

Research Methods in Perspective of HR Managers

Ahmad Awais

Business School, University of Bedfordshire,
UNITED KINGDOM.

inspired.ahmad@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This piece of paper has closely looked into the uses and limitations of research methods in relation to HR Managers. Rich literature is available regarding research methods and its benefits for marketers, researchers and professionals. However, particular reference with HR Managers has not been explored frequently in the past. Therefore, discussion and analysis of available research methods has been done in this paper then their particular linkage with the HR Managers has been presented which will help the readers to understand on how research methods can be helpful for HR Managers in their day to day work life.

Keywords: Qualitative research, quantitative research, limitations, classification, data collection, purpose of research, decision making, , HR Managers, research design, applied research

INTRODUCTION

In this article we will briefly look into several factors related to research its uses and its limitations regarding HR managers. We will first highlight different methods of doing research and the purposes of different types of research. Then we will examine the relevance of research for HR managers in their day to day life i.e. the influence of research when approaching a specific task in their job.

CLASSIFICATION OF RESEARCH

Research can be classified in many shapes and sizes. Before the start of conducting a study, researcher must decide on a specific method of research. The understanding of advantages and disadvantages of each type of research is essential for researchers to have even though mostly they end up with specializing in one. Following are the four dimensions for classifying research given by (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011): i) The purpose of conducting research, ii) The uses of research that are intended, iii) How the dimension of time is being treated in research, and iv) The data collection techniques being used.

These dimensions are reinforcing factor for each other and this is a purpose of tending to go with particular techniques and specific uses (Neuman, 2003). Under the first dimension we have exploratory or formulative research which is used when you are exploring a new topic or issue or previously it has little written on it. Then we have descriptive research under this dimension which is used for describing the characteristics of a phenomenon or population i.e. it answers to what, when, who, where and how questions. Focus surveys, educational census and labor force surveys are examples. Then we have explanatory research under this dimension which has the purpose of explaining the “why” question (Zikmund, 2003). It builds on descriptive and exploratory research and it goes on to look for reasons and causes. Under the second dimensions which are “uses of research” we have the basic and applied researches which are defined below:

Research is mainly used by some researchers for advancing their general knowledge, whereas some researchers use it for solving some specific problems. Basic research is used by those individuals who are seeking an understanding of the original nature of the social reality (this is also called fundamental research or pure research or academic research). In contrast, applied researchers look forward to apply and tailor the knowledge for addressing a particular practical issue. They want to either solve an economic and social problem or to answer a policy related question (Zikmund, 2003). Applied researchers are willing to solve policy related problems or to help practitioners in accomplishing their task. For them, theory is of less central attention as they seek to solve a specific problem given for a limited setting (Saunders et al, 2009). Applied research normally is a descriptive research, and the major strength of this type is its instant practical use. Applied research is carried out when a decision is required regarding a particular real-life problem i.e. it encompasses such studies which are directed towards making a decision regarding particular course of policy or action. For example, a company is considering a paperless office and launching a networking system for the personal computers of the company so they might conduct research for learning the amount of time spent of computers by its employees in an average week. Under applied research we have further types i.e. impact assessment research, evaluation research and action research (Nykiel, 2007).

Now under the third dimension which is “time” i.e. how we treat time in our research, we have cross-sectional research and longitudinal research. Cross-sectional research is the least costly and simplest alternative in which researchers observe at one point in time (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). It can be exploratory, explanatory and descriptive but the most consistent approach with this is the descriptive one but, the disadvantage of cross-sectional is that it cannot capture the change process.

Longitudinal observes features of people at more than one time. It is more costly and complex than the previous one but it is also more powerful especially when it comes to know about the change. It further has three types i.e. the panel study, time series research and a cohort analysis. The fourth dimension is data collection techniques i.e. how researchers collect data and this can be divided into two parts qualitative (data in the shape of pictures or words) and quantitative (data in the form of numbers). The main techniques used in quantitative method are surveys, content analysis, experiments, using existing statistics. The main techniques used in qualitative method are field research, focus group discussion, interviews and case study (Sekaran, 2004). Now after defining and understanding the methods of doing research we will move towards our main body in which we will focus on two methods of research i.e. qualitative & quantitative and will discuss their possible benefits and disadvantages for managers and its limitations as well. We will analyze that which research method is more appropriate for HR managers and to what extent research is beneficial for them and what its limitations are when it comes to the use of practitioners.

QUANTITATIVE METHOD OF RESEARCH

The positive or functional pattern that guides this method of quantitative research has assumptions as its basis i.e. the structure of ontology is part of the social reality and that, for this objective environment individuals are agents for responding them (Creswell, 2003).

This type of research includes measuring and counting of incidents and conducting the analysis based on statistical technique regarding a numerical data set. The underlying assumption of stating the positive paradigm is the fact that in this world truth which is objective exist which can be explained and measured scientifically. Valid, reliable and generalizable measurement is the major focus of the quantitative model for its apparent guess

of cause & effect (Cassell & Symon, 1994). Being particularistic and deductive, this type of research depends on preparing hypotheses of research and verifying it by using a set of empirical data which is specific. Value-free scientific hypotheses are an attribute of this method and own biases, values and preferences of researchers which are subjective are not allowed in this type of method. In this method researchers can take the process of communication as tangible and concrete and devoid of contacting the concerned people involved in communication researchers can analyze it (Neuman, 2000).

Advantages of Quantitative Research Method are as Follows:

1. Research problem is stated in very specific and set terms.
2. Precisely and clearly specifying both the dependent and independent variables under investigation.
3. Firmly follows the original set of research goals, arrives at objective conclusions, tests hypothesis and determination the issues of causality.
4. It gives the high level of reliability of data gathered due to mass surveys, laboratory experiments, controlled observations or other form of research manipulation (Creswell & Clark, 2007).
5. Minimizing or eliminating subjectivity of judgment.
6. It allows the longitudinal measures of the consequent performance of research subjects.
7. This type of research allows the measurement of data and its analysis and the relationship between a dependent and independent variable is studied in detail. This is beneficial because researchers are more objective regarding the findings of their research.

Disadvantages of Quantitative Research method are discussed as:

1. The major disadvantage of this research is the context of the study. This method does not discuss things in a natural setting or study the different meaning things have for different people like what qualitative research provides (Mindy et al, 2006).
2. Another weakness is that the study of a large population sample must be conducted and the larger is the sample of people to be researched, the more accurate results you will get statistically.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

This method shares the theoretical supposition of the interpretative model, which has the basis of notion that social reality is sustained and created via the subjective experience of individuals involved in communication. The main concern of qualitative researchers in their research is to make effort for accurately decoding, describing and interpreting the meaning of phenomena taking place in their normal social context (Fryer, 1991). Within the framework of interpretative paradigm the researchers operate by focusing on examining the authenticity, complexity, shared objectivity, contextualization and minimization of illusion (Fryer, 1991).

The occurrence of this type of research is more likely in a natural setting (Gill & Johnson 2005), which means that the topic for study focuses on daily routine as “defined”, smoothed, enacted and made problematic by individuals going about their routines”. The imposition of restrictive a priori classification is less likely to be imposed by qualitative research on the collection of data. It is less driven by categorical frameworks and specific hypotheses and concerned more with emergent idiographic descriptions and themes (Cassell & Symon,

1994). The three characteristics of qualitative research can be defined by extending the basic belief of interpretative paradigm. Firstly, this research is the study of symbolic communication or discourse which constitutes of the study of conversations and texts. Secondly, this research is the study of interpretive principles that individuals use for giving sense to their symbolic activities. Thirdly, this research is the study of contextual principles i.e. the physical setting, the role of participants and a set of situational events for guiding the interpretation of communication or discourse (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Benefits of Qualitative Research

1. This type of research is useful when the study is at its early stages and when the researcher is unsure may be of exactly what should be the focus.
2. A strict design plan is not needed for starting this type of research.
3. This type gives more freedom to researcher for unfolding the study more naturally (Denzin, 2010).
4. The researcher can get rich data and more detailed in the form of visual evidence or written descriptions.
5. Social meaning and context is more closely looked in this type and how it can affect individuals which are beneficial especially in social sciences.

Disadvantages of Qualitative Research

1. This method of research gives a subjective view of the study to its researcher as this method involves heavily on its researcher in the process. The researcher understands the research in the context of his/her own biased view, which twists the gathered data (Anderson, 2004).
2. The aspect of time consuming is another disadvantage of this type and it can last for longer period of time.

Relevance of Quantitative Research with HR Managers

For carrying our effective HR management in the organizations it is necessary to get the good quality information for making wise and accurate decisions and solving problems. For enhancing the decisions and actions in HR the research can be used for enhancing the employment relationships i.e. individual employees, trade unions and professional organizations.

Surveys and questionnaires are one of the main quantitative methods being used for research by HR managers especially in performance appraisal. This research method can benefit HR managers in several ways depending on the size of the firm i.e. it is less expensive to conduct and it covers fair amount of employees for comparisons which means for smaller organizations it is affordable and it covers the wide range of employees as well. Another benefit that HR manager can get from this is the shorter-span of time for completing this research and it will allow managers to save time for their further processes. A high volume of information can be produced by HR managers by using this which will allow them to make decisions rather easily. This method will give the ease of making comparisons for managers especially in large organizations where the complexity is relatively high (Nkwi et al, 2001). Another important benefit that HR managers can get from this method is that they can use the same survey or questionnaire repeatedly at different times and different locations for making more comparisons. This method can give cost effective and quick results for HR managers

which they can use in their tasks. The limitations or disadvantage of this method for HR managers can be the avoidance for depth of the research for attaining the breadth.

Secondly, poor quality data can be resulted if the questionnaire design is poor which will change the whole meaning of research. Another limitation is the lesser control over the kind of response HR managers can get i.e. a poor response from employees will make the information unrepresentative. As we said earlier that the control is minimal over the responses making it weak instrument for managers; plus the questionnaire can be interpreted differently by different employees which will change the meaning of it and hence poor results for HR managers (Breakwell et al, 1995) . Some employees may answer by focusing on their personal agenda which will destroy the actual shape of the research and wrong information or results will be produced which can lead to wrong decision making. Lastly, managers cannot know that those employees who have not answered, what are their views and points regarding the issue which will limit the research to an extent.

The bottom line is, this method is a closed-ended way and it depends a lot on the understanding of the managers i.e. how to design questions and the best way of asking them which means they have to be specific. Another prominent limitation of this method for HR managers is the numerical description of results instead of detailed narrative which provides less description of human perception. Another limitation can be the development of survey questions by HR managers which can lead to structural biasness and wrong representation in which subject will be deviated and will reflect the personal view of manager. Now we will move on to the benefits and limitation of qualitative research for HR managers.

Relevance of Qualitative Research with HR Managers

In this research method one of the most common uses by HR managers is of focus group discussions that they conduct many times during the organizational workings i.e. before and after organizational development & change. The main theme is to collect primary data, analyze it, implement it for decision making and then evaluate it for further improvements. HR managers normally participate in open ended way of research i.e. focus group discussion and this is the early stage of research in which data is gathered through observation and questioning (Carey, 1995). This open-ended nature is an advantage for HR managers and strict design plan is not needed for it. This first stage of data collection will depend on the factors that what type of problem has arisen in the organization and how data will be extracted and in which conditions managers are going to talk. This method gives an advantage of unfolding the discussion more naturally and with freedom so that issues can be understood deeply and more information can be extracted. Visual evidence and written descriptions can be gathered by HR managers by using this method as the detailed view and rich data will give HR managers better understanding of the situation (Nuttal et al, 2011). As mentioned earlier the context will be looked at more properly i.e. the situation and circumstances which gives an added advantage to HR managers in effectively conducting the research.

The after data collection the analysis of data will be carried out which will lead to the implementation on the basis of the data gathered and analysis given social meaning to the research. This will help managers in analyzing the situation clearly and implementing the right decisions. The disadvantage of this method for HR managers is the subjectivity of the process because the managers will use their own biasness in the situation and may be the participant employees will be getting subjective for their own personal interests thus twisting the data or information gathered (Tracy, 2010).

The heavy reliance on the researcher is the limitation of this method. Another limitation of this method is the high consumption of time especially when HR manager is working in a large organization this method will take longer time which will make it poor option. The probing is very detailed in qualitative method i.e. two ways interaction in focus group discussion allows HR managers to identify the weaknesses clearly and understand the results easily as compared to quantitative research in which complicated data in statistical form is to be understood. HR manager can get information from even body language and facial expressions of employees involved and this non-verbal information is very reliable and helpful for managers in their decision making and understanding of the problem. At the same time if the group is of small size then the representation of all the employees will cease and time can be lost by diverting to irrelevant topics. Another limitation of this method is the difficulty to control and steer the group discussion which is key for getting the research method on right track. Another limitation is the peer pressure that individuals can feel and will give similar answers which can destruct the whole research. One final limitation will be the attitude of the moderator or manager which can affect the results and responses of individuals and reliability of research will be lost.

CONCLUSION

To conclude up we would say that both the quantitative and qualitative methods of research have their own comparative advantages and we can say that 'both these are good neighbors with strong fences'. In few lines we would say that quantitative method tends to produce information and data that we can gather and analyze for predicting and describing relationships whereas, with the help of qualitative research we can explain and probe those relationships by specifying the contexts and solving the problems or differences in those relationships. Qualitative research gives us a dynamic process instead of a static outcome and it helps HR managers in solving different problems and confusions. Under qualitative research the most unique benefit for HR managers is the statistical results that they can get with surveys covering wide range which is helpful in especially large organizations.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anderson V, (2004). *Research Methods in HRM*. London: CIPD.
- [2] Bernard, H. R., & Ryan, G. (2010). *Qualitative data analysis: Systematic approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [3] Breakwell, C., Glynis, M., Sean, H., & Chris, F.-S. (1995). *Research Methods in Psychology*. London: Sage.
- [4] Carey, M.A. (1995). Comment: Concerns in the analysis of focus group data. *Qualitative Health Research*, 5(4), 487-495
- [5] Cassell, C., & Symon, G. (1994). Qualitative research in work contexts. In C. Cassell, & G. Symon (Eds.), *Qualitative methods in organizational research* (pp. 1-13). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- [6] Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [7] Creswell, J., & Plano, C.V. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [8] Denzin, N. (2010). On elephants and gold standards. *Qualitative Research*, 10(6), 269–272.
- [9] Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2011). *Handbook of qualitative research*. (4th Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [10] Frey, J. H. (1995). *How to Conduct Interviews by Telephone and in Person*. London: Sage.
- [11] Gill, J., & Johnson, P. (2005). *Research Methods for Managers* (3rd Edition). London: Sage Publications.
- [12] Mindy, M., & Joseph S. L. Cheng & Sonja Petrovic-Lazarevic, (2006) Manager's Role in Implementing Organizational Change. *Journal of Global Business & Technology*, 2(1), 5-9.
- [13] Neuman, K. L. (2000). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative approaches*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- [14] Nkwi, P., Nyamongo, I., & Ryan, G. (2001). *Field research into socio-cultural issues: Methodological guidelines*. Yaounde, Cameroon, Africa: International Center for Applied Social Sciences, Research, and Training/UNFPA.
- [15] Nuttal, P., Shankar, A., & Beverland, M. (2011). Mapping the Unarticulated Potential of Qualitative Research Stepping out from the Shadow of Quantitative Studies. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 4(2), 15-21.
- [16] Nykiel, A. (2007). *Handbook of Marketing Research Methodologies*. Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Hospitality and Tourism Press.
- [17] Sekaran, U. (2004). *Research Methods for Business*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- [18] Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(5), 837– 851.
- [19] Zikmund, W. G. (2003). *Business Research Methods*. Mason, OH: South Western.