

Second Edition

# DOING RESEARCH IN BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

An essential guide to planning your project

Mark Saunders  
Philip Lewis

# Doing Research in Business and Management

### ■ Strategy 2: Put yourself in the shoes of the manager receiving your request

If the organisation is likely to be resistant to your approach, you have to think about why that organisation is likely to be resistant. Put yourself in the shoes of the manager receiving your request and think about how to overcome some of that resistance. Strategies 3–6 offer specific guidance on practical steps you take to overcome resistance. All these need you to think through how your request is likely to be seen by the manager receiving your request.

We noted above that the reaction of the manager who receives the request is likely to be ‘What’s in it for the organisation?’ which seems a reasonable reaction. So it’s important to think about any possible benefits to the organisation. And there may be some. Frequently, we have experienced participants who have confessed to us after an interview that they viewed the prospect of being interviewed as a bit of a chore. Yet we have been delighted to hear from them that they found the interview helpful. Rarely do they have the opportunity to talk through issues with an interested outsider. The more probing your questioning, based on thoughtful listening, the more value the participant is likely to get from listening to the responses.

Participants(s) may also appreciate a summary report of the interview, although it is not normally appropriate to send them a copy of your project report. The report is for a different purpose. An interview summary helps in three ways. First, it enables the participant to check the accuracy of your summary, second, it allows the addition of material which may have been overlooked during the interview and last, it shows that you have actually done something as an end product of the interview.

Let’s go back to the worry the manager may have that you will take too much valuable organisational time. Your request for access is more likely to be accepted if the amount of time you ask for is kept to a minimum. And it’s important to be realistic about the amount of time you ask for. Be honest. For example, falsely stating that each interview will last for only 30 minutes, and then deliberately exceeding this, may very likely upset the person you are interviewing and prevent your gaining further access.

### ■ Strategy 3: Make sure you give yourself sufficient time to set up the arrangement

We hope that one of the messages that come across clearly in this book is that of giving yourself plenty of time to complete your research project. To summarise this message: start early!

Nowhere is this message more significant than the issue of allowing sufficient time to set up access to your research organisation. It can take weeks of delay between your original request and the final approval to go ahead (or, regrettably, the refusal). Even where the go-ahead is granted there will be further delay before you gain access to the people from whom you wish to get information.

Assuming that you are not using an existing contact (and even where you may be), you are unlikely to receive a direct reply to your first approach. There will be delay while you wait for this, and then for a response to your follow-up. This raises the question of

the amount of time you should wait, and the ‘tone’ you adopt when sending your ‘reminder’. You must ensure that you keep to the right side of the line between persistence and pestering. Whether you use email, telephone or letter (or a combination of the three) depends on the situation. We have found that a telephone approach with a written follow-up can be very effective.

The larger the organisation, the more time consuming the access negotiation process may be. Where you have no existing contact, it may be necessary to make several telephone calls simply to establish the best person to ensure that your request for access will be considered. If you use a contact given to you, you will still experience delay while your request is considered and an interview meeting arranged at a convenient time. This may take a number of weeks.

More time will be needed for access requests that are more complex. You may wish to get data in a variety of ways from across the organisation which, of course, has the potential for more delays. The official go-ahead from the organisational gatekeeper may mean that you are ‘in’, but you still have to gain cognitive access: the consent, support and trust of those participants you will depend upon for your research data.

One final note to emphasise is that the worst may happen and you receive a refusal. Not only is it essential to have a plan B (or even C and D!), but make sure the necessity to enact plan B does not seriously jeopardise your overall timescale. Following experimentation, psychologists recently have concluded that time passes quickest when we are busy. Many of our students have told us that this is not true: it passes like lightning during the time allocated to a research project!

### Strategy 4: Make your written request professional

Putting your request for research access into writing is highly advisable. Unless you read from script, it is unlikely that you could achieve the same level of precision in a spoken telephone request.

There are several reasons why it is advantageous to put your request in writing in a clearly written manner. Among these are:

- 1 It allows people to be aware precisely of what will be required from them. This is important because asking them for their help without being clear about your needs will probably lead them to be wary, since the amount of time you require from them may be more than they may reasonably expect to give.
- 2 It gives you the opportunity to set your request in context. You can explain the overall purpose of the research, the reason you are doing it, the university and department in which you are studying and the course you are completing.
- 3 It gives you the opportunity to enhance your credibility by presenting a professional image through a well-written and carefully considered request.

Your written request should outline briefly:

- the purpose of your research;
- how the person being contacted might be able to help;



- the demands being made of those taking part in the research;
- a guarantee of anonymity (where appropriate);
- what you will do with the information you get from each person involved, including any intention you may have of sharing the information during or after the data collection stage;
- your contact details so that the person can reply to you.

Should your written request be an email or a traditional letter? The advantages of an email are clear, but don't discount the value of a letter. The impact of the letter may be greater as it is more unusual these days; it is much less easy to delete or mislay; and it gives you greater opportunity to personalise and, therefore, impress. Whichever method you choose, it is essential that your communication achieves the highest standard of which you are capable. This warning is especially appropriate in the case of emails. We all know how easy it is for normal writing standards to drop when we send emails and how tempting it is to hit 'send' without double- and triple-checking in the same way that we may do with traditional written forms of communication. Don't be tempted. The person reading your email may (like us!) be a stickler for correct written English, and may reject your request on these grounds alone (see Research in practice 3.2).

### Research in practice 3.2

#### Writing your research request

Below is a copy of the letter Nazaneen sent to the National Federation of Self Employed & Small Businesses Limited regarding her planned research which we explained in Research in practice 3.1.

Dear Ms Armfield

Further to my telephone call to your assistant, Stephanie Dixon, last Friday April 11th, I would like to introduce myself and explain the reason for me contacting you.

My name is Nazaneen Ghorbani. I am a part-time business studies undergraduate at the University of ..... I also work full-time in one of the major banks. As part of my course I have to complete successfully a research project. I am very interested in the issue of cashless pay, both the technology that facilitates this development and the way in which it has the capacity to change consumer behaviour. This is the subject of my project.

In my review of the large amount of research material available on this topic it seems that the widespread adoption of cashless pay has particularly large important implications for smaller retailers. I would like to gain a closer understanding of the attitudes of small retailers to cashless pay by speaking to you and a number of your members. I hope you are able to help me in this regard.

The details of my research plan are in the attached document called 'Nazaneen Ghorbani Research Proposal'.

At the end of the document I suggest a set of topics/questions for the interviews I plan to conduct, which I hope will be valuable for you in thinking about this prior to my visit. I assure you that I will take no more than one hour of your time and that the information you give me will not be credited to you in any report that I subsequently write without your approval.

I very much hope that you are able to help. If so please email me at Nazaneen@isp.com or call me on 07123 456789. I will then contact Stephanie Dixon to fix an interview at a time and place suitable for you.

I hope we are able to meet in the not too distant future. Meanwhile, thank you for reading this letter.

Yours sincerely  
Nazaneen Ghorbani

### ■ Strategy 5: Work hard to ensure there are no concerns about the way in which you will use the information

You will have noticed that one thing that virtually all organisations have in common is that they like to present a positive front to the world! Even if the news is bad, they work hard to put a less negative aspect on that news than perhaps is justified. Why else would large organisations spend millions on public relations specialists? There is a message here for those of us who want to pursue organisational research. You are unlikely to gain research access if the subject of your research can be perceived as negative. So an inquiry into the reasons for an organisation's market failure in a particular product area is to be avoided. However, you may learn from the public relations experts and lend a positive emphasis to this by, for example, using the organisation of your choice as a context for an inquiry into the changing nature of the demand for a particular product area and what may be learned. Your choice of language in the written request will have to be very carefully considered to ensure that no hint of negativity is suggested.

A more predictable area of concern is that of anonymity. This relates to that information which is given to you and what you do with it once it is given. Some topics, some organisations and some people will be extremely sensitive about anonymity. While this occasionally may be hard to understand, the point remains that it is their information, and you must respect their wishes.

The introductory email or letter offers you the opportunity to give a guarantee of confidentiality in writing at the time of making the request for access. This is a good time to make the initial guarantee, as confidentiality may be uppermost in the minds of the managers who will consider your approach. But do think of this as only the initial guarantee. As you meet more people, you will need to repeat any assurances about confidentiality. This can be done, for example, with an assurance that any information given to you will not be attributed to any individual. It is essential that you honour this assurance, not only for your credibility, but for those researchers who may follow you.

It is quite common for the organisation to ask you to not place your written report in the university library, although you may not have identified the organisation or any individuals. You must check the course requirements here with your supervisor, but whatever the regulations, the confidentiality wishes of your research organisation come first.

### ■ Strategy 6: Underline your credibility!

Perhaps this sixth strategy is a result of the efforts you have put in making your request as professional as possible. The more credible you seem, the more likely you are to receive a favourable response to your request for research access. But there is one point we haven't mentioned so far which we think will really underline your credibility: find out as much as possible about the organisation before requesting access. The more you know about the organisation's context, such as their products and services, markets, competitors, trading position, current challenges and development plans, the better. This will really impress the person you're approaching, particularly if that knowledge blends thoughtfully with the information you are seeking and your research question(s) and objectives.

### ■ In the end, do what's possible

Like many research considerations, getting access to your research organisation is a balance between what is ideal and what is possible. OK, so you want to make sure that you get a representative sample, conduct your interviews in a uniform way and collect sufficient data to ensure the answers to your research question(s) and objectives are valid and reliable. But life isn't perfect. People will deny you access to information, limit your interview time, lose your questionnaire, go on holiday, and leave the organisation in the middle of your research. You are at the mercy of events. You can manage much of the process, but you can't control the uncontrollable!

**Table 3.1** Checklist of points to follow to increase your chances of getting access to your chosen research organisation

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- Be clear about the overall purpose of your research project.
  - Write your research question(s) and objectives.
  - Use existing contacts where possible.
  - Consider using your work placement organisation (if appropriate) as a setting for your research project.
  - Approach relevant appropriate local and/or national employer, or employee, professional or trade bodies to see if they can suggest contacts.
  - Make a direct approach to an organisation to identify the most appropriate manager.
  - Think about the possible benefits for the organisation, should access be granted to you.
  - Offer a report summarising your findings.
  - Allow yourself plenty of time for the entire process.
  - Allow sufficient time to contact intended participants and gain their consent, once access has been granted.
  - If you make your initial request for access by telephone, follow this with an email or letter to confirm your request.
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**Table 3.1** Continued

- Make sure the construction, tone, language, spelling, grammar and presentation of an introductory email or letter are all likely to persuade the person to help you.
- Consider how you will address concerns about the amount of organisational time you would take up.
- Ensure you have considered any sensitivities concerning your research topic.
- Assure participants or respondents you have recognised any needs for confidentiality and/or anonymity.
- Think about a range of contact methods for potential participants to use to reply.

## 3.5 Managing yourself

We now move on to consider the management of those components of the research process over which you have more control: managing yourself, your supervisor and your university.

### Managing your time

We have already mentioned in this chapter elements of time management, particularly those that refer to the process of gaining access to your research organisation. Here we consider time management more widely, both in terms of your research project schedule and the allocation of time to your research.

It is important that you complete a research project plan at the beginning of your research. Indeed, this may be a university requirement, as it helps your supervisor assess the viability of your research proposal. It's useful if you divide your research plan into stages. This will give you a clear idea as to what is possible in the given timescale. But don't forget that however well your time is organised, the whole process seems to take longer than you planned. An example of the sort of schedule you may develop is shown in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2** Research project schedule

<i>Task</i>	<i>To be completed by</i>
Generate list of research ideas	10.10.2016
Choose research topic	1.11.2016
Undertake preliminary literature review	1.11.2016
Define research questions and objectives and submit research proposal	10.11.2016
Main literature reading	10.12.2016
Literature review written	31.12.2016
Methods chosen and draft method chapter written	10.01.2017
Fieldwork commenced	20.01.2017
All data collected and fieldwork notes completed	01.03.2017
All data analysed ready for draft findings and conclusions chapters to be written	20.03.2017
Final draft submitted to supervisor	15.04.2017
Final submission	30.05.2017