

Exemplars

Research Report

Every effort has been made to trace and contact the authors of these works, but this has not been possible in every case. If notified, we will undertake to rectify any errors or omissions at the earliest opportunity.

These exemplars have been chosen as they are all examples of good practice. We have sought to anonymise them by removing references to the author, the company the project is on and any references they have used. Topic 8 is the most popular topic chosen by students, therefore we have reflected in the selection of Research and Analysis projects below. All references to exemplars refer to the same individual project as indexed below.

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When “*reference*” is used this means we have removed mentions to references that will identify the student’s work. When “...” is used this means we have not included parts of the RAP that may identify the student.

Research Report Exemplars

Reasons for choosing topic and organisation:

Exemplar 1:

Topic 8: An analysis and evaluation of the business and financial performance of an organisation over a three year period.

During the authors time as an ACCA student they were able to build up their knowledge and understanding of the preparation and interpretation of financial statements, management reporting and performance management. The authors chosen topic and organisation gives them the opportunity to apply their knowledge and understanding to an organisation and industry they are closely involved with. The selection of this topic also relates to their chosen career, as a commercial manager they are required to analyse information from a variety of sources and use this to make effective commercial decisions. The research report has enabled the author to further develop their graduate level skills including research, analysis and interpretation of data, using the information gathered to effectively contextualise it alongside the economic climate and overall business strategy and draw effective conclusions from this.

Exemplar 2:

Topic 19: An analysis and evaluation of the financial and operational consequences of a merger between two organisations or the acquisition of one organisation by another.

Following acquisition, the author was involved in the integration plan for aligning the financial processes and activities of Organisation Green into the acquirer's financial and business environment. As a result there can be a robust analysis undertaken on the drivers for the acquisition and additionally, given the time period that has elapsed since acquisition, detailed evaluation and research can be undertaken on the subsequent effects on financial results and operations of the acquired entity post-acquisition.

According to the Office for National Statistics, in the past 10 years (to end of December 2011), approximately £225 Billion was spent on domestic acquisitions, that is, acquisitions in the UK by other UK companies Therefore this lends itself to being a research area that is extremely relevant to the professional accountant.

In addition, this research will assist me in further refining my understanding of an acquisition process, along with the consequences of acquisitions in terms of how a business' operations and finance are

impacted. This will also be beneficial to me in future work opportunities as I will have a broader understanding of motivations for acquiring other entities, and can apply the practical and theoretical knowledge garnered from this research.

Project Objectives:

Exemplar 1:

Topic 8: An analysis and evaluation of the business and financial performance of an organisation over a three year period.

The objective of this research report is to critically assess the business and financial performance of ABC Co. over a three-year period between 2009 and 2011.

The report aims to research both the business and financial performance of ABC Co. and develop an understanding of how this affects the overall business strategy of ABC Co., and its ability to maintain its competitive position in the longer term.

A further aim of this report is to gain an understanding of what factors have most affected the financial performance of the business.

The following questions have been set so that the report meets the research aims and objectives; these are:

- What has been the financial performance of ABC Co. over the last three years, and how does this affect the future growth strategy?
 - What are the key drivers and factors that impact the business and financial performance?
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Exemplar 2:

Topic 19: An analysis and evaluation of the financial and operational consequences of a merger between two organisations or the acquisition of one organisation by another.

The motives for merger and acquisition activity are varied, but the main purpose is to create shareholders' value over and above that of the sum of two companies. One of the key objectives of this report will be to examine the drivers for Organisation Blue's acquisition of Organisation Green.

As "*reference*" states, there is overwhelming empirical evidence that from the acquirer's perspective, acquisitions are mostly at best break-even, and at worst, failures. The second objective of the report will be to determine whether the purchase resulted in improved financial performance or otherwise of the acquired entity, through detailed analysis of the financial position pre-acquisition and post-acquisition, and to analyse the reasons for any improvement or decline; along with outlining operational consequences of the acquisition.

Exemplar 3

Topic 18: A review of the marketing strategy of an organisation and its effectiveness

This RAP aims to analyze the market environment in which Red Car Company (RCC) operates and marketing strategies adopted, through a series of data analysis and evaluations to examine the effectiveness of its marketing strategies:

The research questions for this RAP are as followed:

1. What are the critical success factors of RCC?
 2. How effective is RCC's marketing mix strategy?
 3. How the marketing mix strategy should be adjusted to help RCC in sustaining the current success as well as exploring opportunities?
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Approach to Research:

Exemplar 1:

Topic 8: An analysis and evaluation of the business and financial performance of an organisation over a three year period.

This report critically reviews the financial statements of ABC Co. for the last three years using ratio analysis. The ratio analysis used in the report looked at profitability, liquidity, gearing and investment ratios.

This report at appropriate points evaluates ABC Co. financial performance in order to benchmark the data and analyse this accordingly.

The research report evaluates the financial strategy of ABC Co. using the SWOT analysis framework, in order to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to ABC Co. The report also applied Porters five forces competitive framework, there is a review of both the external and the internal threats to ABC Co.

The research report evaluates the business performance and strategy of ABC Co., with an emphasis on the business growth strategy; to do this the report reviews it's acquisitions, the economic environment, and impact of digital and social media on the communication services industry.

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Having established the aims to research and analyse the drivers for acquisition and the impact of the acquisition, the author has formed a research approach to address these objectives. This research approach is characterised by reviewing relevant literature on accounting and business concepts, and determining which are applicable to answering the research questions. In the case of the motivations for acquisition, this will be a mix of qualitative and quantitative secondary data from annual reports, due diligence reports, management accounts and academic research, which will be subsequently analysed and applied to a renowned and popular business model. To address the objective of assessing the financial performance following acquisition, this will be done by quantitative research in the form of an accounting study analysing financial performance and financial position, including working capital. The financial performance information will cover the three financial years prior to acquisition, plus the three financial years following acquisition, which given the time frame, will allow examination of trends.

The qualitative and quantitative data will be analysed and presented in the report when it contributes to answering the research questions.

Exemplar 3:

Topic 18: A review of the marketing strategy of an organisation and its effectiveness

This research and analysis report will firstly start with a brief introduction of background of RCC. Then secondary and primary data will be gathered through various kinds of research methods. Literature review will also provide some useful business models and methods to be used to determine and analyze RCC marketing strategies.

Lastly, RCC's marketing strategies will be analyzed and evaluated by using the secondary and primary data gathered to answer the research questions to draw a conclusion based on the analysis and make recommendations on the organization.

Sources of Information:

Exemplar 2:

Topic 19: An analysis and evaluation of the financial and operational consequences of a merger between two organisations or the acquisition of one organisation by another.

Primary data is original data collected for a specific research goal, whilst secondary data is data originally collected for a different purpose and reused for another research question. The information

sources utilised in the research and analysis presented will be of a secondary nature, as there is no requirement to answer the research questions with any primary information, as the secondary sources can provide the data required.

The main sources of secondary data will be the Annual Reports of Company Green and a competitor; internal budgets; a due diligence report prepared by an external consultant; academic research papers, along with data from relevant online sources. The secondary data such as financial statements are verifiable and reliable given they have been audited, so this will diminish any risk in presenting incorrect conclusions from unreliable data, however one limitation is that the comparison to a competitor may be restricted due to the differences in accounting policies applied by the different organisations.

Academic research papers have been obtained through an academic library. By reading widely across mergers and acquisition research, this will enable the author to extract salient points to present in the report and also provide the chance to compare the findings of researchers in the specific topic areas, against that of this research.

As “*reference’s*” state, “the Internet is a vast but extremely disorganised source of information. To use it effectively, we must be able to formulate a search strategy, and potential secondary data must be screened for practicality and feasibility’. Another consideration is the reliability of the internet sources. The usage of internet sources has been limited to websites on which reliance can be placed, due to the fact they are trusted and verifiable sources, for example governmental websites, or they are official websites of the companies’ themselves. This approach mitigates any risk of using capricious data or information.

Exemplar 3

Topic 18: A review of the marketing strategy of an organisation and its effectiveness

Sources of Information

Information can be sourced in the RAP through either primary or secondary sources.

Secondary Data

Secondary data refers to data that has previously been gathered by another researcher for a different purpose rather than the current research purpose. This data can either be internal or external. Secondary data can be used as a useful starting point for research. They are usually less time consuming and inexpensive to obtain. For example, a researcher can access to the internet to obtain relevant data to satisfy certain project objectives. Secondary data can also provide guidance and help to support the primary data.

Primary Data

Primary data is generated directly by the researcher for current research project purposes. Primary data is more up-to-date and specific to research objectives, i.e. primary data can provide more reliable, relevant, current and accurate information for the project purpose. For example, a researcher can conduct a survey for gathering data which are directly related to the research purposes.

Exemplar 4

Topic 8: An analysis and evaluation of the business and financial performance of an organisation over a three year period.

Precision of the research is determined by accuracy of information; hence, data sources are crucial. Ensuring their authenticity, I collected data using secondary sources, to nurture my research. They assisted me well to comprehend the aesthetics of the industry and PharmaA.

Secondary Research

Sources employed during my research were:

- **Course Books:** I sought out to my ACCA text books (BPP and Kaplan) to revisit my technical knowledge for the analysis tools.
 - **Student Accountant:** It assisted me with technical articles and those exclusively written for guidance in the project.
 - **ACCA Official Website:** The website helped me in getting hold of RAP preparation guidelines for better understanding.
 - **Annual Reports:** The annual reports of PharmaA and PharmaB available on their respective websites were of immense assistance. Audited financials of both companies provided as the basis of my financial analysis.
 - **Electronic Media:** I nurtured my report with vast amount of data available on internet, using Google and Wikipedia as my main search engines. I looked into detailed works available online by various analysts to widen my scope of knowledge on the related topic. Moreover, I stayed in-tune to television channels like GEO, Business Plus, DAWN News and various others for updates on the latest trends in the industry.
 - **Print Media:** I skimmed through different newspapers and business magazines like Financial Times, Business Recorder and Daily Times, in order to stay current on the economic conditions prevalent in the Pakistan and those affecting the company.
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Limitations of Information Gathering:

Exemplar 3

Topic 18: A review of the marketing strategy of an organisation and its effectiveness

Secondary data maybe irrelevant in research project, i.e. it might not fit the research purpose. Sometimes accuracy of secondary data is a problem due to irrelevant data gathered and data may be out-dated. The researcher has to evaluate the quality of such data carefully.

Other than being more time consuming and expensive, collecting primary data requires higher skills and expertise of the research. For instance, the researcher needs to spend a considerable amount of time to conduct a survey. There is also a chance that the response rates will be low due to non-cooperative interviewees.

Furthermore, extensive skills are required to design the research questions. Without possessing certain skills, the researcher may find it difficult to obtain relevant, reliable and accurate information at a standard required.

Exemplar 4

Topic 8: An analysis and evaluation of the business and financial performance of an organisation over a three year period.

While gathering relevant information, I came across a few limitations:

- The interview I conducted was precise because it was a telephonic conversation.
- “...”
- The research was very time-consuming and hectic, as I had to ensure the authenticity of information.
- I came across mismatch in some information, despite both sources being valid.
- Latest financial information available to analyze was of 2011, as PhamaA’s year-end is December.

Exemplar 6

Topic 8: An analysis and evaluation of the business and financial performance of an organisation over a three year period.

A wealth of information exists on the internet, but the time available constrained how much research could be undertaken. There was also the risk that much of the information available may have been inaccurate, or irrelevant to the report's objectives.

The author had access to the full MS Excel versions of Charity A's financial statements, which enabled easier analysis of the data and presentation of results. Several NGOs were contacted to request copies of their financial statements in MS Excel format, but unfortunately none were able to provide them, presumably for data security reasons. This meant that the research had to rely on the publicly-available PDF versions of Charity B, Charity C and Charity D's accounts, which made calculation and analysis more labour intensive and increased the chance of human inputting error.

The author is an employee of the Charity A. Whilst writing a paper which evaluates one's employer doesn't constitute a conflict of interest, there are issues to consider around confidentiality. The author has therefore ensured that only publicly-available information has been used in this analysis of the Charity A.

It should also be noted that the author's interpretation of the Charity A results may be subconsciously or unwittingly affected by having knowledge of the operational workings of the Charity A. Put simply, the author is more familiar with the Charity than with the three comparator NGOs. However, the author endeavoured to maintain professional objectivity throughout the research, and there is no reason to believe that the analysis has been unduly influenced by any personal bias.

Ethical & Confidentiality Issues:

Exemplar 1:

Topic 8: An analysis and evaluation of the business and financial performance of an organisation over a three year period.

Plagiarism is a serious issue for academic research writing. To plagiarize is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as: 'take (the work or an idea of someone else) and pass it off as one's own' (*Oxford English Dictionary Online, n.d.*). This report follows the Harvard referencing guide to referencing, to ensure that all sources are acknowledged and referenced accordingly.

Another area the author has considered is collusion; there is the opportunity to work in groups, however to avoid any possible collusion and to ensure that the report is their own they have completed their work in isolation with only the necessary guidance from their mentor.

The author has given consideration to privacy issues to ensure that there is no private data presented in the report, to that end all data presented is available in the public domain, either online or in a printed publication.

Exemplar 2:

Topic 19: An analysis and evaluation of the financial and operational consequences of a merger between two organisations or the acquisition of one organisation by another.

As I currently have unrestricted access to non-publically available information as a result of my position in the acquiring entity, and due to the fact that I was closely involved in the subsequent integration of Company Green, it was crucial that I followed the appropriate process prior to commencement of this research and analysis project. “....

....”

Consequently, I arranged a meeting with the Finance Director of Company Blue to request permission that I was able to focus on this organisation for my project, and to obtain authorisation to utilise internal information available to me in my current role. The Finance Director approved use of such confidential information, and was also reassured by the Oxford Brookes Information Pack (2011-12) in which it specifically states that ‘all projects are confidential, never published, seen only by a marker and moderator....and normally destroyed after 12 months’. Once approval was obtained I then commenced my research.

Another consideration I have had to be mindful of is objectivity. Given my close ties to the acquirer and acquiree, in some instances I have had to put aside my detailed knowledge and view the results objectively, through exercising my professional judgement and analytical skills, almost as if I was impartial to the companies being assessed.

Exemplar 4

Topic 8: An analysis and evaluation of the business and financial performance of an organisation over a three-year period.

Throughout my ACCA studies, I learned the importance of ethics in my profession. During my research, I had to confront certain predicaments of ethical nature and I ascertained to resolve these issues:

- Information collected through primary sources was difficult mainly because of confidentiality, but I assured the related personnel that the classified information will only be used for the project.
- I made sure to set aside my personal bias and judgment in performing the analysis of PharmaA, working with hard facts.

The report is my work entirely, keeping in view the issue of plagiarism and any information collected from different sources is cited properly with references in the bibliography.
