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Chapter XVI

Qualitative Research in Information Systems: An Exploration of Methods

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the researcher, who already is inclined to apply qualitative research, with an overview of methods. A representative sample of qualitative research methods is presented, which may be employed when conducting information systems research. These methods include Action Research, Case Study, Ethnography, Grounded Theory, and Narrative Inquiry. Examples of these research methods are also included, which provide a description of the method and references to more detailed presentations. Researchers should thoroughly explore these methods and become fully cognizant of when to appropriately apply each method. It is important to ensure that the chosen method addresses the research questions and supports the research objectives.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the use of qualitative research in the investigation of topics in information systems. A representative number of qualitative research methods are presented here for researchers to consider applying to their investigations. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the researcher who is already inclined to apply qualitative research with an overview of methods which may be considered for conducting research in the information systems subject area. The value of the chapter is that it represents an overview of the major qualitative research methods in information systems along with a discussion of an example of research that has been conducted within each topic area. This discussion provides the reader with an idea of how to go about conducting investigations using a particular qualitative research method.

This chapter does not compare qualitative and quantitative approaches. Indeed, there are many other venues where this debate continues. Further, this chapter does not discuss the pluralistic approach, where multiple methods are employed within a research project (Mingers, 2001). While this topic is fascinating and represents an exciting approach to conducting research, it is considered beyond the scope of this chapter. Thus, the focus of the presentation is to outline, for researcher consideration, aspects of qualitative research which may be adopted, where appropriate, in the investigation of information systems.

To begin, an overview of qualitative research, in general, is presented. After a review of the definition of qualitative research, a discussion is presented in support of why such approaches should be considered for information systems research. Then, the remainder of the chapter presents a discussion of the major qualitative research methods. The discussion of each method provides a description and references to more detailed presentations of each specific method.

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Qualitative research is an interpretive approach to investigating subjects in their natural surroundings. Thus, qualitative researchers conduct their investigations “in the field.” They spend time in organizations attempting to document situations and to garner organization members’ interpretations of situations. The main emphasis of qualitative researchers is the personnel involved in organizations. So, qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of their meanings attributed by individuals. They must work closely with research participants. Thus, those individuals involved with the qualitative researcher are likely considered partners or fellow research participants, involved in the investigation of a research question.

A concern about conducting qualitative research relates to verification. In general, qualitative researchers tend to agree that replication is the best means to validate conclusions determined from qualitative research. Further concerns about verification relate to research bias and reliability.

Qualitative researchers become closely involved in research situations and with research participants. There arises then a concern about researcher bias. Thus, in an interview, questions may be posed in a certain way, or certain aspects of the discussion may be pursued more or less intensively. Some researchers would consider this flexibility

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