



Making a Business Case for New People, Process or Technology Resources

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As we start 2019, new ideas and projects will be brought forward and many of them will need a business case to get started, or to move forward at key points. While building and presenting a business case is not difficult, it is an important skill for making compelling arguments and getting it right the first time. You also want to use style and substance that works in your organization and appeals to your decision-makers. Below are some tips and tricks from my experiences making successful (and unsuccessful) business cases.

Advocating to Achieve Business Objectives

As a leader in my organization, I frequently need to influence decision-making relating to initiatives within my sphere, and one of the tools I have embraced is the business case. I use the elements discussed below in varying degree depending on whether I am crafting notes for an informal discussion, making a presentation to partners, or preparing a detailed document for a significant initiative. I have used business cases for everything from headcount and organizational changes to technology acquisitions and projects. At its heart, this is a form of advocacy which is a great way to use my legal skills to push forward business goals.

If you are at the point of advocating for a certain decision to be made, you likely have a good idea of what the outcome should be. But what is the best means of influencing the decision-making of others in a way that can achieve these goals? There are several excellent books on writing a business case^[1] as well as courses you can take. In some organizations, a consistent standard format works best while in others (like Stikeman Elliott), a tailored approach that is suitable to the circumstances is a better way to go.

Before You Start

Information is at the core of a strong business case. While your gut instinct may tell you what the right outcome should be, it is difficult to influence decision-makers on that basis. So, you need the facts:

- **User feedback.** The most valuable information you have is what your users and stakeholders are saying about the problem or challenge you are trying to address. Spend time interviewing them to get their input so you understand the problem from their perspective (remember design thinking and don't jump to conclusions!)

- **Practical examples and use cases:** What actual tasks and activities are people trying to achieve? Use cases are an effective way to bring a lofty objective down to earth with real examples that decision-makers can relate to of what a person, process or system needs to support.
- **Data:** Pull together relevant data. This may be easy or difficult but try to collect as much data as is reasonable, especially around the economics of the "current state" and the costs and benefits of change.
- **Market landscape:** Learn as much as you can about what your competitors and others are doing with respect to the same challenge or problem. I can usually find a relevant industry survey or report that will provide adequate background information which I then supplement with my own market intelligence.

Write it Up

My approach to documenting the business case will vary depending on the circumstances. Some of the areas I typically address are background information, the objective or rationale for the project, the impact on lawyers and other stakeholders, the technology approach and an estimated timeline and budget.

By way of example, for a large technology project, I presented the results of our user feedback at the opening of the business case as it was the most compelling reason for the project. I also highlighted the project's benefits and the technology risks of not proceeding.

Articulate the "why": Take notes from Simon Sinek and his well-known Ted Talk and book, "Start with Why".^[2] Your business case should articulate the change you are proposing and why, giving a reason that inspires the decision-makers to care about your proposal: "when a *why* is clear, those who share that belief will be drawn to it and maybe want to take part in bringing it to life".

Leverage your data: Data is incredibly useful for showing (rather than just describing) the current state and how it will change based on your proposal which enables decision-makers to easily draw comparisons. No matter how poor you think your data is, it is data and you can use it. Even a rudimentary statistic like how many searches are run can be turned into a statement such as, "this means that each associate runs approximately X searches a day making enterprise search our most critical practice tool."

Tell powerful stories: As important as statistics are, storytelling and personalization are even more powerful. For one particular project, I used quotes gathered from surveys and interviews with stakeholders to populate the business case. I also made the information personal to decision-makers by using stories and anecdotes from their colleagues and peers.

User impact: Articulate and quantify the user impact of your proposal. These may be both objective and subjective. Will people save time or be able to focus on higher value work? Will the initiative eliminate frustration or make people feel more supported in their tasks? Will the user impact extend to clients or business partners?

Business impact: Estimate the "hard" and "soft" costs for the business of the change you are proposing, as well as the benefits, including revenues or reduced costs that you expect.

Competitive information: Whether you want to follow industry best practices and do what your competitors are doing or break away from the pack and do something different, you want to provide a competitive analysis. In situations where we are considering a new initiative or technology we do not currently have, a competitive analysis is critical to answer questions like, "who else is using it?" "what's market?" and "what are our competitors doing?"

Risk of action/non-action: For some initiatives or projects there is a risk of non-action or action. For example, there are risks associated with not replacing technology that is end of life. Similarly, there may be risks associated with innovative or market leading changes. In both cases, those risks should be called out for decision-makers.

Options: Finally, and most importantly, provide your decision-makers with options. I usually put forward two or three, one of which is the "status quo". These should be meaningful options that you think are viable and that you are prepared to live with and stand behind. Costing should be included for each of the options and you should provide your assessment of each. That assessment can be a simple pro/con list or a detailed SWOT analysis.

Presenting – Consider Your Audience

The final stage of the business case process usually involves a presentation to, and discussion with, decision-makers. As mentioned above, I have experienced the full spectrum of business case presentations from situations where everyone was in full agreement to others where my proposal was turned down or I was asked to reframe it.

I have learned that although the rationale for the change or project may be clear to me, it is not necessarily clear for those I am trying to influence. Decision-makers should not be hearing about the proposal or the project for the first time when presenting the business case. Communicating with them during the preparation phase is a key to success for your advocacy, in particular if you are able to include them early on as a "user" in your user feedback-gathering stage. It also helps to find out ahead of time where individual decision-makers stand on your recommendation.

There have been situations where I was questioned in-depth on the business case and others where I was not. The key is being prepared which means you need a good understanding of the details underlying the options and the recommendations.

Finally, you need to pick the right time to present your business case. On the one hand you want to have done enough preparation so that you are confident in both the nature of the problem or need and your proposed solution. On the other hand, you do not want to leave it too late such that it appears you are not on top of the situation or decision-makers are painted into a corner with your proposal presented as a foregone conclusion.

No matter the outcome of the presentation, the best approach is to consider the results and the feedback and determine next steps. If the business case is a success, planning for implementation will be the next task. If the business case was not successful, it is the opportunity to gather lessons learned for success the next time. Great ideas have a way of surfacing again!

[1] See for example, Ray Sheen and Amy Gallo: HBR Guide to Building Your Business Case (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, July 7 2015).

[2] Simon Sinek: Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action (New York: Penguin Group, 2009)

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