formal language used among Malaysians. Therefore, the interview questionnaires were translated into Malay to facilitate respondent comprehension of the questions. After the translation was completed, the draft was given to an expert who works at the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (the government agency responsible for publishing books in the Malay language). Her recommendations were incorporated into the final draft of the interview schedule for non-managerial employees and union delegates. Part of the interview design was derived from Markey, Hodgkinson, Mylett, Pomfret, Murray and Zanko in *The Illawarra Regional Workplace Industrial Relations Survey* as well as from Marchington (1980). These interview questionnaires were modified to fit into the Malaysian context as required for this research project. Therefore, the final research instruments were semi-structured and unstructured interviews.

A tape recorder was also used to record all interviews. The complexity of the topic led to a relatively long questionnaire, extending the interview, so it seemed reasonable not to further prolong interviews by writing down all the answers by hand. Using a tape recorder allowed both the researcher and the respondents to concentrate fully on the
interview and allowed the researcher to thoroughly observe respondents’ non-verbal behaviour.

An important issue in conducting face-to-face interviews in Malaysia is related to the multicultural nature of the workforce. The researcher could speak three languages, those being Tamil, English, and Malay, simplifying data collection. However, the researcher faced difficulties when translating the interview transcriptions from local languages into English. This may have affected the validity of the research, a crucial issue at the PhD level. When translating into English, the researcher must consider the possibility that the original meaning of participant’s views may be lost or distorted. The researcher’s own experiences indicate that this kind of obstacle is very rare in Western societies, particularly in English speaking countries like Australia, New Zealand, UK, and USA, but it is very crucial in Asian and African countries (Ryen 2004).

*Direct Observation*

Before starting the interviews, each company was visited in order to get a first impression as well as an initial understanding of the structure and functioning of the company. Observations continued during each visit and every interview; it is important to get details of company life, atmosphere, and behaviour of people in each company, as this builds a context for the study.
Additionally, permission was obtained from each company to attend meetings (such as management-union meetings, management-employee consultation meetings, in-plant committee meetings, quality control committee meetings, team briefings, and safety committee meetings) as well as company sports and recreation activities. Again, this was carried out to gain perspective for the context of the study.

*Document Analysis*

In the document analysis, the study benefited from the variety of documents made available by company officials. These documents were: policy handbooks, staff record books, organisational charts, company official histories, company journals (such as monthly newsletter or magazine), statistical data (on the number of employees, labour turnover), collective agreements, minutes of meetings, company annual reports, and annual financial statements. It should be noted that not all of these documents were in a compiled form; rather, the researcher had to inspect and extract the data that was relevant to the requirements of the research. Furthermore, these documents were particularly useful in providing additional information on the companies investigated (Rose 2002). The primary data collection techniques in this project can be seen in Table 1.2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Sources of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews (Structured and</td>
<td>• HR Managers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Semi-structured questions)</td>
<td>• Chief Executive Officer (CEO)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Non-managerial Employees</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Trade Union Delegates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Fulltime National Union Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Representative of Malaysian Employers Federation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Representative of Industrial Relations Department, Ministry of Human</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resources Malaysia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>• Management-union meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Management-employee consultation meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Company sports and recreation activities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Team briefings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Safety committees meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Company layout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents Analysis</td>
<td>• Policy handbooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Organisational charts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff attendance record book</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Company official histories</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Company journals (such as monthly newsletter or magazine)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The official binding of collective agreements</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Minutes of meetings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Negotiations with unions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Company annual reports</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Annual financial statements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The generalisation issues in the qualitative case study

Case studies were also criticised as a scientific method (Gummersson 1991; Kelly 1999; Jansen 2000). Case studies were criticised because of lack statistical validity and can therefore be used to generate hypotheses but not to test them, meaning that generalisation cannot be made (Flyvbjerg 2004). Gummersson (1991) argues that generalisation in case studies can be seen in a different way. For example, he agreed with Norman, a researcher who made a distinct feature of generalisation in case studies. Norman (as cited in
Gummesson 1991:76-79) explained:

‘If you have a good descriptive or analytic language by means of which you can really grasp the interaction between various parts of the system and the important characteristics of the system, the possibilities to generalise also from very few cases, or even one single case, may be reasonably good...Such generalisation may be of a particular character it might be possible to generalise a statement of the type ‘a system of type A and a system type B together comprise a mechanism which tends to function in particular way...The possibilities to generalise from one single case are founded on the comprehensiveness of the measurements which makes it possible to reach a fundamental understanding of the structure process and driving forces rather than a superficial establishment of correlation or cause–effect relationship’.

Based on above quotation, Gummesson further explains that the study involves the use of in-depth and exhaustive investigations and analyses to identify certain phenomena. In this case, the research identifies the pattern and emerging issues on employee participation in four companies in the Malaysian private sector that should also exist in other companies. The science is a journey and the existing theory is not its destinations but they have to expand and improve it (Gummesson 1991:79; Lukka 2005).

Denzin (1978) and Yin (2003) had offered some useful arguments to emphasise that case study can be generalised through analytical generalisation, not from sampling logic used to generalise whole populations. Even Hartley (Hartley 1994; 2004), Robson (2002) and Flyvbjerg (2004) supported the above arguments that the data received from particular cases can provide theoretical insights, which is a sufficient level of generality or universality. In fact, one of the participants from Steelco confirmed the arguments above where he said in his offer letter:

‘In order to make this research a success, your preliminary objective with us must be made beneficial for both parties....In addition to this, a general scenario of other companies management practices should share with us for our company continuos improvement purpose’ (Letter from Steelco 2003).
The facts about the relevant comparison can be based on present understanding, on existing literature, or on the decision of experiential specialists based on argumentative dialogues (Smaling 2003). Smaling further clarifies that an analogical argument is merely credible when there are strong arguments that, when a specific researched case has characteristic which are applicable for the research conclusions, another case that has not been researched also has these relevant distinctiveness. They perhaps can be an accepted or well-founded theory as a support, or a separate empirical study of the relevant similarities among two or more cases.

In addition, the organizations examined in the case study have been drawn from a wide range of sectors – steel manufacturing, auto industry, medical service provider, and postal service. Should a consistent ‘story’ emerge across a disparate collection of organizations, one can reasonably draw some firm conclusions, although treated with care, on the potential of transferability (Dietz 2002).

**Key findings of the present project**

While data analysis is still continuing, already certain issues have become apparent. There appears to be no genuine participation by employees in company studies. In the Malaysian context, three contributing factors relating to this issue are multiculturalism, hierarchy and bureaucracy. Other important factors are the role of the state in enforcing the Code of Conduct for Industrial Harmony 1975, and the role of the unions in pushing for employee participation in the workplace (Idrus 2001).

There are various forms of employee participation emerging in Malaysian private
companies. These include both union and non-union forms of employee participation. Union power in the workplace decision-making process is very weak. Most of the time, management imposes any employee participation scheme it desires without consultation with unions and employees. The state continues to use a repressive style to control unions in Malaysia. This will influence genuine participation between management and union/employees at the level of the firm. Unions are still struggling to gain power in the workplace (Ariffin 1997). If they can push the agenda for employee participation, this will increase their power. (2001)

In conclusion

In this paper, the researcher described the research design that was utilised to identify the extent and process of employee participation within four private companies in Malaysia. The researcher also attempted to outline some of the issues that qualitative case study research, both in academia and practice, is struggling with and will probably continue to struggle with in years to come.

Based on the experiences gained doing research in Malaysia, the researcher concludes that there is a big gap between the theory and practice of research methodology. In part, this is due to Malaysia being a developing country whereas most previous research has been designed for, and carried out in, developed countries. While qualitative methods are, in theory, widely applicable, in practice there are many issues impeding a thorough qualitative study. Issues like cultural sensitivity have an impact on research design. For
instance, the majority of the research participants were reluctant to sign any consent forms, a fact that goes against the rules specified by the Human Research Ethics Committees in University of Wollongong. However, the research participants voluntarily participated without signing a consent form.

In Malaysia, there are other factors affecting the overall design of qualitative case study research. The first is the multicultural nature of the Malaysian workforce, a factor with particular impact on research methodology in the research design. There is a cultural barrier between Malaysian and western society. As a result, topics covered in the literature will not always be applicable to the situation in Malaysia. In Malaysia, PhD students from overseas carrying out research in private organisations need to be well versed in the cultural aspects of the country. For example, the researcher encountered problems when first asking for permission to conduct the research in these private organisations. PhD students who are going to do research in Asian countries should have an ability to speak in several languages and must be aware of culturally sensitive issues.

The issues discussed above have a direct impact on the research method and design used in this project. Malaysia is one of the fastest developing countries in the Asia Pacific region, and the research issues discussed above have rarely been discussed in the literature of qualitative case study research. Most research in this area has focussed on the research design and relationship between researcher and participants, with little attention being paid to the overall contextual setting of the project. There is little information on how to address or solve the above mentioned problems, problems facing many
researchers in developing countries. Therefore, it is important that this type of research be carried out to add to the body of knowledge available for future scholars.

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