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## Case Study Research in Accounting

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**SYNOPSIS:** We describe case study research and explain its value for developing theory and informing practice. While recognizing the complementary nature of many research methods, we stress the benefits of case studies for understanding situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict. We introduce the concept of *phronesis*—the analysis of what actions are practical and rational in a specific context—and indicate the value of case studies for developing, and reflecting on, professional knowledge. Examples of case study research in managerial accounting, auditing, and financial accounting illustrate the strengths of case studies for theory development and their potential for generating new knowledge. We conclude by disputing common misconceptions about case study research and suggesting how barriers to case study research may be overcome, which we believe is an important step in making accounting research more relevant.

### INTRODUCTION

Accounting research is periodically challenged about its practical relevance and its progressive scientific achievements (Reiter and Williams 2002; Hopwood 2007). Case studies can help researchers respond to these challenges and contribute to relevant knowledge. We use examples from financial and managerial accounting and auditing to show the value of case studies in making accounting research matter, both for the development of theory and for improving practice. In so doing, we identify four types of case study and show how each type can enhance accounting research and practice. We conclude by reflecting on some of the reasons that case study research may in fact be discouraged, and suggest some avenues to address this situation.

Most accountants are familiar with case studies in relation to teaching. They provide vivid examples that can be used for many purposes, not least to generate an appreciation of the way a general principle can be applied in specific, and often complex, settings. In this paper we concentrate on case studies for research purposes, showing how the benefits that are widely recognized for teaching purposes can also enhance accounting research. A crucial difference between teaching and research-oriented case studies is the central role of theory in the latter. Moreover, we show how research-oriented case studies are valuable for practitioners.

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