

# Encyclopedia of Case Study Research

## Event-Driven Research

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Event-driven research is a dynamic research design that takes an evolutionary approach, focusing on people, processes, or routines and following observed or recorded events to their eventual outcome.

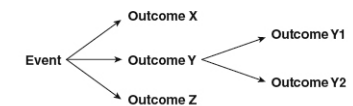
## Conceptual Overview and Discussion

Event-driven research identifies events and records what happens over time, linking the events to outcomes at some point in the future (see Figure 1). Each event sparks multiple possibilities; what is of interest is the choice that is made at these junctures, and the consequences thereof. Event-driven research is longitudinal in nature and may occur over long periods of time—months or years. The same events are followed over time, linking prior events to subsequent outcomes like a narrative unfolding.

In some instances, archival data can be used to harvest the information needed to formulate [p. 358 ↓] event-based explanations. Not all events will lead to noteworthy outcomes, and many in fact may result in nothing at all, or nothing of interest. Unexpected and unanticipated occurrences influence the eventual outcome and are impossible to predict but can be recorded as they occur, including how they influenced or changed the event trajectory and eventual outcome. As events unfold, it is possible to identify a temporal effect including how and when events influenced or affected an outcome, or how long it took for a change to be evident. In this type of research, a lot of information about small events is gathered because the consequences remain unknown. Opposing forces, both positive and negative influences, can be noted, including how the process or organization responds. Based on a Darwinian notion of evolution, event-driven research is interested in variation, selection, and adaptation. Of interest to the researcher is the variety of possibilities, which possibility was selected, and the adaptation that occurred as a result of choices taken and the consequences thereof. The evolution of organizations is not built upon a model of equilibrium or homeostasis, but on an understanding that events change the direction of the outcome in significant ways. The order that events occur is significant in event-driven research and becomes part of the narrative that explains why a course of action was followed, and when. Events and sequences of events are observed and

described, and explanations in the form of a narrative are offered to help to understand the phenomenon that is being studied.

*Figure 1 Event-driven explanations*



**Figure 1** Event-driven explanations  
Source: Aldrich (2001).

## Application

Event-driven research is illustrated by Linda Hill in *Becoming a Manager: Mastery of a New Identity*, which documents in a case study the story of 19 newly appointed frontline managers who are followed through the first year on the job. Data are collected prospectively by the researcher, who spends time with each new manager, conducting interviews in person, shadowing the manager, and conducting phone interviews. The story of the experience and feelings of the managers is told using the managers' own words to create a narrative that describes how the managers defined their work and the transitions they experienced during the crucial first year. The “event” is the hiring of the employee; what occurs after that is observed and recorded, as events lead to other events until a predetermined outcome is reached or, as in this event-driven case study, a defined period of time has passed. This rich and descriptive narrative poses interesting questions for additional study and provides potential for organizational theorizing that could be explored further.

## Critical Summary

Event-driven research is interested in how a process unfolds over time and results in outcomes that become events themselves that lead to further outcomes as the narrative unfolds. The basic difference between outcome-driven research and event-driven research is the stance of the researcher and the research question being asked. In outcome-driven research, the researcher is metaphorically facing backward into the

past, answering questions about “what” happened and suggesting plausible reasons for “why” it may have happened. Event-driven research imagines the researcher facing forward toward an unknown future, asking “how” questions and following an event through time to explain what outcomes occurred, and the subsequent events that resulted from decisions made.

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See also

Further Readings

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