Chapter II

General Research Methodology and Procedures: An Overview of How the Study was Undertaken

An examination of the Table of Contents of this book would indicate to the reader that the research presented in the book is multi-faceted. This has led to a necessary careful consideration of the approach to the research, the methods employed to gather the data, and the methods to present the data in a meaningful way. These will be detailed in this chapter.

Overall Goals of the Study

Based on the literature review presented in Chapter I, we have identified a gap in our understanding of the organisational issues related to e-commerce adoption in SMEs located specifically in regional areas. The present research is concerned primarily with regional areas in developed countries with a mature infrastructure and technology that enable e-commerce adoption and use. We chose Australia, the USA, and Sweden as the location of our research because all three countries are members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) with comparable per capita GDPs and household Internet penetration rates of approximately 55% in 2003/2004. The locations will be described in more detail later.
Our overall aim was to address the very broad issue of “what are SMEs in regional areas doing about e-commerce adoption?” However, this aim was broken down into a number of specific research goals related to the organisation itself and the use of e-commerce, including the following:

1. To examine whether business characteristics such as business age, business size (as defined by the number of employees), business sector, gender of the CEO, educational level of the CEO, level of IT skill within the business, the existence or non-existence of an enterprise wide business system, the use of product planning, market focus, or membership of an alliance are associated with the adoption/non-adoption of e-commerce in SMEs
2. To compare the adoption levels of e-commerce in regional SMEs across the three locations
3. To examine the effects of the business characteristics previously listed on e-commerce adoption criteria, barriers, benefits, and disadvantages
4. To determine the key underlying reasons why SMEs adopt or do not adopt e-commerce
5. To find out the main benefits and disadvantages that SMEs experience after implementing e-commerce
6. To determine whether being a member of an SME alliance is associated with e-commerce adoption in order to understand whether alliances promote or hinder e-commerce
7. To examine whether the gender and education level of the CEO have any bearing on e-commerce adoption
8. To compare and contrast e-commerce adoption in general across the three locations in order to identify similarities and differences

It should be noted that since limited research had been carried out into e-commerce adoption by SMEs in regional areas, our study was conceived as exploratory in nature, although we adopted an empirical approach. One approach to meeting these goals might have been to conduct a series of in-depth case studies of SMEs in the three locations. While such an approach might provide substantial detail concerning the various questions raised, there are just too many permutations that need to be considered. Attempting to include all the permutations would require application of decisions as to which SMEs should be included or excluded from the study, resulting in a potentially biased view of regional SMEs that was not generalisable beyond the samples used in the study.

A second approach was to undertake a large data gathering survey. This approach allowed for differing business characteristics and perceptions of e-commerce and reduced bias brought about by decisions concerning inclusion/exclusion of candidate SMEs for the study.