



Michael D Myers

**QUALITATIVE
RESEARCH**
in **BUSINESS &
MANAGEMENT**

THIRD EDITION



Michael D. Myers

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Qualitative Research in Business and Management is an accessible and well-structured introduction in qualitative research. Myers clearly explains the main concepts and principles of qualitative research, illustrating them with recent examples from top journals. Being concise and comprehensive, I consider this the best textbook in the field.

**Inge Bleijenbergh,
Associate Professor Research Methods,
Radboud University, the Netherlands**

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Assistant Editor: Martha Cunneen
Digital content assistant: Sunita Patel
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Copyeditor: Peter Williams
Proofreader: Jill Birch
Indexer: Melanie Gee
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael D. Myers is Professor of Information Systems in the Department of Information Systems and Operations Management at the University of Auckland Business School, Auckland, New Zealand. His research interests are in the areas of qualitative research methods in information systems, digital transformation, and the social, organizational and cultural aspects of information systems.

Michael has published research articles in many journals including *Communications of the ACM*, *Communications of the AIS*, *European Journal of Information Systems*, *Information and Management*, *Information and Organization*, *Information Systems Journal*, *Information Systems Research*, *Information Technology and People*, *Journal of Management Information Systems*, *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, *Journal of Information Technology*, *MIS Quarterly* and *Pacific Asia Journal of the AIS*. He has also written a book entitled *Qualitative Research in Business and Management*, first published by Sage Publications in 2009, (this being the 3rd edition).

Michael won the Best Paper award (with Heinz Klein) for the most outstanding paper published in *MIS Quarterly* in 1999. This paper has been cited over 5,500 times. He also won the Best Paper Award (with Lynda Harvey) for the best paper published in *Information Technology and People* in 1995 and the Emerald Literati Network Outstanding Paper Award 2012 (with Michelle Soakell) for the most outstanding paper published in *VINE* in 2011.

Michael served as President of the Association for Information Systems in 2006–7 and as Chair of the International Federation of Information Processing (IFIP) Working Group 8.2 from 2006 to 2008. He also served as a Senior Editor of *MIS Quarterly* from 2001 to 2005 and as a Senior Editor of *Information Systems Research* from 2008 to 2010. He continues to serve as Senior Editor of the *European Journal of Information Systems*, *Information and Organization* and *Pacific Asia Journal of the AIS*. He is a Fellow of the Association for Information Systems.

PREFACE

This third edition of *Qualitative Research in Business and Management* has been updated with some of the more recent developments in qualitative research, such as an increased focus on social media, big data and the Internet. This edition also contains many new examples of qualitative research. Like the previous edition, the book is aimed primarily at graduate and postgraduate students in business and management. It is especially appropriate for research Master's and PhD students who are intending to conduct their first qualitative research project. Additionally, the book might be helpful for faculty members who have been trained in quantitative research methods, but want to learn more about the potential of qualitative research. For instructors and lecturers, online resources for the book are available at <https://study.sagepub.com/myers3e>.

This book is relevant for students in almost all of the business disciplines, including accounting, employment relations, finance, human resource management, information systems, international business, management, marketing, operations management, organization development and strategic management.

The content of the book is derived from over 25 years of teaching qualitative research to postgraduate students in information systems at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. I have also taught qualitative research workshops for PhD students and faculty members in many countries, including Australia, China, the Czech Republic, England, Finland, Malaysia, Portugal, South Africa and the United States. These workshops have varied in length from half a day to five days. Additionally, I have published many qualitative research articles in academic journals and books and have served as a senior editor of four excellent research journals in information systems (*European Journal of Information Systems*, *Information and Organization*, *Information Systems Research* and *MIS Quarterly*). For all these journals I have handled qualitative manuscripts only. I am also on the Editorial Advisory Board of *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*.

In addition to this experience within the field of information systems, in 2003 I was appointed as the Associate Dean (Postgraduate and Research) at the University of Auckland. My five years of experience in this role enabled me to familiarize myself with the research being conducted in all of the business disciplines. I began to realize that many

of the issues that qualitative researchers face in information systems were remarkably similar to those being faced in every other business discipline. Although some business disciplines are further ahead than others in their acceptance and use of qualitative research, all have followed a fairly similar path. Whereas most business disciplines favoured quantitative research in the 1980s, from the 1990s there was an increased interest in qualitative research. Today many articles using qualitative research are published in the top peer-reviewed journals of virtually every business discipline. It is now generally recognized that both qualitative and quantitative research have their strengths and weaknesses, and both are needed to study business and management.

The structure of this book, as a general rule, follows the one I developed for my website entitled 'Qualitative Research in Information Systems' at www.qual.auckland.ac.nz. This particular work was accepted for publication by *MISQ Discovery* in 1997 and is available as part of Aisnet.org (a collection of resources sponsored by the Association for Information Systems). This website received the Value-Added Site Award sponsored by the Academy of Management's Organizational Communication and Information Systems Division and AISWorld in 1996–7, the AISWorld Challenge Award from the Association for Information Systems in 2004, and the AIS Technology Challenge Award in 2013. A similar structure was also used for an edited book providing a collection of qualitative research readings in the information systems field (Myers & Avison, 2002).

Of course, this particular book is substantially different from those two earlier works in that the present work is concerned with qualitative research in all of the business and management disciplines (in contrast to the earlier one which focuses solely on the field of information systems). Also, this book is a sole-authored work representing an expanded treatment of my own views about qualitative research rather than a collection of readings.

I hope you find the book interesting and helpful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all the qualitative researchers who have encouraged and inspired me over the years. I am especially grateful to Heinz Klein, with whom I enjoyed a very productive and collaborative relationship. Sadly, Heinz passed away in 2008. As a relatively young researcher when we first met in 1992, I learnt from Heinz what it takes to get published in a top research journal. I have also enjoyed working with many other scholars, such as David Avison, Richard Baskerville, Kevin Crowston, Lynda Harvey, Bob Kuo, Cecilia Lin, Mike Newman, M. N. Ravishankar, David Sundaram, Tuure Tuunanen, Cathy Urquhart, John Venable, Youngjin Yoo and my own PhD students including J. C. (David) Lee, Brad McKenna, Karin Olesen, Christine Beckett, Ranjan Vaidya, Paul Braund, Hameed Chughtai and Michelle Soakell-Ho. I consider it a privilege to have worked and become friends with so many talented people around the world.

I would also like to thank the following people: Hamish Kumar, who helped me to collect and update many of the examples of qualitative research from various business disciplines for the third edition; Felicity Hullah and Mariyam Adam, who helped me prepare many of the examples of qualitative research for the two previous editions; Margo Buchanan-Oliver, who made many suggestions for improvement, particularly to the chapter on semiotics; Cathy Urquhart, who provided many excellent recommendations for improving the second edition; Peter Smith, for his suggestions regarding thematic analysis for the third edition; and the anonymous reviewers who reviewed the first and second editions and made many excellent suggestions for improvements to this third edition.

I am also grateful to my wife, Kathleen, for supporting me in my research work all these years. She very kindly commented on and proof-read every chapter for me.

Michael D. Myers
Auckland
March 2019

YOUR GUIDE TO THIS BOOK

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Understand the purpose of qualitative research
- Appreciate the benefits of qualitative research
- Recognize what counts as research and what does not
- Distinguish between quantitative and qualitative research
- Decide whether or not to use triangulation
- See how qualitative research can contribute to the rigour and relevance of research



Exercises

1. Conduct a brief literature search using Google Scholar or some other bibliographic database and see if you can find both qualitative and quantitative articles in your chosen field. What kinds of topics appear?
2. Looking at some of the articles you found in more detail, can you describe the research problem and the research questions? Can you describe the research method(s) that the author(s) used? Did any of them use triangulation?
3. Looking at these same articles, would you describe some of them as more rigorous or relevant than the others? Why?

Learning Outcomes boxes outline what you can expect to learn from reading a chapter.

Exercises will help you to test your knowledge and understanding of the key topic areas. These can be found at the end of each chapter and are ideal for revision.

Further Reading

Articles



An article by Dubé & Paré (2003) discusses how positivist case study research can be evaluated. Walsham (1995) discusses how interpretive case studies can be evaluated while the article by Klein & Myers (1999) suggests a set of principles by which interpretive field studies (both case studies and ethnographies) can be evaluated. Myers & Klein (2011) suggest a set of principles for evaluating critical case study research (along with ethnographic field studies).

Books



One of the best books on case study research is *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* by Yin (2018). This book, now in its 6th edition, provides an excellent introduction to the case study research method. However, you should keep in mind that Yin, by and large, adopts a positivistic approach to case study research.

Further Reading provides suggestions of books and articles which will help you to further explore the important ideas from the chapter.

Websites

Here are a few useful websites on grounded theory:



- The Wikipedia entry on grounded theory is useful at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grounded_theory
- The Grounded Theory Institute is dedicated to Glaser's view of grounded theory at www.groundedtheory.com/. It is a very useful site and provides additional references and materials
- A short introduction to grounded theory is provided by Steve Borgatti at www.analytictech.com/mb870/introGT.htm
- More references on grounded theory are available at www.qual.auckland.ac.nz

To access these links, as well as additional suggestions for further reading online, visit <https://study.sagepub.com/myers3e>.

Weblinks offer a varied selection of useful websites related to the main themes of the book.

ONLINE RESOURCES



GO ONLINE

The third edition of *Qualitative Research in Business and Management* is supported by a selection of online resources for students and lecturers. Visit <https://study.sagepub.com/myers3e> for to access the following:

FOR STUDENTS

- **Further Reading** – A selection of free SAGE journal articles related to each chapter, to further develop and support your understanding.
- **Web Links** – Helpful suggestions of where you can explore the themes of each chapter online. These can be accessed directly from the website by clicking on the links provided.

FOR INSTRUCTORS

- **PowerPoint slides** – a suite of PowerPoint slides highlighting the main points in each chapter. Customisable to suit your lecture style and learning objectives.

PART I

Introduction

Part I provides a general introduction to **qualitative research** in business and management. Chapter 1 suggests how you can use this book to best advantage. Chapter 2 provides an overview of qualitative research. It discusses the motivation for doing qualitative research, the differences between qualitative and **quantitative research** and how qualitative research can contribute to the rigour and relevance of research in business and management.

1

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I decided to write this book for several reasons. First, there are few textbooks that deal specifically with qualitative research in business and management. Often, professors and teachers of qualitative research in business schools use books that are written for a much wider audience, such as the social sciences more generally.

Second, of the few books that are available for students of business and management, most tend to be somewhat narrow in their treatment. They focus on just one or two **research methods** (such as **action research** and/or **case study research**) and often fail to appreciate the potential of different underlying research philosophies (e.g. **interpretive research**), or of different ways of analysing qualitative data.

Third, I have noticed a tendency for writers of qualitative books in business and management to be somewhat defensive about the use of qualitative research. The tone is one of lamenting the current lack of acceptance of qualitative research in business. Often there are complaints about how difficult it is to get qualitative research articles into the top journals.

The purposes of this book, therefore, are as follows:

- to provide a qualitative textbook that focuses specifically on business and management;
- to provide a broad, reasonably comprehensive discussion of the various qualitative research methods (and their philosophical underpinnings) that researchers can use;
- to provide a qualitative textbook that is enthusiastic and positive about the use of qualitative research in business and management.

With regard to the last point, this book provides examples of qualitative studies drawn from many business and management disciplines. Almost all of the examples have been drawn from the top journals in the disciplines concerned, e.g. *Academy of Management Journal* in management, *MIS Quarterly* in the **field** of information systems or *Journal of Consumer Research* in marketing. This third edition contains over 60 examples of qualitative research articles from these top journals! This selection of examples from some of the

top research journals shows that qualitative researchers in business no longer need to be apologetic or defensive about their research. It seems obvious to me that both qualitative and quantitative research methods are needed to study business phenomena.

In the remainder of this short chapter I will outline the structure of the book and highlight some of its significant features.

Part I provides an introduction to the book and an overview of qualitative research. A key theme is the contribution that qualitative research can make to research in business and management.

Part II provides an overview of some fundamental concepts in qualitative research. It looks at various approaches to research philosophy, **research design** and research **ethics**. I believe it is important for research students to be aware of the different underlying assumptions and research designs that can inform qualitative research. All qualitative researchers should make their research designs and underlying philosophical assumptions explicit.

Part III deals with the most common research methods that are used in business and management today. I define a research method as a strategy of enquiry or a way of finding **empirical** data about the (social) world. Chapter 6 deals with action research, Chapter 7 case study research, Chapter 8 ethnographic research and Chapter 9 **grounded theory**. A key feature of this part of the book is that it outlines the advantages and disadvantages of the various research methods.

In Part IV, I discuss the use of qualitative techniques for data collection. In business and management, the most important qualitative technique is the use of **interviews** (Chapter 10). However, **participant observation** and **fieldwork** are discussed in Chapter 11 and the use of **documents** in Chapter 12.

Part V focuses on analysing and interpreting qualitative data. The tremendous variety in approaches is reviewed in Chapter 13, whereas the following three chapters discuss three specific approaches in more detail. These are **hermeneutics** (Chapter 14), **semiotics** (Chapter 15) and narrative and metaphor (Chapter 16).

In Part VI, I look at writing up and publishing qualitative research. Chapter 17 focuses solely on the process of writing up (mostly for a thesis or dissertation) whereas Chapter 18 focuses on getting published. As journal articles tend to count much more than books in all the business and management disciplines, I provide some practical guidance with respect to getting qualitative research work published in **peer-reviewed** conferences and academic journals. This is one of the distinguishing features of the book.

Part VII is the concluding section. Chapter 19 looks at qualitative research in perspective. This is followed by a glossary of some of the most commonly used terms in qualitative research.

2

OVERVIEW OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Understand the purpose of qualitative research
- Appreciate the benefits of qualitative research
- Recognize what counts as research and what does not
- Distinguish between quantitative and qualitative research
- Decide whether or not to use triangulation
- See how qualitative research can contribute to the rigour and relevance of research



2.1 WHY DO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Qualitative research methods are designed to help researchers understand people and what they say and do. They are designed to help researchers understand the social and cultural contexts within which people live.

One of the key benefits of qualitative research is that it allows a researcher to see and understand the *context* within which decisions and actions take place. It is often the case that human decisions and actions can only be understood in context – it is the context that helps to ‘explain’ why someone acted as they did. And this context (or multiple contexts) is best understood by talking to people.

Qualitative researchers contend that it is virtually impossible to understand why someone did something or why something happened in an organization, without talking to people about it. Imagine if the police tried to solve a serious crime without being able to talk to the suspects or witnesses. If the police were restricted to using only quantitative data, almost no crimes would be solved. Imagine if lawyers and judges were not allowed to question or cross-examine witnesses in court. The validity and reliability of any court decision would be thrown into serious doubt. So, likewise, qualitative researchers argue that if you want to understand people's motivations, their reasons, their actions, and the context for their beliefs and actions in an in-depth way, qualitative research is best. Kaplan & Maxwell (1994) say that the goal of understanding a phenomenon from the point of view of the participants and its particular social and institutional context is largely lost when textual data are quantified.

One of the primary motivations for doing qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, research comes from the **observation** that, if there is one thing which distinguishes humans from the natural world, it is their ability to talk. It is only by talking to people, or reading what they have written, that we can find out what they are thinking, and understanding their thoughts goes a long way towards explaining their actions.

Types of Questions Using Qualitative Research

The questions that a qualitative researcher might typically ask are what, why, how and when questions:

- **What** is happening here?
- **Why** is it happening?
- **How** has it come to happen this way?
- **When** did it happen?

2.2 WHAT IS RESEARCH?

In a university setting, research is defined as an *original investigation* undertaken in order to contribute to knowledge and understanding in a particular field. Research is a creative activity leading to the production of *new* knowledge. The knowledge produced

is new in the sense that the facts, the interpretation of those facts or the theories used to explain them might not have been used in a particular way before in that specific discipline.

Research typically involves enquiry of an empirical or conceptual nature and is conducted by people with specialist knowledge about the subject matter, theories and methods in a specific field. Research may involve contributing to the intellectual infrastructure of a subject or discipline (e.g. by publishing a dictionary). In some fields, such as engineering, computer science, or information systems, research can also include the experimental design of new artefacts. Engineers often try to develop new or substantially improved materials, devices, products or processes.

Of course, as more research is published, the subject matter, theories and methods used in a particular field may change over time. For this reason, scholars in many disciplines will write a literature review of previous relevant research to show that they understand and are up-to-date with the latest thinking.

But how do we know that the research results are new? How do we know that the findings are original? How do we know that the research was conducted in a rigorous manner?

The only way to tell if the research findings are both sound and original is if those findings are open to scrutiny and formal evaluation by experts in a particular field. That is, the findings must be evaluated by those who are experienced and 'qualified' to do so. If these experts, in evaluating the research, find that the results are sound and that the findings are new to *them*, then we can say that the research project represents an original contribution to knowledge.

This way of evaluating the quality of research in science is called the peer review system. The peer review system exists in all scientific disciplines and is what distinguishes science from most other human endeavours. It is a system of quality assurance. Of course, the peer review system is a social system and as such it has its drawbacks, but it does ensure that only research of a certain standard is published. I discuss the peer review system and the publication process in more detail in Part VI.

It should be clear from the above discussion that some activities do not count as research in a university setting (Tertiary Education Commission, 2005). Some of these activities are as follows:

- The preparation of teaching materials. Teaching materials are excluded since they are not normally formally evaluated by experts in the field as a whole. For example, case study books written for teaching purposes are written primarily for students, not researchers. As Yin describes, 'For teaching purposes, a case study need not contain a complete or accurate rendition of actual events; rather, its purpose is to establish

a framework for discussion and debate among students' (2003: 2). The distinction between producing case studies for teaching and research is discussed more fully in Chapter 7.

- The provision of advice or opinion, e.g. consulting work.
- Feasibility studies (where the output is a recommendation to a client).
- Routine data collection (where there is no attempt to contribute to new knowledge in the field as a whole).
- Routine information systems development (where the output is a new or improved product for a client, not the experimental design of a new product or service).
- Any other routine professional practice.

2.3 QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH COMPARED

There are many different ways to classify and characterize different types of research. However, one of the most common distinctions is between qualitative and quantitative research methods (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Examples of qualitative and quantitative research

Qualitative research: A focus on text	Quantitative research: A focus on numbers
Action research	Surveys
Case study research	Laboratory experiments
Ethnography	Simulation
Grounded theory	Mathematical modelling
Semiotics	Structured equation modelling
Discourse analysis	Statistical analysis
Hermeneutics	Econometrics
Narrative and metaphor	

Quantitative research methods were originally developed in the natural sciences to study natural phenomena. Examples of quantitative methods now well accepted in the social sciences include survey methods, laboratory experiments, formal methods (e.g. econometrics) and numerical methods such as mathematical modelling. All quantitative researchers emphasize numbers more than anything else. That is, the numbers represent

values or levels of various theoretical constructs and these numbers are viewed as strong scientific evidence of how a phenomenon works. Most quantitative researchers use statistical tools and packages to analyse their data.

Qualitative research methods were developed in the social sciences to enable researchers to study social and cultural phenomena. Examples of qualitative methods are action research, case study research and grounded theory. Qualitative data sources include observation and participant observation (fieldwork), interviews and questionnaires, documents and texts, and the researcher's impressions and reactions. Qualitative data are mostly a record of what people have said. For example, interviews (the most common technique for collecting qualitative data) record what one of your informants said about a particular topic; **field notes** record what the researcher experienced or thought about a particular topic or event; and documents record what the author of the document wrote at the time. In all cases, these qualitative data can help us to understand people, their motivations and actions, and the broader context within which they work and live.

In the 1980s most business disciplines favoured quantitative research. In the 1990s, however, there was an increased interest in qualitative research in almost every business discipline. The quality of this research improved over time such that many articles using qualitative research have now been published in the top peer-reviewed journals of virtually every business discipline.

My view is that both quantitative and qualitative research approaches are useful and necessary in researching business organizations. Both kinds of research are important and both kinds of research can be rigorous. Most of the resources and readings cited in this book have been peer reviewed by leading experts and published in the top journals in the various business disciplines. However, there are advantages and disadvantages in each approach.

Generally speaking, quantitative research is best if you want to have a large sample size and you want to generalize to a large population. In this case the objective is to study a particular topic across many people or many organizations. You want to find out trends or patterns that apply in many different situations. Various statistical techniques can be used to analyse your data.

A major disadvantage of quantitative research is that, as a general rule, many of the social and cultural aspects of organizations are lost or are treated in a superficial manner. The 'context' is usually treated as 'noise' or as something that gets in the way. The quantitative researcher trades context for the ability to generalize across a population.

Qualitative research is best if you want to study a particular subject in depth (e.g. in one or a few organizations). It is good for **exploratory research** when the particular

topic is new and there is not much previously published research on that topic. It is also ideal for studying the social, cultural and political aspects of people and organizations. A special section of the *Academy of Management Journal* was devoted to the ‘power of rich’ research (see Rynes, 2007).

A major disadvantage of qualitative research, however, is that it is often difficult to generalize to a larger population. You can generalize from qualitative research, but not by using sampling logic. For instance, if you conduct three in-depth case studies of three organizations, a sample size of three does not count for much in statistical terms. Three cases are no better than one. Therefore it is normally impossible for qualitative researchers to make generalizations from a sample to a population.

However, you can generalize from qualitative research to theory and you can generalize from just one case study or one **ethnography** (Klein & Myers, 1999; Lee & Baskerville, 2003; Yin, 2018). How you can use qualitative research to make generalizations and how the contributions and quality of qualitative research studies can be evaluated is discussed in each of the chapters in Part III.

Although the qualitative/quantitative distinction in research methods is by far the most common, there are other distinctions which can be made. Research methods have variously been classified as objective versus subjective (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), as being concerned with the discovery of general laws (nomothetic) versus being concerned with the uniqueness of each particular situation (idiographic), as aimed at prediction and control versus aimed at explanation and understanding, as taking an outsider (etic) versus taking an insider (emic) perspective and so on. Considerable controversy continues to surround the use of these terms (Myers & Avison, 2002). However, a discussion of these distinctions is beyond the scope of this book. For a fuller discussion see Luthans & Davis (1982) and Morey & Luthans (1984). See also Chapter 3 which discusses the various philosophical perspectives that can inform research.

2.4 TRIANGULATION

Triangulation is the idea that you should do more than just one thing in a study. That is, you should use more than one research method, use two or more techniques to gather data, or combine qualitative and quantitative research methods in the one study. Triangulation is an excellent idea if you want to look at the same topic from different angles. It allows you to gain a ‘fuller’ picture of what is happening. It allows you to triangulate data from interviews with data from documents, or data from two different research methods (e.g. a qualitative case study with quantitative data from a survey).

Triangulating Case Study Data

Doing marketing research, Fournier (1998) conducted three in-depth case studies looking at the relationships consumers form with brands. She triangulated data within her case studies.

She used multiple stories from the same person, interviews conducted with the same persons at multiple points in time, and information from other data sources, such as grocery lists, shelf contents, stories of other household members and so forth. In addition, researchers who had multiple encounters with informants in previous stages were employed. Thus interpretations were triangulated across researchers and authors as well.

It is relatively common for qualitative researchers to triangulate data within a study using just one research method. For example, a researcher conducting a case study of one organization might triangulate interview data with data from published or unpublished documents or an ethnographer might triangulate data from interviews with data from her fieldwork. Many qualitative research methods require the triangulation of data in some way or other.

Much less common, however, and much more difficult, is when researchers try to combine two or more research methods in the one study. The idea is to triangulate data and findings on the same topic, but to use different methods. Triangulation is especially challenging if the research methods are substantially different in their underlying philosophy or approach, e.g. when researchers try to combine qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Triangulating Qualitative and Quantitative Data

An excellent example of triangulating data obtained from the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods is Markus's (1994a) study of how and why managers use email. Her study questioned the assumptions of media richness theory (that 'richness is better') and demonstrated how a 'lean' medium such as email could be used for complex communication.

To answer her research question, 'how and why do managers use email?' Markus used two research methods. First, she used a quantitative method, a statistically analysed survey. The survey was sent to a large sample of managers. Second, she used a qualitative method called **analytic induction**. The data were purely textual – mostly she used email messages that were sent by managers. She also obtained data from interviews.

Using both quantitative and qualitative research methods meant that Markus had quantitative data (e.g. frequency of email use) and qualitative data (transcripts of email message exchanges). Her findings and conclusions are rigorous and convincing.

I believe it can be difficult for most people to do this kind of triangulation well. This is because you need to be well trained and become an expert in multiple research methods, not just one. Also, each method has its own underlying perspective and involves the use of certain techniques. It can take months, if not years, for someone to become proficient in the use of just one particular method, e.g. ethnography. However, if you have the inclination, enthusiasm and time, this is certainly a worthwhile and viable option. It is something that can be done (Mingers, 2001).

A slightly easier way to achieve the triangulation of research methods is for a single study to include multiple researchers. In this case, each researcher brings to the table his or her own method of expertise and experience. Having multiple researchers and multiple perspectives on any research topic can be positive. A key requirement for the project to be successful, however, is for the researchers concerned to respect each other's expertise and method. There must be mutual respect for any real dialogue to take place. In such cases, the research findings can be truly outstanding.

2.5 RESEARCH IN BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

All research in business and management focuses on a topic that is of relevance to one or more of the business and management disciplines. This disciplinary area is actually very broad and, depending upon your background and institution, may include the following: accounting and finance, commercial law, economics, human resource management, logistics and supply chain management, organizational behaviour and organizational development, information systems, management strategy and international business, marketing and operations management. Of course, these business and management disciplines often build on research from other disciplines, such as statistics, psychology or sociology. The list of potentially relevant disciplines is very large.

A key feature of a qualitative or quantitative study, as opposed to a purely conceptual study, is that it is an empirical investigation, i.e. it relies on empirical data from the natural or social world. The empirical investigation seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge in a particular field. A simple model of the process of empirical research in business and management is represented in Figure 2.1.

As can be seen in the figure, a researcher finds a topic or a research problem that is relevant to the body of knowledge in a particular discipline. Normally, the research questions are derived from the research literature, but they could come from current business practice or your own intuitive hunches (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In order to answer the questions raised by the problem, the researcher subsequently uses a research method

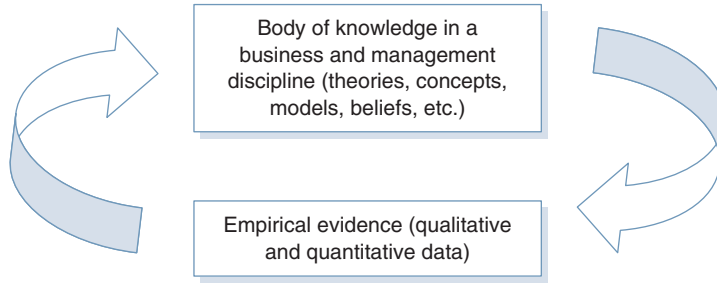


Figure 2.1 A model of research in business and management

to find some empirical evidence. These findings are hopefully significant enough to be published and hence add to the body of knowledge. A new researcher then comes along and starts the process once more.

2.6 RIGOUR AND RELEVANCE IN RESEARCH

A perennial issue for researchers in business and management is the apparent trade-off between rigour and relevance (Table 2.2). It has become a common complaint over the past decade or so that research in business schools has become more rigorous at the expense of relevance.

Table 2.2 Rigour and relevance

Rigorous scientific research	Relevant practical research
Relevant to academics	Relevant to business practitioners
Emphasis on meeting scientific standards such as validity and reliability	Emphasis on being immediately relevant to practice
Subject to academic peer review	Subject to minimal if any review, possibly editorial review
Published in academic journals	Published in consulting reports or magazines
Theoretical contribution	Practical contribution

Rigorous research is usually defined as research that meets the standards of ‘scientific’ research; it is research that has been conducted according to the scientific model of research, subject to peer review and published in an academic journal. Unfortunately,

much of the research that is published in academic business journals is often seen as being too theoretical and of little practical relevance to business professionals.

Relevant research is usually defined as research that is of immediate relevance to business professionals. The research results can be used right away. This kind of research is usually seen as more akin to consulting. Unfortunately, much of this kind of research is difficult, if not impossible, to get published in academic journals in business and management. The lack of a theoretical contribution almost guarantees rejection.

In my own field of information systems, the issue of rigour versus relevance seems to be discussed at almost every conference. Most academics tend to agree with the notion that research in information systems and business schools more generally should be more relevant to business professionals. In practice, however, they are faced with the need to gain tenure and promotion. In order to gain tenure, most business schools in research universities require faculty members to have a record of publication in reputable academic journals. This job requirement means that most faculty members end up postponing indefinitely their desire (if they have one) to conduct 'relevant' research.

As an example of this debate in the management literature more generally, Bennis & O'Toole (2005) argue that business schools focus far too much on what they call 'scientific' research. Writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, they claim that business management is not a scientific discipline but a profession. They lament the fact that business schools have followed a scientific model of research rather than a professional model (as found, for example, in medicine and law). They say that graduating business students are ill equipped to wrangle with the complex, unquantifiable issues that are the reality of business. As most decisions in business are made on the basis of messy and incomplete data, they are particularly critical of statistical and quantitative research which they believe can blind rather than illuminate (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005).

I must admit that I do not entirely agree with Bennis and O'Toole's argument. In my view, the focus on research in business schools has transformed them from having a mostly vocational focus to being proper scholarly institutions. Faculty members have become scholars rather than consultants. Also, while most academic research may not be immediately relevant to business professionals, it may become relevant over the longer term. In fact, I would argue that one of the failings of contemporary management practice is the predilection to seek 'silver bullets', i.e. quick fixes, or magic solutions to more deep-seated problems. Few silver bullets turn out to be of any long-lasting value.

However, I do agree that research in business and management could be much more relevant than it is right now and that it should be able to deal with complex, unquantifiable issues that are the reality of business. And this is where the value of qualitative research lies.

It is my view that qualitative research is perhaps the best way for research in business and management to become both rigorous and relevant at the same time. It allows scholarship and practice to come together. Qualitative researchers study real situations, not artificial ones (as, for example, in a laboratory experiment). To do a good qualitative study, qualitative researchers need to engage actively with people in real organizations. An in-depth field study, in particular, needs to look at the complexity of organizations, including the 'complex, unquantifiable issues' that are the reality of business. A case study researcher or an ethnographer may well study the social, cultural and political aspects of a company.

Hence, if you are trying to decide whether to do qualitative or quantitative research in a business discipline, the choice should not be made on the basis of whether one approach is more rigorous than the other. This would have been a valid question in the 1980s and early 1990s, but it is no longer a valid question today. Rather, the choice should be based on the topic, on the research question you want to ask, on the basis of your own interest and experience, and how relevant you want to be to practice. It is also important to consider the expertise of your supervisor or faculty members in your institution. If you want to use qualitative research but there is no one with the qualifications, interest or experience to supervise you at your university, then it is probably best to choose a different topic and method or change university.

2.7 EXAMPLES

1. Demonstrating the Value of Qualitative Research: A Hermeneutic Interpretation of a Controlled Laboratory Experiment

Lee & Dennis (2012) demonstrate the value of qualitative research by reinterpreting the findings of a previously published quantitative study. The original quantitative study (a laboratory experiment) sought to demonstrate the decision-making benefits of a group support system, but the findings turned out to be contradictory. The experiment yielded results that were altogether unexpected by the researchers who conducted it. Using a qualitative analysis approach called hermeneutics, Lee & Dennis (2012) reinterpret the findings of the original study. Instead of using just the quantitative data, they take the perspectives of the experiment's human subjects and the original researchers themselves as the basis on which to interpret what happened in the experiment. They show that the subjective meanings held by the human subjects and the researchers themselves played a significant role in shaping the experimental outcomes. For example, the

original researchers simply assumed a ‘rational man’ theory of human behaviour (like the rational man theory in microeconomics). However, by using a qualitative analysis approach, Lee and Dennis reveal that the human subjects brought their socially constructed world of personal friends, histories and even their popular **culture** into the laboratory. This is consistent with what one would expect using qualitative research but unanticipated by the quantitative experimenters.

2. Triangulating Qualitative and Quantitative Research: Investigating the Nature and Consequences of Brand Love

Batra et al.’s (2012) article is an excellent example of triangulation. The article improves our understanding of the consumer experience of brand love, which includes both a love emotion and love relationship with a particular brand (e.g. Apple, Samsung). The authors conducted two qualitative studies followed by a quantitative study. The first study consisted of 70 structured telephone interviews followed by 10 in-depth interviews, where respondents were asked to compare loved and not-loved items, as well as interpersonal and non-interpersonal love. The second study focused specifically on loved brands and included 18 detailed interviews. The authors used a qualitative research method called grounded theory to uncover the different elements of brand love. In the third study, the authors used a quantitative method called structured equation modelling to develop a model of brand love. They say that their model is able to predict brand loyalty, word of mouth and brand resistance, and helps provide a greater understanding of brand love.



Exercises

1. Conduct a brief literature search using Google Scholar or some other bibliographic database and see if you can find both qualitative and quantitative articles in your chosen field. What kinds of topics appear?
2. Looking at some of the articles you found in more detail, can you describe the research problem and the research questions? Can you describe the research method(s) that the author(s) used? Did any of them use triangulation?
3. Looking at these same articles, would you describe some of them as more rigorous or relevant than the others? Why?