EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE: A QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION TOOL FOR ORGANISATIONAL RESEARCHERS

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ABSTRACT:
This paper proposes a novel method for qualitative data collection in organisational research, that of email correspondence. This approach involves written communication between the researcher and each respondent, as a conversational dialogue is constructed. An overview of this method of engaging with respondents is provided. The author then discusses how email correspondence was used in two studies of middle managers, outlining both the benefits and challenges experienced. Lessons learned for future use of the method are also considered. Email correspondence proved a valuable tool in revealing respondents' workplace experiences, and this method provides opportunity for organisational researchers seeking to explore employees' personal reflections.

Keywords: Data collection; qualitative research; research design.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative researchers seek to understand 'how humans arrange themselves and their settings, and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings' (Berg 1989: 6). Particularly in interpretive qualitative research, the aim is to understand the system of meanings that individuals utilise to understand their world, both their feelings and their worldviews (Neuman 2000). The challenge for the researcher is how to best elicit and reveal these meanings and understandings from research participants. For many qualitative research studies, the chosen data collection method is that of conducting face-to-face interviews between the researcher and the respondent, asking a number of questions to reveal the respondents' own experiences of the phenomenon being explored. Other qualitative methods include focus groups, observation and diary writing. This paper seeks to highlight a further data collection method available to organisational researchers, that of email correspondence.

My interest in email correspondence was first raised on reading of Kralik's (2000) use of a novel method for a nursing research project, which she termed "data generation by correspondence". This method involved communication between Kralik and each of her respondents, using the medium of either written letter or email. Particularly given the underpinning of her research with feminist

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research principles, Kralik likened the correspondence process to that of 'pen pal relationships' (Kralik, Koch & Brady 2000: 911).

This paper highlights my own development of this method during two qualitative studies of middle managers' workplace experiences. In doing so, I discuss both the advantages and challenges experienced, and consider lessons learnt from these studies which can benefit future use of the data collection method. I begin with briefly outlining the studies undertaken, as both the particular contexts and research designs have relevance for the subsequent decisions made.

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS

I initially used this method in the first phase of my PhD research project, which investigated the question: What are the day-to-day work experiences of middle managers, and how do these experiences personally impact them in and beyond the workplace? An interpretive phenomenological approach guided the research design, with a focus on respondents' meaning and understanding of their experiences as a middle manager, and the effect these had on their lives outside the organisation. Fifteen middle managers participated in the email correspondence phase. Thematic analysis of their responses was undertaken, and a second phase involving face-to-face interviews with six further middle managers was also conducted.

My use of email correspondence has further been developed in a subsequent study of middle managers currently being undertaken, investigating the question: What are middle managers' understandings and experiences of authenticity and expression of values in the workplace? Again, fifteen middle managers have participated in the email correspondence phase, which will be followed by online focus group discussion of the emergent themes. In both studies, participants have come from a wide range of industries and varying levels of middle management. The following discussion considers development of the method during the first study, and how lessons learned have been applied in the second study.

EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE FOR DATA COLLECTION

With technology continuing to develop rapidly, and the emergence of computer-mediated communication systems (CMCs) as a medium for communication both within organisations and from personal (home) computers (Crook & Booth 1997), researchers have started to turn to the internet and email as a method of engaging with respondents. This interest, and the ability to act upon it, has mainly occurred within the last fifteen years. Within organisational research, the use of email for obtaining participant responses has generally been limited to electronic surveys (eg. Schaefer & Dillman 1998; Simsek & Veiga 2000; Treadwell, Soetikno & Lenert 1999). However, within the education and nursing disciplines, some qualitative researchers have also begun to consider the potential applications for internet-based enquiries, particularly through on-line discussion groups (eg. Heflich & Rice 2001; Murray 1996). Interestingly, many of these research studies were aiming to investigate the use of online and technological initiatives, and then incorporated the technology into the research method.

The use of email for both organisational and personal use is increasing (Cooper 2000; Simsek & Veiga 2001). In choosing to use this method for my research projects, I believed most middle managers would be familiar and comfortable with email as a communication tool. Indeed, Lee (1994) found managers use email as an information rich form of communication. Certainly, many are familiar with the developing norms and etiquette of email use, such as how typing in all capital letters is considered the equivalent of yelling, and that there is a need to indicate humour (due to lack of body language) with smiley faces or some other indicator (Sharf 1999). I should note that all but one of the respondents in the first study used email as the correspondence medium. Like Kralik (2000), I did not want to restrict potential respondents by only providing the technological option. Although he used email in the workplace, one respondent expressed a preference for communicating by letter. However, I chose not to provide this option in the current study, and this aspect has not inhibited potential participants.

Email correspondence involves written communication between the researcher and each respondent. In exploring responses to the research question, a dialogue is conducted with each respondent. For Kralik, some of the benefits in developing this method of data generation included potential access to a wide geographical area, an extended discovery period (in her case, twelve months), and a way to endeavour to capture respondents' 'day to day experiences' as they occurred (Kralik et al. 2000: 910). It was this final concern, for a method that would capture individuals' day-to-day experiences, which most attracted me initially. When considering the first study's research question about the daily experiences of middle managers, there was an imperative for respondents to be able to consider and reflect on the personal impacts of these. My hope was that the method of correspondence with each individual would provide an opportunity to capture stories of workplace experiences as they occurred while, at the same time, allow respondents time to reflect on these experiences and their effects.

I note that this asynchronous nature of the correspondence process, providing time for reflection between receiving and responding to questions, has been identified by other authors as a benefit in the use of email for qualitative interviewing (eg. Heflich & Rice 2001; Murray 1995). However, the novelty in the approach of email correspondence is its construction of a "conversational" dialogue between the researcher and the respondent, a "to-and-fro" of hearing respondents' stories and questioning further to ensure their meaning is understood. Beyond asking questions and receiving responses, there is an engagement with respondents' daily experiences and their lives.

To briefly outline the specifics of how this correspondence was conducted during the first study, the original aim was to conduct the process of correspondence with each participant over a period of three months, with an option to extend the process for another three months if both the respondent and I believed this to be beneficial, as well as being convenient for the respondent. The length and frequency of correspondence within this period was at each participant's convenience, although the opening email advised that communications from respondents would generally be expected at a frequency somewhere between daily and fortnightly. If I had not received a response after a fortnight, a follow-up email was sent. As this data collection phase progressed, most of the respondents extended beyond three months (with their agreement). On average, the correspondence process was for a period of five months. This extension of the planned timeframe was primarily because the time between responses extended to a fortnight on average, particularly as the period of correspondence was drawing towards an end.

To commence the research process, an opening email was sent, setting the context for the process and how it would be conducted. At the same time, I set the context for my own frequency of reply. Kralik (in Kralik et al. 2000) set a standard of replying within 24 hours to emails and within 48 hours to written correspondence, and saw this as another means of gaining rapport with respondents. I also saw this as an important issue. To provide a more manageable load (particularly in case all respondents wrote daily!), I determined it would be safer to say a reply would be sent within 48 hours. In the event that a lengthy response was received, I planned to send a short email in acknowledgement, advising when a more detailed reply would be sent.

A broad framework for enquiry with respondents in this phase was determined by the research question, that is, middle managers' experiences at work and the subsequent personal impacts. A number of focus questions were, for the most part, developed intuitively, and covered such concerns as interactions with managers, colleagues and staff, and impacts on relationships with family and friends. These areas were intended to provide a starting point only. Further discussion areas were developed as they arose during the course of the correspondence process (Taylor & Bogdan 1998). Originally, I planned to send just two of these focus questions to respondents in the opening email, and subsequently send two or three more each time. However, as it became apparent that most responses would not be as frequent as projected, it was decided to include more questions per email. The initial focus questions were sent over the first two emails, and further questions were asked as they arose. On average, three to four questions were sent in each subsequent email.

As the research progressed, there were a number of issues I encountered and a need to "tweak" my use of this method. Indeed, Kvale (1996) has argued that much learning does take place through the actual practice of carrying out a data collection method, even for those methods where more guidelines are available for the novice researcher. In the following two sections, I consider both the advantages I identified – relating to transcription, geographical reach and a useful tool for "busy" respondents to reflect on their experiences; and the challenges I encountered – including building rapport with respondents, the potentially time-consuming nature for both participants and researcher, and ethical issues related to the electronic medium. I also discuss refinements I have made to my use of this method in the subsequent research project.

Advantages

The first advantage of email correspondence, which the qualitative researcher in particular cannot help but be drawn by, is the potential time savings in transcription. Data collection and transcription occurred at the same time (Foster 1994; Murray 1996), and the email narratives could be copied and pasted directly to a new file for analysis. As Roberts and Woods (2000) proclaimed, 'the respondent does the transcription for you!' (p. 93). Furthermore, email correspondence came ready-marked with date and time details to allow ease of following the development of the discussion process (Roberts & Woods 2000). The transcripts were prepared with both the emails from myself and the respondents presented in chronological order, with dates and times shown.

As noted earlier, another benefit of using email correspondence was access to a wide geographical area. This method provided the potential for middle managers across Australia to participate in the studies, rather than solely the city where I was located, without great expense. For those organisational researchers conducting exploratory research (and with limited funds), use of email correspondence has the potential to create a broader cross-section of respondents, not only moving beyond the researcher's physical location within their own country but enabling international respondents to participate.

Email correspondence also provides the potential to access individuals whose time demands may inhibit their participation through more traditional data collection methods. Although some concerns have been raised about respondents' ability to effectively communicate via email (Crook & Booth 1997; Murray 1996), I believe email correspondence provides a valuable medium for organisational researchers. Email can be a convenient medium for "busy" people, such as the middle managers in my studies. Use of email allows respondents to have some control over when and where they participate. This benefit was realised in both studies in the fact that a great number of respondents' emails were sent to me after 10pm.

Finally, as discussed above, one of the main reasons for choosing this method was as a way of capturing individuals' day-to-day experiences, while allowing respondents the time to reflect on their responses. As well as providing convenience, both the respondents and the researcher have time to read and consider their exchanges (Murray 1996). This ability for reflection was recognised by respondents to the first study, with one middle manager commenting: 'I have had time to consider each question carefully prior to answering'. Another respondent commented that he had not considered the issues discussed as 'holistically' before, and he found the reflection he undertook during the research process personally useful. The nature of the research question in the second study – focusing on middle managers' personal beliefs as well as their experiences – made the time for reflection by respondents particularly valuable. As one of the respondents stated: 'The rigour of communicating in writing ... has given me a great opportunity to clarify my thoughts.' Depending on the questions a researcher is seeking to answer, this ability for extended reflection provides an opportunity that may not be available in more discrete interactions with participants.

Challenges

The building of rapport is important for qualitative research, as each respondent must feel comfortable enough to openly share their experiences with the researcher (Fontana & Frey 2000). This was a challenge I identified early, particularly with the length of contribution I was asking of respondents. The process of establishing rapport began with preliminary telephone contact with respondents as part of the recruitment process in both studies. Including this early personal contact – essentially "putting a voice to the name" – is a feature that has also been identified in quantitative electronic research. Dillman (2007) argued that potentially one of the most momentous breakthroughs with technology is the potential to combine various mediums of contact and exploit their different advantages. Speaking with potential respondents on the telephone allowed me to address any initial queries, and to emphasise that I was available at any time to answer concerns if and when they arose. As noted previously, I believed that my responding to all emails within 48 hours, as promised, was also a way for me to develop trust and rapport.

The development of rapport, with its features of relieving anxiety and reducing distance between the researcher and respondent (Glesne 1999), is also linked to the notion of developing and indicating an understanding of each respondent's particular situation and experiences. The use of data generation by correspondence requires a particular awareness on the part of the researcher, as concerns have been raised in relation to the use of text-based communication as a way of gaining understanding, mainly centred on the fact that this correspondence 'contains none of the visual or tonal cues of face-to-face communication' (Murray 1996: 228). These cues can often aid researchers in interpretation of messages (Crook & Booth 1997), and can certainly assist an interviewer in a face-to-face situation in determining understanding of the question asked. In my past experiences with face-to-face interviews, pauses, quizzical looks and querulous comments caused me to reword the question to provide further explanation to a respondent. I was conscious of this need to ensure understanding throughout the correspondence process. One way in which the data collection method aided in this was that, as the researcher, I too had time to reflect on my responses and ensuing questions before sending them to respondents. Also, as I was corresponding with a number of participants at the same time, if one person was unclear on a question, it was a learning experience for subsequent communications with both them and others. Similar to other data collection methods, building rapport with respondents requires time and effort on the part of the researcher. Nevertheless, these efforts are often rewarded in the richness of data collected. One of the middle managers in my first study highlighted this benefit: 'From your questions, you were across my responses and I found that particularly rewarding. [I know that] you appreciated the depth of responses, not to mention the time I am spending, commenting to it on a number of occasions.'

Linked to these ideas of rapport building, and quickly and fully responding to participants' emails, a second challenge is the potential for this data collection method to be very "busy". During the first study, I had fifteen participants responding at varying paces, while the recruitment process of the second study, as well as the reduced individual timeframes discussed below, meant that I was corresponding with no more than ten participants at any time. I believe there would be an upper limit on how many respondents can be handled at the one time, depending on the researchers' other commitments. I spoke earlier of at least sending a short email in acknowledgement (advising a more detailed reply would follow), and I did use this concept in the first study when I was unwell for a period during the correspondence phase. However, this slowed the momentum of our correspondence and ultimately increased the time commitment for respondents, as I now consider.

A third challenge is that this method of data collection *is* time-consuming for respondents. In the first study, I sensed a weariness from my respondents as we approached the end of our correspondence; even those who were prolific writers at the start became delayed in their replies over time. In giving feedback at the end of data collection, some respondents noted that, although they enjoyed participating, it was a time-consuming process. For the second study, I reduced the planned data collection period with each respondent to two months, while emphasising that the process would each week involve at least one or two emails as well as a minimum of half an hour of their time. Most respondents have completed within this time period, although the option to extend has still been taken by some, generally when personal situations (such as family, work or health) have impacted their participation. If this method is to be utilised by researchers, it is imperative for attention to be paid to providing a clear context and structure for respondents. Timeframes for each reply should be given, and feedback given to respondents early in the process affirming the content of their responses. The majority of respondents to the first study who provided feedback on the process noted the time-consuming nature of email correspondence. While they also commented that it was still a worthwhile experience for them, this extended time commitment may have been a factor for those who discontinued the process. In the second study, only one of the participants discontinued during the email correspondence phase. I believe that the clear endpoint for the correspondence, in addition to setting a more frequent deadline for responses, may have assisted in reducing participant drop-off. The importance of building rapport with respondents – and the time commitment of the researcher – also plays a role here. This was identified by one of the participants in the second study who commented: 'The feedback was very pertinent to my responses and positive enough to keep me motivated.'

While discussing the time that email correspondence involves for participants, it is worth noting here another outcome of this extended involvement in the research. At the end of data collection in the first study, an offer was made to provide respondents with a copy of the first academic paper produced, should they be interested; this served as a means of showing appreciation for the time and effort provided by respondents. In making this offer, I found a similar experience to that of Murray and Sixsmith (1998), in that respondents to the correspondence phase were particularly vocal in their interest in seeing the research findings. While a number of interview respondents in the second stage made comments such as 'Oh, that would be nice', email respondents replied with a resounding positive. Indeed, some had mentioned an interest in the results during the period of our correspondence. I believe this particular method of data collection, with its extended time period, created a heightened feeling of involvement for these respondents.

Finally, the ethical issues related to use of email correspondence were a critical concern. Ethical discussion around computer-mediated communication is still being developed (Murray 1996), and Im and Chee (2002) argued that 'very few standardised guidelines for human subjects protection in Internet research are currently available' (p. 268). While this particular method avoids the additional privacy issues related to online focus groups (eg. Jones 1994; Waskul & Douglass 1996), it is generally recognised that no online interaction is completely secure (Im & Chee 2002). Decisions on research design must incorporate these concerns. For my first study, middle managers were advised that correspondence needed to occur via a personal (that is, non-work) email address. This decision was made to eliminate the possibility of the organisation they were employed by having access to this correspondence. Computer technologies enable organisational monitoring and interception of email messages (Sharf 1999), although debate continues as to the justification of such action (Miller & Weckert 2000). Although it was considered that respondents could have made an informed decision with respect to this, I personally felt uncomfortable with the degree of uncertainty around this issue and the possible implications. For those respondents who did not have access to personal email, information was provided in how to set up a Hotmail (that is, free) account. One respondent chose this option. At my end, a dedicated email account was established through the university for the sole use of the research project.

I see the ethical consideration of email correspondence with employees as a critical issue for organisational researchers, and an area which warrants further discussion and development. In my current study with middle managers, I hoped to further alleviate some of the potential concerns. For this study, I moved the medium to a password-protected online environment which enabled the correspondence to be contained on a single server. While my main concern was for security, this environment has provided other benefits, as one of the respondents noted: 'It [the online environment] is more convenient than plain email as you have your questions and previous answers in front of you, and it's accessible from any PC, which may not be the case with email.'

CONCLUSION

Email correspondence proved a valuable tool in revealing both middle managers' daily work experiences and their personal beliefs. This method provides benefits particularly for exploratory research as a relatively low-cost method of accessing respondents in a wide geographical area. Its use allows an opportunity for reflection on research questions via a medium which many employees are now comfortable and competent in using. Nevertheless, a number of challenges exist of which the researcher should be aware. Attention must be given to the ethical issues of electronic communication, as well as establishing rapport with respondents alongside the potentially time-intensive nature of the research process. It is hoped that future use and development of email correspondence in research design will allow these challenges to be addressed further. For organisational researchers looking to understand the experiences of employees, this form of data collection should be considered alongside the other qualitative methods available.

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