

Chapter 12

Conducting Effective Interviews about Virtual Work: Gathering and Analyzing Data Using a Grounded Theory Approach

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explicates interviewing as a viable research method for studying virtual work. The chapter begins with a review of the existing interdisciplinary scholarship on qualitative interviewing along with three modes of interviewing, interviewing techniques, formats, and rigor. Next, the chapter reviews exemplary research reports on virtual work to illustrate best practices in interviewing and data analysis. Finally, suggestions for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting interview data about virtual work are discussed.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

“Qualitative research is an umbrella term that encompasses several philosophical or theoretical orientations” (Merriam, 2002, p. 15); it includes methodologies such as biography, case study, ethnography, and phenomenology (Creswell, 1998;

Merriam, 2002). Qualitative research provides a viable alternative to the limits imposed by the positivist research model and empirical analyses. A major strength of qualitative inquiry lies in its ability to provide a depth of understanding about the phenomenon under study (Rubin, 2000). Qualitative methods provide rich accounts of human experiences and, of particular interest to social scientists, how interactants apply meanings

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to those experiences (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, Davidson, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The most popular qualitative research methods include interviews, observation, and archival studies (Bowen, 2005). Of the many qualitative data collection methods, interviewing provides the most direct, research-focused interaction between researcher and participant (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Stroh, 2000). Interviewing is widely valued by multiple disciplines as a primary research tool that allows for initial exploration of a previously uninvestigated phenomenon. Conversely, interviewing can provide fresh insights into a well-explored but complicated phenomenon surrounded by theoretical controversy or conflicting findings.

The body of research on organizational behavior and the research literature examining online behavior both enjoy a rich tradition of qualitative methodologies, including interviewing. Thus, it comes as no surprise that interviewing emerges as a prominent research methodology in the study of virtual work. The purpose of this chapter is to explicate interviewing as a research methodology and its application to the study of virtual work. The chapter contains four distinct sections: First, we provide a brief literature review on qualitative interviewing along with a brief discussion of three specific modes of interviews (i.e., face-to-face, telephone, and online). Then we explain basic interviewing techniques, formats, and rigor. The third section provides multiple case studies of published research reports to illustrate the techniques and types of interviewing methods employed in the study of virtual work. Finally, we offer advice on how to conduct effective interview studies of virtual work by providing specific recommendations for data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

INTERVIEWING

Scholars have attempted to define the method of interviewing with different emphases. Rubin and

Rubin (1995) refer to interviewing as the art of hearing data. They further explain, “Qualitative interviewing is a way of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds. Through qualitative interviews you can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate” (p. 1). Furthermore, interviewing involves many choices. Hookway (2008) argues that the interviewing method for data collection depends on participants’ willingness to generously share their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. On the other hand, Kvale (1996) maintains, “Interviewing is a craft: It does not follow content- and context-free rules of method, but rests on the judgments of a qualified researcher” (Kvale, 1996, p. 105). In both statements, the subjective choices by the participants and the researcher play an important role in data collection and interpretation.

Lastly, Seidman (1998) argues that interviewing is a method that “provides access to the context of people’s behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior... Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action” (p. 4). This definition highlights the need to understand participants’ meaning making and the context in which meaning making takes place. Overall, qualitative interviewing involves hearing the data, finding out the feelings and thoughts of the informants, researchers’ making active interpretations and decisions, as well as understanding the meaning and context that prompted informants’ behaviors. Given this overview of the different definitions of interviewing, we will discuss three particular modes of interviewing modalities.

Face-to-Face Interviewing: Conducting an interview in person has several advantages. First, meeting face-to-face allows the researcher to pick up subtle nonverbal cues, such as hand gestures, body positioning, eye contact, facial expression, etc. (Holt, 2010). These nonverbal cues may provide useful insights for later data analysis, interpretation, and coding. Second, informants

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