Conducting research with employees

March 2006

Introduction

These Guidelines interpret the MRS Code of Conduct (revised 2005) and provide additional best practice guidance. Unless otherwise stated, Guidelines are not binding.

They should be read in conjunction with other MRS guidelines, particularly the Mystery Customer Research Guidelines since this type of research covers another aspect of monitoring of employees. The main aim of these guidelines is to ensure that research is transparent to employees in order to promote public support for market research. More generally, they seek to promote professionalism in the conduct of employee research.

The general public and other interested parties are entitled to complete assurance that every research project is carried out in accordance with the Code of Conduct and that their rights and privacy are respected.

Rules from the Code of Conduct applicable in each section of this document are stated in the shaded boxes. These rules are binding on MRS members and breaches may result in disciplinary action. The guidance that follows the rules provides interpretation and additional best practice. Members are reminded that this document is designed to complement the MRS Code of Conduct and should not be consulted in isolation.

As specified in the Code, it is the responsibility of the researcher to keep abreast of any legislation which could affect research with employees and to ensure that all those involved in a project are aware of and agree to abide by the MRS Code of Conduct.

This material is provided for information only. It is not legal advice and should not be relied upon as such. Specific legal advice should be taken in relation to specific issues.

MRS would like to thank Peter Goudge for his co-authorship of this guidance, and also for the help and advice of the many members of the MRS Employee Research Group (ERG) who have contributed to the various editions of this guideline over the years.

Definition of Employee Research

The 'discipline' of employee research is any formalised activity developed to gather information about the opinions and behaviours of employees. It is the exploration of aspects of an individual's working life with an employer – what they do as well as what they think. Rather than seeing it as an isolated practice, this broad definition seeks to place employee research within the wider framework of two-way internal communications and effective Human Resource Management, in which we see it as playing an integral part.

Please note that the word interview is used generically in this document to cover the process whereby information is gathered from respondents, even though a considerable amount of this type of research is conducted on a self-completion basis whether on paper or electronically via e-mail, intranets and the internet.

Relationship with Data Protection

All personal employee data is covered by the Data Protection Act 1998. For full details of the implications of the Act on employer/employee relationships see the Information Commissioner's publications on employment. Details are available via www.ico.gov.uk in the Codes of Practice section of the website.

Guidelines

1. Planning a Quantitative study

A. Communication with Employees

The Rules	
A3	Members must act honestly in dealings with Respondents, Clients (actual or potential), employers, employees, sub-contractors and the general public.
B2	All written or oral assurances made by any Member involved in commissioning or conducting projects must be factually correct and honoured by the Member.
B21	Members must ensure that all of the following are clearly communicated to the Respondent: • the name of the interviewer (an Interviewer's Identity Card must be shown if face to face); • an assurance that the interview will be carried out according to the MRS Code of Conduct; • the general subject of the interview; • the purpose of the interview; • if asked, the likely length of the interview; • any costs likely to be incurred by the Respondent.
B22	Respondents (including employees in employee research) must not be unduly pressurised to participate.

Guidance

1. Prior publicity is important to help boost rates of response. Any number of media can be deployed to advise employees of the research and its purpose – ranging

from in-house magazines and personal briefings to videos and posters as well as e-mail and the Intranet.

2. A letter from a relevant person with authority should be sent prior to the research, or at the time the research is conducted.

3. In accordance with rule B2, any assurances made in communications with staff regarding the research (such as anonymity) must be honoured.

4. Employees should be informed as to how it is intended that the results from the research will be used; and, where relevant, examples of how results from previous studies have been acted upon. Such information will help to encourage participation.

B. Sample Selection

The Rules

B8 The anonymity of Respondents must be preserved unless they have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on.

Comment: Members must be particularly careful if sample sizes are very small (such as in business and employee research) that they do not inadvertently identify organisations or departments and therefore individuals.

B9 If Respondents have given consent for data to be passed on in a form which allows them to be personally identified, Members must:

- demonstrate that they have taken all reasonable steps to ensure that it will only be used for the purpose for which it was collected and
- fully inform Respondents as to what will be revealed, to whom and for what purpose.

B10 If Respondents request individual complaints or unresolved issues to be passed back to a Client (for example in customer satisfaction research), Members must comply with that request. The comments/issues to be passed back to a Client must be agreed with the Respondent and must not be linked back to any other data or used for any other purpose without the explicit consent of the Respondent.

B18 A Respondent's right to withdraw from a research project at any stage must be respected.

B23 Members must delete any responses given by the Respondent, if requested, and if this is reasonable and practicable.

Guidance

1. To avoid skewed or unrepresentative data in quantitative studies, selection should be arranged to ensure that each sample represents a balanced cross-section of the whole. This can be achieved either by drawing a random sample (e.g. selecting every n^{th} name from an alphabetical list of employees), or by setting quotas (e.g. a representative proportion of the whole according to sub-groups such as department, job grade, age, working locations etc.).

2. Sample sizes in specialised areas may be very small to the point where employees themselves could be identified. If there is a reasonable risk of an employee being identified, due to the sample size of the population or sub-population being covered, the employee should be informed of this risk at the beginning of the interview and given the opportunity to withdraw.

3. On some occasions employees may want requests or additional comments passed back to an employer. In these circumstances, in accordance with rule B10, the relevant comments must not be linked back to any other data unless agreed. The researcher must honour any promises made e.g. to pass the information to the employer for resolution.

4. Where the universe of respondents is small, and the respondents may be well known to the client, special precautions should be taken to comply with B8. All information provided to the client should be checked to ensure that respondents cannot be identified – this includes the selection of any verbatim comments from depths or groups that they may wish to use in a presentation or report.

2. The Research

A: Qualitative Research

The Rules

B15 If there is to be any recording, monitoring or observation during an interview, Respondents must be informed about this both at recruitment and at the beginning of the interview.

B17 Respondents must not be misled when being asked for cooperation to participate in a research project.

B18 A Respondent's right to withdraw from a research project at any stage must be respected.

B34 At the time of recruitment (or before the research takes place if details change after recruitment), Members must ensure that Respondents are told all relevant information as per rule B21and:

- the location of the discussion and if it is to take place in a viewing facility; and
- whether observers are likely to be present; and
- when and how the discussion is to be recorded; and
- the likely length of the discussion including the start and finish time; and
- the Member, moderator and/or research agency that will be conducting the research;

B37 Members must make clear to Respondents the capacity in which observers are present; Clients must be presented as such, even if they are also Researchers and/or Members of MRS.

Guidance

1. Researchers should reassure employees of the confidentiality of anything they may say in a group or depth interview.

2. In accordance with rule B15, the researcher must inform employees about any recording or monitoring methods (e.g. tape recording, video recording, and presence of a mirror or a camera) both at recruitment and at the beginning of an interview, giving the employee the option not to proceed. This also applies to instances where remote monitoring is used. Employees may prefer groups to be recorded and transcribed and researchers should give employees this option

3. Where permission is to be obtained to release digital, audio or video recordings, the researcher should ensure that employees are given as much relevant information as possible about the future use of the data, in particular:

   - To whom they are to be given
   - To whom they are likely to be shown
   - For what purposes they are likely to be used.

4. In the same way that employees are given the opportunity to withdraw at the recruitment stage or at the start of a group or depth interview if it is going to be recorded, they should similarly be given the opportunity to withdraw should other people from the company (e.g. senior managers, HR personnel) who are not selected respondents intend to be present.

5. Given the sensitivities of conducting research amongst employees, only in exceptional circumstances should groups or depth interviews be observed or video recorded.

<u>B: On-line (E-mail and web-based) research</u>

The Rules

B8 The anonymity of Respondents must be preserved unless they have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on.

Comment: Members must be particularly careful if sample sizes are very small (such as in business and employee research) that they do not inadvertently identify organisations or departments and therefore individuals.

Guidance

1. When research documentation is distributed electronically and employees are required to complete it on screen, researchers should take into account any limits on the employee's privacy when answering, and how this might impact on the validity of the research results.

2. Research documentation sent out as attachments should be piloted on the employer's network. This will ensure that they can get through security barriers or firewall and identify any problems with either the layout or appearance of the documentation by virtue of the equipment (e.g. PC) and software available to the employee.

3. If some form of tracking is used (to ensure that employees do not submit more than one response) it should be undertaken by the researcher and not the employer.

4. Researchers should take the following issues into account when deciding on whether an on-line approach is the best methodology to use. These include:

   - Access: how many people use e-mail/the intranet/internet? How many have individual access? Do they have Internet access?

   - User confidence: how new is e-mail/the intranet/internet? Are they used daily? Are all employees equally confident using these channels?

   - Confidentiality: how much concern is there? How much reassurance is needed? Would a password ease (or exacerbate) these concerns?

5. Although on-line research affords the possibility of requiring respondents to answer a question before moving on, this capability should not be deployed in areas such as profiling or demographic questions which could raise concerns about the identification of individuals.

3: Reporting the Results

The Rules

B8 The anonymity of Respondents must be preserved unless they have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on.

Comment: *Members must be particularly careful if sample sizes are very small (such as in business and employee research) that they do not inadvertently identify organisations or departments and therefore individuals.*

B42 Members must ensure that any material handed to Client s or included in reports, without consent from Respondent s, is anonymised e.g. transcripts containing verbatim comments and projective material.

Comment: Special care must be taken when the universe is small, as in the case of some business to business research studies.

Guidance

1. The employer should be made aware before a project has started what employee information can be detailed in the report. Only in instances where an employee has given permission can their name be revealed.

2. In accordance with rule B8, care must be taken when the range of employees to be interviewed is limited by job title such that by identifying the department or the local region, the identity of the employee is disclosed or potentially disclosed. Wherever there is a conflict of interest between a researcher's duty and obligation to employees and/or to employers, the duty and obligation to employees is paramount.

3. It is recommended that reports should only examine the results of sub-groups where 10 or more have responded to the research.

4. Due to the nature of employee research there is a higher possibility that employees will be contacted on a regular basis. Therefore, research documentation should be clear, relevant and logical to avoid employee fatigue. (See the *MRS Questionnaire Design Guidelines* for guidance in this area.)

5. Researchers should agree in advance with the client as to how employee complaints about internal company matters are to be handled. As a general rule, researchers should only pass back complaints at a very general level of detail, given that the complaints will have been made anonymously. Anonymous allegations made in the course of a research project should not be the sole

grounds for disciplinary action against a named employee. Rather, they should be a starting point for an investigation by the employer, if it is warranted.