STAGE 4

SELECTING CASES
The researcher must devote considerable effort to finding cases that fully meet the criteria that have been established for forming the theoretical sample. And then the selected subjects must be persuaded to participate in the study, which may require some skill. As we have noted, participation in a case study is no trivial matter; it can demand considerable time spread over several sessions and a fairly long period. It also means surrendering privacy by allowing a stranger, the researcher, into the group’s inner sanctum. This stage is tricky because the strategies dictated by the study’s requirements come up against the constraints created by the specific features of each research setting (Hlady Rispal 2002a, b).

The subjects should be shown that they have an interest in participating in the study. This can be a challenge for researchers, who may be in the habit of discussing their research in theoretical terms, whereas a pragmatic, operational presentation may be more effective in convincing key players to take part.

The first contact is critical since it can shape the entire relationship between the investigator and the informants, and therefore can indirectly affect the quality of the data that is collected. Hence the importance of being fully prepared before starting field work. This also applies to inductive research, in which data is gathered from the beginning of the study. Inadequate knowledge of the subject matter can compromise the contact with actors in the field. They often feel they are doing researchers a favour by agreeing to meet with them and listen to what they have to say; informants generally expect investigators to be experts on the subject and to know what they are talking about. The researcher’s ability to meet those expectations will
determine his or her legitimacy in the eyes of informants and directly affect the information they provide and the longevity of their relationship with the researcher (Hlady Rispal 2002a, b).

**STEP 4.1 Acquire thorough knowledge of the workings of the environment under investigation**

The investigator must acquire a sound knowledge of the workings of the environment in which the cases are to be recruited. The support of an individual or organization that already has contacts with the players in this environment can be very useful. To begin with, it helps in identifying potential cases and making first contact in order to determine whether they do meet the sampling criteria. Secondly, it can help induce subjects not only to participate in the study but, even more importantly, to trust the researcher and provide all the required information. The ability to obtain all the information needed for the study is a key factor in choosing a specific case (De Weerd-Nederhof 2001). This can be more problematic in some circles where there is a culture of secrecy, making access more difficult. Some research questions, such as those related to failures, are also perceived as more sensitive than others.

To find cases for my study of business leaders, I turned to the agencies that provide subsidies to Quebec businesses for the introduction of new technologies. As I wanted to observe the technology adoption process from the beginning, I thought companies applying for subsidies would be a suitable pool of potential cases. I met with officials at the agencies to discuss my research with them and explain that my findings might help businesses through the technology adoption process. With assistance from the Association des manufacturiers du Québec, I obtained a list of companies that wanted to introduce new technology, accompanied by a fair amount of corporate information and details on the technology adoption project. The agencies also introduced me to the executives of the businesses I was interested in.

When I found a case that matched my criteria, I had to persuade all the players involved in the project to participate in the study. These included the developer (which could be an outside firm or a department of the company), a funding agency in almost all cases, and of course the business itself, which was obviously the key actor, since I needed the agreement of its owner or senior managers from
the outset. Securing their consent was particularly difficult in a period of economic crisis; this is where the support of the funding agencies and the Association des manufacturiers proved most useful.

Another example is a series of case studies of total quality management processes by Sohal, Simon and Lu (1996). They formed a pool of potential subjects using suggestions from faculty colleagues, personal contacts and lists of executives they had met at lectures and conferences. First contact was then made by telephone with the general manager or a plant manager. In this conversation, the study’s goals and objectives were explained. The call was followed by a letter in which the research program and the researchers’ expectations were described in detail. The researchers report that securing the agreement of the subjects required considerable tact and a good deal of time and effort.

**STEP 4.2 Make sure you have no other professional relationship with the subjects**

To ensure the impartiality of the study, it is important that the researcher have no professional relationship with the participants other than that related to the study. For example, the investigator should not do a case study of a company for which he or she has worked as a consultant. Neither should the investigator agree to provide professional or other services in exchange for a subject’s participation in the study. In many cases, study participants will request some kind of compensation (often they will seek to benefit from the researcher’s expertise) in exchange for their time, and this is understandable. There are also subjects who ask to be studied. This can be very attractive to a researcher who is trying to recruit cases, but it increases the risk of absorption or over-assimilation. The investigator may become wound up in the field work and neglect the reflection that is necessary for productive and rigorous research (Hlady Rispal 2002a, b).

**STEP 4.3 Consider the geographic distribution of cases**

One must always bear in mind that the greater the distance between observation sites and the farther they are from the researcher’s home, the more time and money will be required for travel. The challenge, therefore, is to achieve a geographic distribution that satisfies the
study’s requirements in terms of rigour while enabling the researcher to stay within budget and deadline. This step is particularly important for international research programs that study cases in different countries or even continents.

In my study of business executives, the research sites were spread across the province of Quebec. I had to be very well organized to follow events at each of the sites. It meant I had to be readily available and required a great deal of time, since observation extended over a period of more than two years. We also had to devote fairly large sums of money to travel and accommodation expenses.

**STEP 4.4** Recruit more than the necessary number of cases

The researcher must safeguard against the risk of mortality during the study, which is to say it may be impossible to observe some cases until the end of the study because they have withdrawn their authorization or for other reasons, such as bankruptcy in the case of companies. Therefore, to make sure the study can proceed to the end, the sample should contain at least one case more than the required minimum.

In our study of medium-sized business executives, the prevailing difficult economic environment made it all the more important to guard against the possibility of losing cases during the study. I therefore observed 12 businesses. Of this number, one was abandoned during the study because it turned out to be a large company, according to our pre-established criteria. The number of employees they had reported was the number they expected to have once the technological changeover was completed, but at the time of the study the company was 150 employees above the 250 maximum established by our size criterion.

Now that the research sites have been selected, we can proceed to the important and delicate data collection stage.