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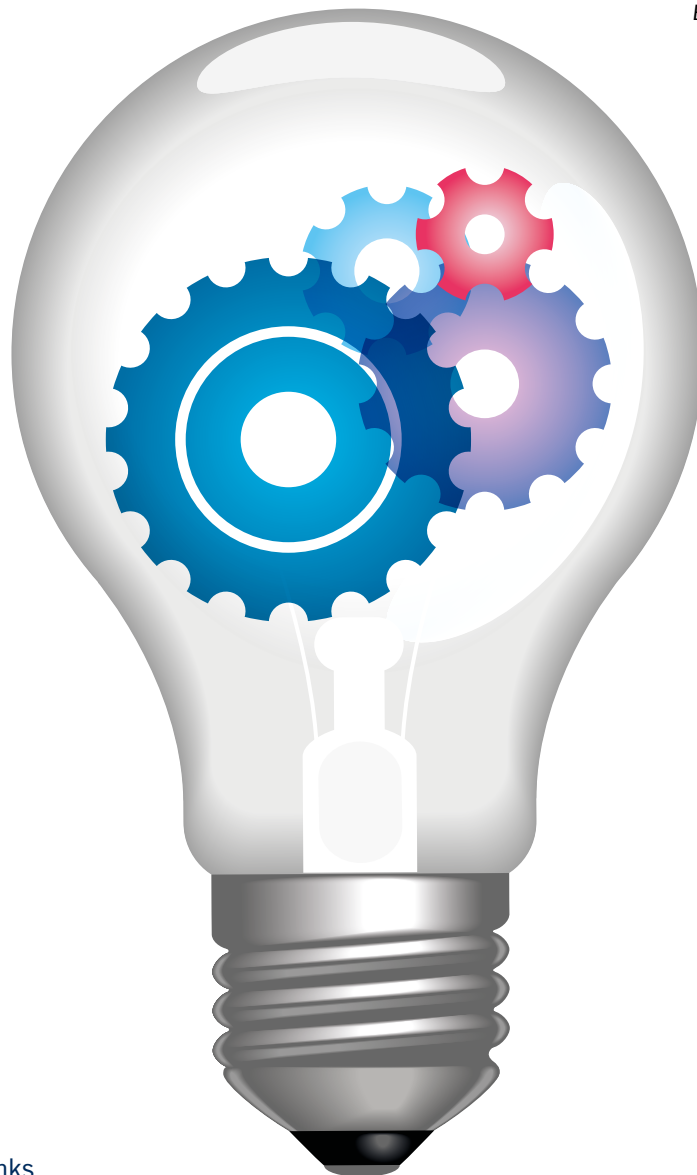
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The business school that thinks and lives in the future

# Teaching by example through case studies

Tim Skelton talks with Bas Koene and Tao Yue

**RSM's Case Development Centre documents business experiences and turns them into useful learning tools for students and business managers alike. It does this by writing case studies to help train current and future business leaders.**

Established in 2008, the Case Development Centre (CDC) is one of the few of its kind in Europe. Working closely with academia and business, it brings first-hand knowledge of business practices into management education, and – conversely – helps to communicate the latest management theory back into the business world. 'We bring theory and practice together, helping both practitioners and academics to turn business experience into attention-grabbing stories for learning,' CDC's director Bas Koene explains.

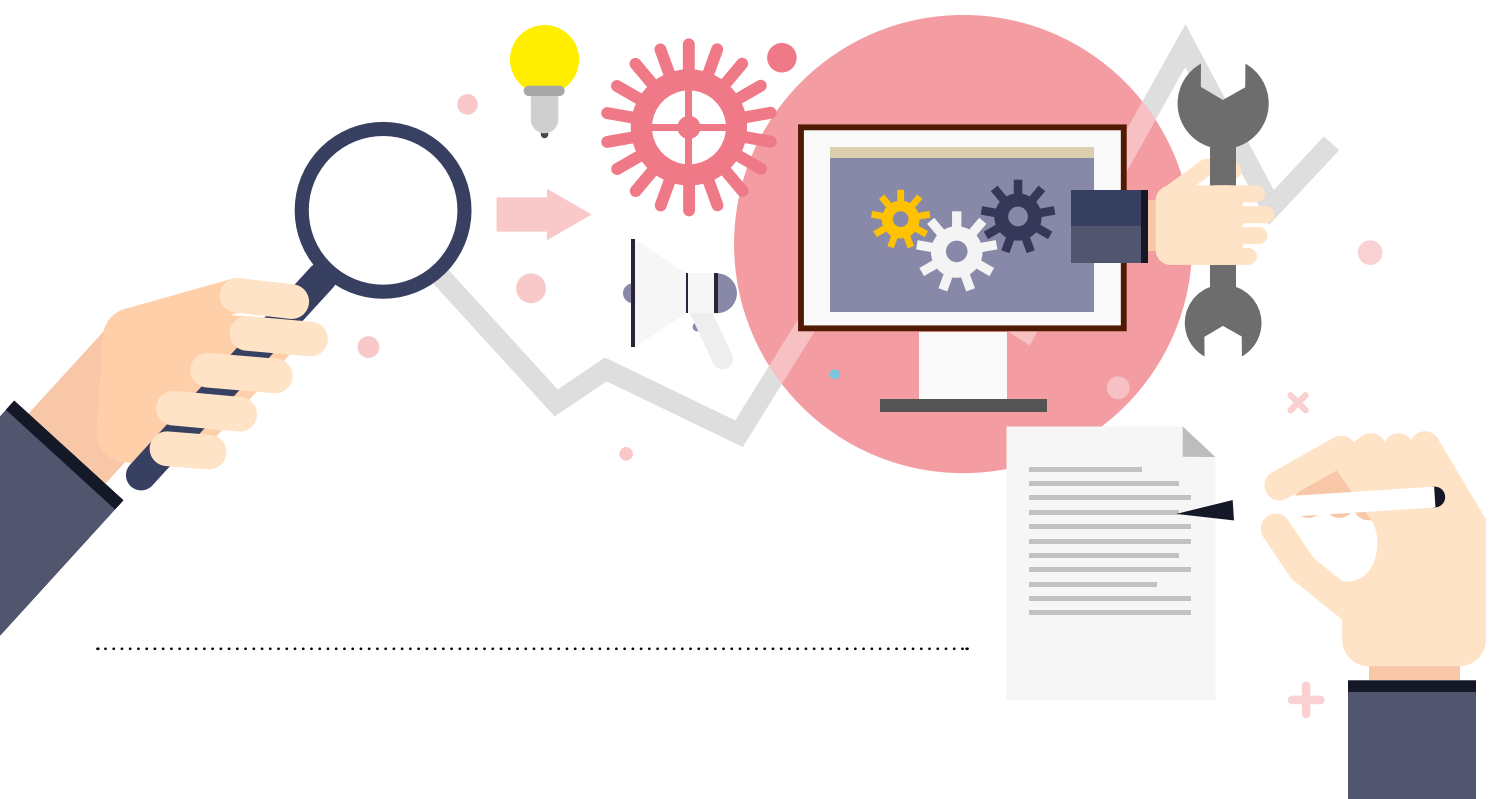
'The case studies are used by business students and in executive programmes. Interestingly, while our studies are mainly created to teach students, the process of developing a case is often valuable for the organisation involved. It's like a mirror helping them to see their own decision-making process better,' he says.

When the centre was established there was a clear need for cases documenting European business practice. 'Teachers were using many US-based cases, and their content, decision-

making style and mind-set were all American,' Bas points out. 'Moreover we were looking for cases that richly and accurately present the complexity of European situations involving active societal stakeholders; cases with clever and creative solutions that appreciate the importance of multiple perspectives, and provide *sustainably* profitable solutions,' he adds.

Although the majority of cases are placed in a European context, the key issues often reflect global challenges. One example is the case of Koppert Cress, a small Dutch horticultural company that grows "micro-vegetables" such as cresses. The company had to develop sophisticated entrepreneurial logistics systems to supply to top chefs around the world such as Ferran Adrià.

Another example is Vanderlande. 'You see their baggage systems in ▶



# Teaching by example through case studies *(continued)*

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many airports all over the world,' Bas says. 'They also develop warehousing systems. We did a case on their logistics production strategy to deal with the development of quickly growing international markets in the face of competition from abroad.' Other cases involve international stories, such as Chinese companies interested in doing business in Europe.

## International interest

CDC's collaborations also reflect a growing international interest in the professional development of case material for learning. The centre has developed a co-branded case series with the Ivey Business School, and is working with top academic institutions in Stockholm, Istanbul and Ankara, and Shanghai to develop their case writing capabilities. 'Interest in case writing is increasing, along with an interest in qualitative methods of business research more broadly,' Bas explains. 'The case story investigates the premises driving actions, rather than just measuring outcomes. In terms of learning this is highly effective.'

Moreover, the centre is well placed when it comes to an emerging economic power like China. RSM recent-

ly began co-operating with Shanghai University of Finance and Economics. As part of the initiative, CDC is developing a range of case studies on the Shanghai Free Trade Zone. 'The Beijing government is exploring possibilities for facilitating cross-border activities with both Chinese and international companies. This offers new opportunities and requires careful and the responsible engagement of business leaders,' Bas says. 'Our co-operation draws on RSM's strong competences in finance and logistics, and it builds on our ability at RSM to do part of the work in Chinese.'

CDC's cases are widely published via international outlets such as the Case Centre in the UK, Ivey Publishing, and in media outlets such as the *Financial Times* (FT) and *Harvard Business Review* (HBR). Its cases have also won major international competitions, including the Case Centre Case Awards and the EFMD Case Writing Competition, and are used by management schools worldwide.

Bas is particularly proud that the FT and HBR recognise the centre's potential. 'We developed special material for both,' he says. 'For the FT we translated key insights from our studies for them, such as an early case we

developed on the business model of Alibaba's Taobao, and the lessons in the approach of Koppert Cress.' For HBR the centre has contributed to a special series of fictionalised case studies. These are based on actual business experiences, but adapted so they are short and easy to read, and dramatised with dilemmas.

Whether dramatised or factual, quality is key. 'We always develop cases based on intensive field research and accompanied by a teaching note. Teaching notes are important. They reflect the careful analysis and evaluation of the case study as an instrument for learning,' Bas says.

So how is a potential case study chosen? As Bas reveals, they come from various routes. 'We started out helping RSM staff, but soon it became clear there was also interest within companies seeking to share their experiences,' he says. 'In that way we kind of act as matchmakers. We work with programme directors wanting to strengthen their courses. And we help find companies with relevant experience, then develop cases that showcase the key dynamics, exceptional experiences, and novel approaches.'

## Teaching tools

For RSM teaching programmes, CDC actively solicits cases, making use of the Dutch HRM Network's strong business connections. One recent example is the prize-winning study, *Vanderlande Industries: parcel and postal predicaments*, which was developed as part of a series for a specialised business services programme together with

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course designers and RSM professor, René de Koster.

Another case, *Pulse: Quality control at Xpert Clinic*, helped the hand surgery specialists featured as well as the course designers. CDC teamed up with Paolo Perego, professor of management accounting at RSM, to look at the clinic's innovative management control system. 'They believed they were providing unique feedback for doctors, and the case study helped them better understand how their own system works,' Bas says.

At other times companies have approached CDC, and the centre has helped them develop customised studies for executive education, in-company programmes and stakeholder roundtables. Sometimes, RSM alumni with small start-ups offer to talk about the challenges they faced. 'This can often be a fruitful relationship, providing a way for these entrepreneurs to reconnect to their alma mater, and at the same time providing the university with relevant case studies,' Bas says.

Since they are teaching tools, case studies in which major problems are encountered can be more interesting than those where everything went to plan. 'When something goes wrong it can highlight the relevant dynamics better. Writing it up helps place the problem at the centre. This helps to get the students thinking,' Bas says. Many cases also contain lessons about the way companies eventually resolve situations, he adds, allowing people to learn from other's actions. 'Some describe a best practice, such as with Alibaba. Understanding the dynamic

possibilities of their business model was the core there.'

Becoming a good case study writer requires certain skills. CDC's main writer Tao Yue says the ideal person must be able to explain a highly technical subject in a non-technical way. 'He/she is a translator between professional (academic or business) and everyday languages, has a keen eye and can see the "point" in amongst the clutter, and is able to tell a story in an engag-



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ing way that everyone understands,' she explains.

Bas agrees: 'A good writer notices the complexity of a situation, but is also able to draw out the key challenges, and formulate them in such a way that readers are motivated to spring to action and solve the case.'

As with many other fields, CDC's overall approach is constantly evolving, and new multimedia and technical possibilities are changing the way it builds case studies. 'Documenting stories was previously very much about writing up a situation and relevant information in a paper-based case,' Bas says. Now, however, he says the centre is experimenting with novel methods. Technology makes it possible to pre-

sent cases in new ways by adding film and digital content.

This opens up other opportunities. While the relevant case focus and question may change little, information in the case can change rapidly. As a result, the centre is investigating the possibility of creating regularly updated "live cases" that present the most up-to-date understanding of the situation. 'In this way,' Bas says, 'the relationship between practical experience, teaching and course design, and case development is also changing. It's all becoming more intertwined.' ■

**More information about RSM's Case Development Centre can be found at**

**WEB** [www.erim.eur.nl/cdc](http://www.erim.eur.nl/cdc)