



Confidentiality of Business and Trade Secrets in the Thesis

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1 Introduction

In all universities and universities of applied sciences, theses written by students and their assessments are public documents in accordance with the Act on Openness. In accordance with the directive issued by the Ministry of Education on January 28, 2004, and the directive by the Office of the Data Protection Ombudsman (Opetusministeriön kirje; Tietosuojaja 2010), theses cannot be classified as confidential documents. The numerical assessment and written feedback given to theses are also public and available from the Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences library or the Study Services office. The assessment of the thesis is, however, not attached to the thesis published in the Theseus database.

The completion of the thesis may involve information or materials that fall within the scope of confidentiality of business and trade secrets. Trade secrets refer to the information that is not generally known and not readily accessible; it holds financial value for the organization's operations, and the holder of the information has taken measures to protect it. Trade secrets can include competitor analyses, computer program source codes, a company's financial forecasts, information related to pricing, business ideas, manufacturing information, customer databases, information related to company procedures or the information that, from the organization's operational perspective, can be inferred as negative. (Trade Secrets Act 595/2018, Section 2; Government's proposal to Parliament for the Trade Secrets Act and some related laws 49/2018 vp, 11.)

Information or materials containing business and trade secrets must be edited in the thesis report or used only as background material. Background material shall not be taken into account in the thesis evaluation. The thesis advisor has nonetheless the right to access the background material, if requested. The thesis advisor is bound by a duty of confidentiality regarding sensitive information.

All thesis reports with appendices are published in Theseus or in its restricted [access] collection. The thesis report stored in the restricted [access] collection can be read on Haaga-Helia's internal network, but the metadata and abstract of the report are publicly accessible. However, anyone, upon request, can receive the thesis report in its entirety from the restricted collection by e-mail. Assessment-specific information is not enclosed in the Theseus database.

2 Public access to the thesis

Public access to the thesis means that anyone has the right to access an [archived] thesis. To enhance the impact and transparency of our operations, it is Haaga-Helia's duty to actively communicate about completed theses. Confidential information is not presented during thesis presentations.

In addition to the publicly accessible version of the thesis, a confidential company version can be written, though the latter will not be considered in the evaluation process and will not be published in Theseus. The confidential company version of the thesis may contain business and trade secrets. Instructions as to the form and content are provided by the commissioning party.

It is the student's responsibility to ensure that neither confidential information nor the information that can be used to trace confidential information can appear in any section of the thesis report to be published (for example, server IP addresses, the commissioner's contact information, employees' names, or logos). When editing figures, keep in mind that filters blurring the sensitive text or other content in the figure are not necessarily reliable, as it may be possible to revert the edits. The thesis advisor only checks that the evaluated report has been published.

The thesis report must be written in such a way that it constitutes a clear and coherent whole and can be understood without familiarizing oneself with possibly confidential background material. If this cannot be done, one should not write a thesis on the topic in question.

A published thesis report always includes a cover page, an abstract, a table of contents, a theoretical framework, an empirical/product part, a discussion, a list of references and possible appendices, where confidentiality of details can be secured with the techniques presented in the following chapter.

3 Business and trade secrets in the thesis report

This chapter provides examples of how to apply the reporting guidelines in a thesis report containing business and trade secrets.

3.1 Thesis title on the cover page

The company name that may be used in the title of the thesis to be published is removed by replacing it with an invented name, such as Company Y. However, the author of the thesis must verify that none of the existing companies bears the invented name (Business Information System).

3.2 Abstract

The abstract must always indicate the objective, methodology and results. The objective, process, research results or product are presented in the form that is allowed in the publicly accessible version.

Please note that the thesis abstracts stored in the Theseus restricted collection are also publicly accessible. Where relevant, for example, the name of the company should be removed.

3.3 Omission of the company name from the table of contents

The company name must be removed from the headings of chapters, subchapters, and appendices. For example, 3.5 Background information on Company X.

3.4 Thesis introduction

The background of the thesis study, objectives, limitations and methods are briefly presented in the introduction. The objectives are described so that they correspond to the product or empirical part. Where relevant, the name of the company and even the industry discussed in the objectives must be rendered unidentifiable. The names of the company's employees should not be mentioned in the background information on the company.

3.5 Theoretical framework of the thesis

The theoretical framework provides the background for the phenomenon to be researched or developed, therefore there is typically no need to refer to materials that contain business and trade secrets. However, pay special attention to the matter if you use material intended for internal use in the company in the knowledge base.

3.6 The empirical section in the research-based thesis

The empirical part of the research-based thesis can be modified in the following ways:

- In graphs, the y-axis is labelled, but its scale can be left unspecified.
- The actual numerical values can be multiplied or divided by a constant, thus keeping trends unaffected while ensuring comparability. The text should mention that the numbers have been modified.
- The research planning and implementation phases of the study, as well as the analysis methods in the form of a general description are not kept confidential.
- If the research results are presented covertly, the analysis methods should be described in more detail.
- The validity and reliability considerations of the study are included in the thesis report as such.

3.7 The empirical section in the product-based thesis

The empirical part in the product-based thesis is divided into three parts: the description of the initial situation and planning, the description of how the product was produced and the presentation of the final product. In the description of the initial situation, the company name, industry, and other background data should be described so that the company cannot be identified based on those criteria.

The description of how the product was produced is to be written in phases. If, for example, drafts of the product are presented in the phasing, the information that makes it possible to recognise the company must be rendered unidentifiable. If you illustrate the production with a figure, remember to remove the elements that contribute to the identification of the company. The methods for development work related to the production are presented at a general level, therefore they do not contain confidential information related to business and trade secrets.

If the final product cannot be linked to the thesis because of business- and trade-related sensitive information, the product must still be described in the empirical part of the thesis report. Please remove from the description any information that makes it possible to identify the company. When illustrating the product with photos, screenshots, or drawings, remember to remove the elements that contribute to the identification of the company. If it is anyway possible to attach the final product to the thesis, a separate subchapter presenting the product is not needed.

Below are the possible ways of modifying the product-based thesis, depending on the topic area, and, if necessary, your thesis advisor will provide further instructions individually.

A) Websites, multi-media presentations, user manuals, etc.

Where relevant, the structure of the product can be separated from its content (e.g., the structure and content of a web page) to be handled in a different way. The structure can be described by omitting business and trade secrets, but the content often calls for a modification.

B) Computer software, applications (e.g., e-commerce), and database solutions

If the commissioning party has a valid reason to classify a [programming] code as confidential, the latter must be left out of the thesis report. Parts of the code must be presented as examples, demonstrating that the code is in line with good syntactic, semantic, and stylistic practices. Architectural solutions linked to the code must be presented. In database testing, production data can be replaced with test data. In more comprehensive applications and database solutions, structure and content clearly constitute two different themes. The requirements of confidentiality of business and trade secrets are almost always linked to content. The structure of some more comprehensive thesis reports may also contain matters classified as confidential, in which case the structure and content are not reported exactly but are described on a more general level.

C) Development of business operations

Examples of this area include improving company efficiency and changing or developing business-related operating methods, as well as updating an operating system, in all of which the project description is emphasized, and as a general work description it does not contain confidential information related to business and trade secrets. The empirical part of the thesis report contains information about the stages of the development process to such extent that no business and trade secrets are revealed.

D) Financial administration work

If necessary, numerical data can be modified in such a way that they are multiplied or divided by a constant, thus keeping trends unaffected while ensuring comparability. The text should mention that the numbers have been modified.

3.8 Discussion

The Discussion section must be in line with the reporting in the empirical/product part. Development ideas and recommendations are stated in a general form so that the company is not revealed.

3.9 References/Sources

All sources referred to in the text should be included in the list of references. Those elements that may reveal trade secrets should be removed from the reference information on the list of references. For example, for web-based sources, part of the URL can be replaced with X- characters or the person's name is replaced with, for example, Customer A or Person H or CEO T.

3.10 Appendices

Appendices must at least include descriptions of the content. Appendices must always be numbered and named. When confidential information has been edited into a format preventing its recognition, care must also be taken to ensure that the contents of the appendices do not allow such confidential information to be traced. For example, the cover letters and questionnaires included as appendices of a research-based thesis, or the products of the product-based thesis must be edited so that their information does not contribute to the identification or tracing of any confidential information. Logos and visual clues should also be removed or covered.

Sources

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